

TEXTXET:
**IN SEARCH OF
SINGULARITY**

STUDIES
POETRY IN POLAND AND CHINA

SINCE 1989

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Joanna Krenz

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In Search of Singularity

Textxet

STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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In Search of Singularity

Poetry in Poland and China since 1989

By

Joanna Krenz



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This book is dedicated to Agnieszka. Rest now, my friend, and know your flame will continue to burn in the hearts and works of many.

Introduction: Setting the Comparative Stage

This book is a tale of two poetics that are worlds apart in many ways. There is, however, a close, if not always immediately tangible, affinity between them, in literary-historical terms and on the level of individual oeuvres and texts alike. As a translator, I regularly experience and try to sensibly exploit this affinity to increase the quality of translations. Regrettably, the creative and cognitive potential of this kinship is rarely recast into artistic or scholarly practice; and when this does happen, it often proves epistemologically unproductive and/or ethically questionable, as we shall see in the selected examples in this book of flawed intertextual dialogues between Polish and Chinese poets. Nevertheless, my primary aim is not so much critical as it is political. Instead of focusing on the problems in the current connections between Polish and Chinese poetry, I propose alternative linkages, demonstrating how resonance and dissonance can be orchestrated with spectacular effect. Although I draw on culturally specific material, I hope to offer a more broadly applicable *modus operandi* in world literature studies, one which may be instrumental in discussing various literatures in a way that does justice to, but allows us to transcend, the global cultural-historical context, overcoming its implicit hierarchies and mutual preconceptions and misconceptions.

1 Mismatch? On *Com-pair-ison* and Directing as Method

Among the many approaches to intercultural literary research, two widely represented general types can be distinguished: propositions that oscillate around broadly taken reception studies (including so-called influence studies, among other things) and propositions that assume a comparative perspective in the strictest sense; that is, they compare texts or poetics to arrive at a deeper understanding of those texts/poetics, their source cultures, or literature at large. While I do recognize the value of these approaches in addressing many pivotal questions, I consider them insufficient in the making of an equal, dynamic, diverse, and ethical discourse of world literature, a task I believe should be at the center of the longtime covenant between comparative literary studies and area studies.

The limitations of reception-oriented approaches are obvious. They exclude discussions of interactions between literatures and poetics between which no points of contact can be identified in the literary-historical past or present.

They investigate, describe, and often, as a consequence, reinforce the status quo in global literary discourse. The limitations of comparison have been raised many times too, leading usually to the shared general conclusion that while comparative thinking is unavoidable as a natural process occurring in the human mind, it has to be subject to constant critical examination and confrontation against possibly optimized axiological systems and ethical codes, especially when it concerns interactions between mutually distant cultures. Works such as David Damrosch's *Comparing the Literatures* (2020), which critically examines how the comparative method has evolved through the centuries from a literary-historical perspective, or the volume *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013) edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, which gathers essays by renowned postcolonial scholars and comparatists offering a variety of sensible and creative applications of the comparative method, are important steps toward an effective redefinition of comparative literature in a global context. Nonetheless, although the topic has been thoroughly discussed by many authors, I still find it necessary to draw the reader's attention to what I consider important but not sufficiently addressed or emphasized in the existing scholarship.

My questions largely overlap with those listed by Felski and Friedman in the introduction to their volume:

To what extent do all modes of thought rely on implicit, if not explicit forms of comparison? Is comparative analysis compatible with the acknowledgement of singularity or even incommensurability? Can comparison decenter or unsettle our standards of measure rather than reinforce them? How do we rethink our structures of comparison and the history of its uses to do justice to past and current postcolonial and global contexts? How do the new spatial modes of analysis based on interrelations, conjunctures, networks, linkages, and modes of circulation draw on or enrich comparative thinking? What are the limitations of comparisons based on similarities and differences, and what other methods of comparative thinking might we envision? What are the contributions of different disciplines and interdisciplinary fields to the archive of comparative scholarship?¹

However, I wish to ask these questions from a slightly different angle, focusing on the very mechanics and geometry of comparison in which, I believe, lies the root of its undesirable literary-political consequences.

1 Felski and Friedman 2013: 1.

The most problematic aspect of comparison is the way in which it shapes literary politics in macro- and microscale alike. Naively or primitively deployed quantitative and qualitative comparison leads, on the one hand, to tacit competition between literatures. Who is bigger, stronger, wins more prizes, or, on the contrary, who has suffered or struggled more. On the other hand, it leads to calculations about whom to align oneself with to enhance one's material or symbolic capital. Such naive comparison is rarely discussed or employed explicitly; rather, it constitutes an inbuilt mechanism which determines certain unconscious choices, whether in the individual or collective dimension. For example, authors and scholars representing literatures of nations once colonized or part of the so-called Third or Second World—widely questioned categories that yet still exercise a detrimental impact on the mutual perception of cultures—are more likely to trace or try to establish connections between their own or their nation's poetry and Western poetries than the other way around.

Quite aside from the cultural bias and implicit hierarchies that underlie world literature discourse, so understood comparative thinking also discourages scholars from bringing together literatures that appear to be mutually disproportionate, especially in terms of the territorial scope or timespan of their respective cultural traditions. Juxtaposing poetic traditions of similarly expansive territorial scope or timespan, for example Chinese poetry with American or Russian poetry, appears to be quite natural and common in scholarship. Yet an asymmetric juxtaposition of, for instance, Chinese poetry and Polish poetry calls for more elaborate justification. In imagining what the reader might be feeling when reaching for a volume with “Poland” and “China” in the title, which additionally suggests a comparative perspective, I am reminded of a series of memes that caused a stir on the internet back in 2013. Inspired by photographs from diplomatic visits, these caricature cartoons portrayed president Xi Jinping 习近平 and his partners from the global political scene as characters from *Winnie the Pooh*, eventually leading to a ban on *Winnie* in China. The most popular among them were Xi with the former US president Barack Obama as Winnie and Tigger, Xi with Japan's prime minister Shinzo Abe as Winnie and Eeyore, and, finally, Xi with Carrie Lam, the pro-Chinese Communist Party Chief Executive of Hong Kong, as Winnie and Piglet. The last image could serve as an apt illustration of the sheer contrast between China and Poland, which is about the size of one Chinese province, and the scanty relevance of their mutual relationships for the rest of the world. I will keep the names of potential candidates from the Polish political scene who might effectively pose as Piglet to myself.

To avoid glaring disproportions, smaller literatures are usually merged into categories such as “Western literature,” “Central European literature,” “Middle

East literature,” and so forth for them to become “comparable” and enter into an “equal” (in the quantitative sense of the term) dialogue with larger ones. This not only leads to the effacement of their individual specificity and to the multiplying of stereotypes and baseless generalizations but also causes an ontological confusion, so to speak, which stems from considering cultural organisms at two different levels of organization: a relatively self-contained entity of a national literature written largely in the same language (the role of ethnic minorities and their dialects is usually downplayed or glossed over in such discussions) versus a complex network of interconnections between literatures created in many different languages. This is like comparing a whale and a coral reef.

I could perhaps try to dispel the reader’s doubts, arguing that geopoetical “power relationships” are different from geopolitical ones, and that in terms of poetic economy, Poland might be considered a counterpart of Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates—it is small but rich in high-quality resources from which foreign authors, including Chinese poets, draw abundantly. This would not be an unjustified claim because Polish poetry can indeed be counted among the world’s most vivid and widely appreciated poetries, but this path of reasoning would only additionally strengthen the comparative-competitive model which I want to dismantle.

To make matters clear, one can of course theoretically postulate a comparison that has a purely analytical function and does not contain or generate value judgment, though in practice this is virtually impossible due to our deeply rooted mental habits, especially in intercultural discourse, which is still profoundly prejudiced and hierarchical. But even if we can overcome this obstacle and work with crystal-clear epistemological intentions to observe how the objects/texts/cultures we compare shed light on and interpret one another, the efficiency of such an operation is still limited, not least because it is largely contingent on the possible *terrae comparationis* between them—the more specific and diverse the *terrae comparationis*, the richer and more precise the outcome of comparative research.

Comparatists often speak of “common denominators” in this context, borrowing the notion from mathematics. This is a very useful loan and it aptly captures not just the mechanisms of the comparative method but also its practical drawbacks. In math, one can find a common denominator for any two or more fractions, but sometimes these common denominators need to be so big that they prove nonoperational. In the case of fractions whose denominators consist of so-called coprime numbers, which have no common factor, finding a common denominator requires multiplying the numbers under the fraction bars by each other; this, at certain magnitudes, may pose a considerable

problem. By analogy, we might speak of something like “coprime texts” or “coprime poetries/literatures/cultures” with no—or relatively few—“common factors,” which require a cosmic “common denominator” to be effectively compared. In principle, one can discuss any randomly selected set of poetries or poetics through the prism of their respective take on big themes such as nature, history, life, death, and so forth. Yet, just like between people, it is difficult to imagine that a lively, productive, and sustained dialogue between them hinge exclusively on unanswerable abstract questions on imponderabilia. To a greater or lesser extent, it always needs a less absolute but regular stimulation by different impulses and on different levels. I believe comparative studies combined with area studies possess many tools that may be instrumental in providing and responsibly distributing such stimuli. Mostly, these are actually very old implements which are rusting in the academic toolshed, so it is good to take them out once in a while and simultaneously let some fresh air into the shed. I will use them to build a provisional stage, as in a theater, but prior to this, I need to calibrate them a little bit.

To define my approach, I propose a cosmetic but consequential terminological adjustment to comparative vocabulary; namely, to replace “comparing” with what I will call “com-*pair*-ing” (without hyphenation hereafter). The operation I refer to as *compairing* implicitly assumes *comparing* but, at the same time, structurally expands it; this is also what the word itself wants to enact by its specific “expanded” makeup. When one interprets for comparison, one focuses on the juxtaposed objects as such; their specific features come to the foreground and the interpretational process centers on analyzing their idiosyncrasies and similarities and establishes the possible reasons behind these, including culture-specific and more universal factors. For instance, an observation of dissimilarity may lead to a statement that given texts arise from entirely different systems of values and help specify these systems, whereas an observation of similarity may suggest a common source of inspiration or perhaps the existence of some general mechanisms of literary discourse. Simply put, in the case of comparison, conclusion is approximately equal to a cause (of similarity/dissimilarity), and the cause, in its turn, is approximately equal to an intersubjective truth that one expects to reveal through a comparative act, be it about specific texts/cultures or about literature at large. Comparing, on the other hand, takes all factors that determine comparison into account, but the emphasis is not on convergences, divergences, and their explanation. Rather, it is on how the juxtaposed objects together, as a *pair*, through their interplay, may contribute to the emergence of a new quality. Where comparing is static, descriptive, and conclusive, *compairing* is dynamic, narrative, and constructive; where comparing is critical and polemic, *compairing* is collaborative and

poemic, in the etymological sense of *poiema* as doing, producing, or composing something.

By bringing out the *pair*, the word *compair* and its derivatives intend to accentuate the primacy of the interaction between objects/texts on which an interpretative operation is performed over other elements of literary discourse that codetermine the meaning, and the noncompetitive and nonhierarchical character of this interaction. In addition, the broken orthographic rule signals what often happens in comparative operations: texts tend to break free from the paradigms that determine their reception and the trajectory of circulation within their most immediate discursive and linguistic surroundings and it becomes necessary to negotiate new laws of mechanics and dynamics in a transcultural environment.

I like to think of my comparative work as theatrical directing. In the theater world, the director (being the counterpart of a *compairatist* in literary studies) and the actors (= *texts*) remain in close contact throughout the entire production process and have to react to one another's words, actions, and other less tangible signals in order to create a convincing stage narrative. This narrative, although usually anchored in the surrounding world (in the case of comparative activity, meaning local cultural discourse), does not have to conform to its rules, which become temporarily suspended. Conversely, it often has ambitions, and the power, to gradually transform the external order. Comparing actors in a static picture would be a futile exercise, no more productive than comparing characters in the *Winnie* memes, revealing nothing new about any of them. However, when the actors perform together, strategically matched on stage, the dynamic that emerges between them gradually brings out their unique characteristics, personalities, and abilities, at the same time pushing the entire plot forward.

This approach stems from my experience as a literary translator and interpreter. In 2016 and 2017, during my stay in Beijing, I had the pleasure of collaborating with one of Europe's most accomplished directors, Krystian Lupa, on his Polish-Chinese play *Mo Fei* based on Shi Tiesheng's 史铁生 (1951–2010) experimental novella *Project of a Theatrical Play With a Film as Stage Background* (关于一部以电影作舞台背景的戏剧之设想). Lupa's working methods intrigued, and—frankly—exhausted me, but also taught me a lot as a literary scholar. The process was as follows: I translated Shi Tiesheng's novella/play into Polish for Lupa, along with several other, mostly autobiographical, essays by Shi to provide additional context for the director. Lupa tentatively rewrote Shi's quasi-playscript, incorporating many elements from the said essays and other information about the author obtained from various sources, plus some intertextual allusions to European literature. I retranslated the draft for the actors,

most of whom—with one exception—were Chinese. In many places, however, the script provided only very basic instructions for the scene or the general topic of a conversation. The rest had to be improvised. At every rehearsal, several versions of the scene emerged. Each of them was interpreted on the spot and had to be transcribed and translated into Polish for Lupa, who in the end compiled all records and created a “more final” version of the script to retranslate into Chinese for the next rehearsal, always with more blanks for the actors to fill in. This sequence was repeated several times before and after the premiere; thus, every performance was in fact a stage in the negotiations of the story between the director and the actors, bringing all kinds of surprises and discoveries.

Another fascinating thing was Lupa’s ability to incorporate coincidences, including various apparent mishaps, into his project. When he was working with the Chinese producers to find actors for the play, I committed what I now see as a *felix culpa*. While translating the director’s instructions for the producers, I overlooked the information regarding the age of one of the main characters. Lupa envisioned him as a young man in his late teens, whereas the producers organized a casting for children aged seven to nine years old. At the beginning, the director looked anything but delighted, but there was one child who won his heart, and he ended up adding several new scenes to the script just for the boy. The entire play greatly benefited from this decision.

I try to approach poems like Lupa approached his actors; that is, as independent, creative entities with their own experience, personality, and worldview. Instead of me imposing a fixed scenario and homogenous style on them, it is the poems that tell a certain story. They are the (text-)actors on the compairative stage; my job as director is to allow them to maximally play out their individual potential. Of course, like in theater, the compairative story told by the text-actors has to be roughly designed beforehand. It is set in a specific time and place and against a concrete background. It is divided into clear acts/scenes (= chapters/sections of the book). The director (= scholar) must be quite familiar with the actors (= texts), including their background and stage experience (i.e., the way the texts have functioned in their respective local literary discourse and other contexts) in order to know what can be expected from them, whether they fit the general conception, how to *pair* them on the stage (= page), and whether they can be trusted when the performance gets out of hand. That said, there is also a lot of space for natural interactions, free play, happenstance, and surprise, as in the audience’s favorite scene in *Mo Fei*, where the journalist Sandra, played by a Polish actor, and the protagonist, Drunkard Mo Fei, discuss existential problems in broken English. This scene aptly illustrates what I will be doing in the present study: inviting Polish and Chinese

poems to *con-verse*—that is, create a joint poetic narrative—in English for a global audience.

Like in a theatrical play, the dynamic on the compairative stage between the text-actors takes different forms. Frequently, the text-actors enter into close dialogue, and their lines are directly intertwined in the emerging narrative. In one section, the interaction is so close that the compaired poems' respective I-speakers undertake what looks like intertextual dating which develops into a more consistent relationship throughout the authors' oeuvres. But there are also episodes in which poems start on the opposite sides of the stage and gradually move toward the middle, where they meet at the end of the scene/section or act/chapter. In other situations, a scene/section starts from a monologue of one text-actor and the other doesn't enter the stage until later. Then, the first monologue sets the stage for the second one, and is ultimately reinterpreted by it. Finally, there is also a scene/section in which two text-actors meet in a conversation with a third party; that is, a work that inspired both of them independently of each other. Sometimes the text-actors have a clear message they want to deliver through performance, sometimes the performance itself is a message, and sometimes there is no message and the performance is intended to provide the pleasure of the (inter)text and an opportunity to contemplate the mastery of composition.

The story that will emerge from this experiment lays no claims to finality, exclusiveness, or objectivity. Just like actors who can star in many different plays or films, contributing to various plots, the texts I have selected for my compairative narrative may tell different stories in different configurations, company, and stage arrangements. The main thread of the story I wish to tell is poetry's journey *in search of singularity*, a destination to be defined more precisely in the next section. During this journey, Polish and Chinese poetry not only learn and discover each other; they also exchange their experiences and confront their perspectives through poems in order to better understand the various phenomena they come across and try to find solutions to the local and global problems they encounter, thus contributing to the transformation of world literature discourse. This is certainly not to say that their con-versations will provide universally applicable analytical frameworks or ultimate answers to big literary-theoretical questions. Rather, they offer images and ideas that might inspire or be incorporated into someone else's project and developed in a constructive and creative way. Among such inventions that emerge during the interactions between Polish and Chinese poetry on my compairative stage is the metaphorical model of poetry as a photosynthesizing plant, as drawn from my observations of Polish ecopoetry and Chinese migrant worker verse, a notion of *cosomology* intended to connect the perspectives of *cosmos* and

soma based on the investigations of linkages between poetry and ethnomedicine in the two countries, the game/play dichotomy as a literary-analytical tool inspired by poets' experiments with Western postmodernism, or the very ideas of con-versing and compairing, which I developed for the needs of the present study. An interesting side effect of my research is how the findings that originate in the explorations of non-English-language literatures stretch the English language, forcing it to embrace neologisms and broaden its own lexicon and, occasionally, its syntax.

I am aware of certain limitations of my makeshift terminology. The most obvious among them is the problem that appears when one brings a third object into the picture. Technically, the word *compair* may not be useful for those working with more diverse material than a *pair* of texts/objects/cultures. If one still wishes to stick to it for the juxtaposition of three or more literatures, might I suggest a translational trick; namely, to render *pair* as a French word meaning "even, equal" (adj.) or "peer" (n.) and treat the third element as a new, equal mate for the duo at hand. Incidentally, rendered as a bilingual hybrid, the term additionally draws attention to an essential function of comparison: mediating between cultures. Other inconveniences include the untranslatability of the distinction *compare/compair* into most of the world languages and the two terms' phonetic indistinguishability in English, which poses a challenge during oral presentations. But, since we have already stepped onto the territory of the French language, think, for instance, of Jacques Derrida's famously misspelled untranslatable and indistinguishable *différance*, which both makes and does not make a difference, its crucial (dys)function being the triggering of an endless chain reaction, a play of meaning which defies final interpretation. This is, hopefully, precisely what we will experience in the present study, compairing various Chinese and Polish poems and sometimes allowing them to wander off the main narrative path I designed for them toward new or little-known territories of the literary universe.

2 Singularity: A Few Words about the Structuring Principle

The date that marks the beginning of my comparative narrative is June 4, 1989, the day on which Poland celebrated its first partially free parliamentary election after World War II and China witnessed the cruelty of its totalitarian regime at the massacre on Tiananmen Square. Although the circumstances of these events were radically different, June Fourth was a "reset" for poetry discourse in both countries, prompting the process of defining poetry anew.

We will view this process in three dimensions associated with three meanings I ascribe to the word *singularity*, along with the fourth meaning that underlies all of them and which will be explicated at the end of this section. The three dimensions, discussed in an order that reflects the shifting interest of the two poetry discourses over time, are: (1) *singularity of national poetry* defined specifically vis-à-vis social-political background, vis-à-vis local poetry tradition, vis-à-vis world poetry, and vis-à-vis the entire field of cultural production; (2) *individual singularity* of authors and poetics; (3) *capital-S Singularity* as a sphere located beyond the (presumed) limits of text and language. This last notion is inspired by the notion of Singularity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and signifies a moment in which a given discipline's paradigms exhaust themselves, when they can no longer describe the emerging reality, and an entirely new grammar of understanding has to be developed. In the case of poetry, what breaks down are available paradigms of (human) language organization which pushes poetry to undertake efforts to reinvent itself by, for example, borrowing nonhuman languages from nature (ecopoetry) or machines (cyberpoetry, artificial intelligence or AI poetry). Thus, by comparing Polish and Chinese contemporary poetry, one can observe the entire process of poetry's "spatial" development, from the most intimate sphere of personal idioms to the limits of human language, condensed in the timespan of the roughly three decades between 1989 and 2020.

Returning to the theatrical metaphor, this book is divided into a preparatory stage (chapter 1) and a six-act play (chapters 2–7). In chapter 1, I let the cast—Polish and Chinese poetry—get to know each other, look for common ground, and fix mutual misconceptions and misunderstandings that may thwart collaboration between them during the performance. This stage ends with a rehearsal, so to speak, during which we observe and critically analyze one of the few active attempts at con-versing undertaken by contemporary Polish and Chinese poets to date. The entire preparatory stage is open to the audience and recorded in the book, so, from the perspective of the spectators/readers, it can also be taken as a prologue which introduces them to the main threads that will be developed in the ensuing acts/chapters. In chapters 2–5, the narrative develops under the director's relatively tight control with limited space for improvisation, following a near-parallel order of the emergence of certain phenomena in the two poetry discourses. In chapters 6–7, the text-actors take the initiative and lead the action toward an open ending.

Chapters 2–7 are constructed in such a way that they can be read independently of each other and the cross-references between them are usually explicitly marked to facilitate selective reading for those who reach for the book for a specific topic. On the other hand, in the spirit of the postulate that form is

content and medium is message, the study's broad scope as such constitutes part of the experiment I propose in this book. It is aimed at testing the comparative invention on possibly diverse sample materials and in different conditions in order to assess how far and how deep a stimulated conversation between two culturally distant poetries can reach without detracting from its dynamic and productivity. In this respect, I leave the final conclusion to the reader, encouraging them to critically evaluate the result of the experiment, weighing successful and unsuccessful passages.

2.1 *Chapter 1: Before the Curtain Goes Up*

Chapter 1 briefly outlines the development of the two poetry discourses, pointing out, among other things, some cases of their direct interactions understood as a consciously undertaken dialogue between authors, with intersubjectively demonstrable and explicit inspirations and influences. A crucial role in shaping the trajectory of these poetic contacts between Poland and China is played by the shared wartime and totalitarian experience, especially the official "brotherhood in socialism" between the two countries which was eventually dissolved on June 4, 1989. Some say that the connection between the election in Poland and the massacre in Beijing was more than the mere black humor of God, suggesting that the Chinese authorities' brutal response to student protests was prompted by their awareness of the democratic transformation in Central Europe. This is, in my opinion, an even more painful explanation, as it means that, in a sense, the Chinese people paid a bitter price for Polish freedom. In any event, June Fourth is the date when the official "brotherhood" between the two countries was irretrievably severed, generating new, complex narratives about China in Poland and vice versa.

Aside from the official diplomatic stance of the two governments, these narratives seem to have assumed exactly opposite vectors in terms of culture. In the works of contemporary Chinese poets, the modern history of China (the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen Square) is quite easily projected onto the spatiopsiritual topography of Poland (Stalinism, Martial Law, "Solidarity"), as I tried to demonstrate in my paper "Oświęcim, Cheap Bread, and Potatoes in Wounds: Poland in the Eyes of Chinese Poets" (*Oświęcim, tani chleb i ziemniaki w ranach. Polska oczami chińskich poetów*).² At the same time, what the Chinese poets perceive as similarities that allow them to perform the cross-cultural poetic mapping of their own historical experience on the Polish territory is, in Poland, treated as a manifestation of the substantial differences between the two nations and strengthens the image of China as

2 Krenz 2019b.

an Other of Poland. This Other is often regarded with a mixture of fear, pity, superiority, and pride, in a way that is not much different from how Poles themselves were looked at by “more Western” nations for many years. This is reflected, for instance, in the popularity of testimonial prose by Chinese dissidents among Polish readers and Poland’s appetite for political criticism by authors like Yan Lianke 阎连科, whose novels always echo broadly in literary-critical discourse and beyond. Conceivably—but this is a topic for a study in sociology and not in poetry—the Poles’ systematic Othering of China might have something to do with the fact that they, too, project their nation’s past on China, albeit in a different way than the Chinese project their history on Poland. By distancing themselves from China, Poles manifest their desire to cut themselves off from the country’s socialist identity and their recent history with a “thick line” (*gruba kreska*) of which Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first prime minister of the postsocialist Poland, famously spoke in its exposé in August 1989, and to be part of the global West rather than the global East.

At any rate, for Polish poets, the events of 1989 meant first and foremost the abandonment of the traditional role of artists as bards of the nation and of their tacitly acknowledged duty to be actively involved in the struggle for freedom. In particular, this implied the symbolic dethronement of the four Old Masters (*Starzy Mistrzowie*), also known as the Great Four of Polish poetry: Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, and Tadeusz Różewicz, all born before World War II, and the established authors associated with the so-called New Wave Generation, born in the mid-1940s, including Adam Zagajewski, Stanisław Barańczak, Ryszard Krynicki, and Julian Kornhauser. Of course, all of these authors continued creating poetry into the 1990s and later and were successful in finding a new voice for their writing, but they no longer enjoyed the unquestionable authority and unswerving admiration among younger poets and literary audiences.

In China, June Fourth, among other dramatic consequences, resulted in the banishment of many Obscure poets (朦胧诗人), the first generation of avant-garde authors that emerged after the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966–1976), represented by Bei Dao 北岛, Yang Lian 杨炼, Duo Duo 多多, Mang Ke 芒克, and others. Their role might be roughly compared to the role of the New Wave in Poland, although their styles differed significantly. The New Wave poets focused on the recovery of the public discourse: one branch (Zagajewski, Kornhauser) struggled to straighten the historical-political narrative, while the other (Barańczak, Krynicki) tried to reclaim the Polish language infected by Newspeak. Chinese Obscure poets, on the other hand, were concerned with strengthening the position of the individual, which they often portrayed in a Romantic, grandiose fashion, contrasted with the vulnerable,

compliant masses; their poetry played an important part in the awakening of the spirit of independence, which culminated, and was brutally suppressed, on Tiananmen Square. The poet Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, reflecting on the impact of the social-political repressions on poetry at the turn of the decades, said that “1989 did not mean starting from scratch, it seemed like something even more difficult than starting from scratch.”³

Already from the mid-1980s, the Polish Old Masters and New Wave poets had been regularly attacked by authors who were later called the Brulion Generation (after the title of the journal that united the avant-garde literary community toward the end of the decade), while Chinese Obscure poets had felt the Third Generation (第三代) breathing down their necks. Nevertheless, it was only in 1989 that younger authors in Poland and in China alike took the initiative in the mainstream discourse and set the tone for heated debates on the role and place of poetry in the new reality. It was then that the intense search for singularity truly began. From the beginning, this pursuit was three-dimensional, and all three aspects of singularity were among the authors' interests and concerns. However, in the literary discourse, the distribution of attention and emphasis among these spheres has changed significantly over time, specifically as regards the quest for singularity I (national poetry) and singularity II (individual poetics), which in many cases have proven difficult to reconcile.

2.2 *Chapters 2–4: Defining National Poetries* (singularity I > singularity II)

In her seminal monograph, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (2009), Clare Cavanagh noted that for several decades after World War II, in Western countries, Poland was perceived as “Slavic shorthand for an oppressed nation where poetry still counts.”⁴ In 1989, when Poland regained independence, the most pressing challenge for Polish authors was to change the image of Polish verse, cut off the linkage between poetry and oppression, and mark the uniqueness of national poetry, its creativity, energy, and imagination.

Similar aims had been on the minds of contemporary Chinese poets since the end of the Cultural Revolution, although their focus was not so much on emerging from the shadows of recent history as from the shadows of the classical tradition with which Chinese verse has been widely associated in Euro-American culture. The modernization movement had begun in the early twentieth century but was interrupted in the 1940s by political circumstances, and the opportunity to take it up again did not return until the 1980s. After the

3 Ouyang Jianghe 2013: 189.

4 Cavanagh 2009: 241.

three decades of virtual isolation between the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the announcement of "reform and opening up" (改革开放) policy, Chinese poets strived to "connect with the West" (与西方接轨), in search of not only inspiration but also recognition, appreciation, and inclusion in the global canons of modern literature. After June Fourth, the idea of "connecting" acquired a new dimension on the mainland, becoming a search for well-proven poetic narratives that could help Chinese poets deal with the trauma of which they were not able and not allowed to speak directly and strike the balance between the duty of bearing witness and satisfying their own literary ambitions; hence also their increased interest in Polish verse, which possessed a large reservoir of such narratives. The unfulfilling role of spokespersons of the "oppressed nation" fell on the small group of former Obscure poets who left China after Tiananmen and have since been fighting a hard battle for dehistoricization and depoliticization of their work.

The aforementioned transformations are related to the first aspect of poetic singularity that I wish to investigate; namely, the singularity of national poetry. For several years after 1989, the poetry scenes in Poland and China were busy negotiating the shape of, and hierarchies within, their respective local poetry discourses. This phase was characterized by conspicuous dichotomies that resulted in nationwide polemics between the Classicists and the Barbarians (*Klasycyści vs. Barbarzyńcy*) in Poland and the Intellectual poets and Popular poets (知识分子诗人 vs. 民间诗人) in China. In both, authors born in the late 1950s and early 1960s played leading roles. Among the flashpoints of these polemics were the different attitudes toward national tradition, foreign influences, and poetry's relationship to other arts, especially the nascent popular culture. In retrospect, it seems that, at this initial stage, which in Poland lasted until the late 1990s and in China extended further into the early 2000s, poets and critics tried to draw the external boundaries of their national poetics so they could subsequently start filling the interior.

The first dimension of singularity—that is, the singularity of national poetry—has invariably remained in a complex relationship with its second dimension, the individual singularity of poets and poems. On the one hand, one can say that national poetry establishes itself as a net force of individual poetics, a big picture whose shape is negotiated between them; on the other hand, in transitional periods, in which the definition of national poetry becomes the main focus of literary audiences, critics, and/or authors, it often obscures individual singularities, bearing a negative impact on their reception and downplaying their uniqueness. This conflict was particularly visible in Poland when, in the 1990s, scholars launched an informal search for a new *poeta vates* among Brulion authors, who, in turn, consistently sabotaged these attempts, fearful

of how, to quote Frank O'Hara's "Sleeping on the Wing," "space is disappearing and your singularity"⁵ and making this final line of O'Hara's poem the manifesto for their generation.⁶ In China, authors who stayed in the country tended to think of their individual singularities as contributing to, rather than developing against, the national poetry's singularity, which arguably resulted in a more permanent locking of their poetics into fixed paradigms that emerged in local poetry discourse. Emigrants, such as Bei Dao or Duo Duo, were more determined to emphasize their desire to work on their own account. In my interpretations of works from this polemical period in chapters 2–4, I will try to do justice to both of these dimensions of poetic singularity and bring out healthy and unhealthy tensions between them. Also, the compairative narrative as such will be on two levels in each chapter, centered on the interplay between the two poetries on the one hand, and on interactions between individual poet(ic)s matched in cross-cultural pairs on the other.

Chapter 2 comparatively rereads two types of foundational narratives of post-1989 poetry in Poland and in China, around which the newly emergent poetry scenes gradually polarized themselves. I refer to these two strongly mythogenic narratives as the narratives of Old Masters, borrowing the term widely used in Polish poetry discourse, as represented here by the doyens of the late twentieth-century poetry scene, Czesław Miłosz and Ai Qing 艾青, and the Young Martyrs, as represented by Rafał Wojaczek and Haizi 海子, whose premature suicidal deaths acquired a symbolic meaning in the eyes of those who survived them. In both Poland and China, these two types of figures were crucial in redefining poetry and provided fixed, distinct points of reference for authors and critics against which the emerging discourse could be oriented. At the earliest stage of transformation, the Old Masters were taken almost unanimously as a negative framework, while the Young Martyrs were hailed as positive heroes, though soon many controversies arose around them as well, which created further division among leading actors on the poetry scene. By and large, due to a specific distribution of symbolic power in Poland (measured in international acclaim and honors, including Nobel Prizes in literature), the position of the Old Masters was much stronger than in China, and thus the scene formation process hinged more on settling accounts with the precursors than on developing alternative models. In China, where the Old Masters of national poetry were largely self-appointed or government-appointed and therefore not taken seriously by emerging avant-garde authors, a greater focus

5 O'Hara 1995: 236.

6 The artistic affinity of members of the Brulion Generation with the American poet earned them the label of "O'Harists" (*o'haryści*).

was on creating effective martyrology, while spiritual fathers to love and symbolically kill were adopted from abroad. Incidentally, one of those adoptive fathers was Miłosz.

Both case studies, one on Miłosz and Ai Qing and the other on Wojacek and Haizi, draw on texts with surprising mutual resonances despite geographical and cultural distance and a notable difference in the authors' individual styles. This is partly explained by the poets' common sources of inspiration, mostly drawn from Western and Russian literature. These sources include Walt Whitman for Miłosz and Ai Qing—whose paths, however, parted as early as in the 1950s—and Nietzsche, the Romantics, and the existentialists for Wojacek and Haizi. They also trigger a more general comparative narrative that leads to a reflection on the complex relationships between the lived historical/personal experience and artistic creation. Miłosz and Ai Qing, each in his own way, try to rationalize and universalize these connections and set ethical standards for national poetries. Wojacek and Haizi test various reactions between the world and the word on their “homunculuses,” to use Wojacek's term when referring to the lyrical persona in his poetry.

In chapter 3, I investigate how contemporary poetry negotiated its territories with other arts. The first section examines its interactions with high culture exemplified by theater, which at the time was also looking for new forms of expression and welcomed contributors representing all kinds of artistic activity. Section 2 turns to rock music as part of a rapidly developing popular culture. Parallel to a literary-historical discussion, this chapter undertakes a methodological reflection on questions concerning translation, which—as I already disclosed—constitutes a main source of inspiration in the present study. Some two-thirds of the Polish-Chinese pairings discussed in this book were first more or less consciously matched by me in translation, and thus two-thirds of this analysis could be read as a work in translation studies. In fact, translation itself might be taken as a specific case of comparative operation, for it always involves connecting (con)texts from source and target culture and negotiating between them in order to create a new, translational, object; however, in this case, the negotiations are clearly hierarchical, and the text in translation usually plays a decisive role in determining the translator's choice.

The discussion in the first section of chapter 3 centers on intertextual connections established by me in translation between Tadeusz Różewicz's poetic plays *Card Index* (*Kartoteka*, 1958) and *Card Index Scattered* (*Kartoteka rozrzucona*, 1990–1994) and Yu Jian's long poem “File o” (*o dang'an* o 档案, 1994), which was transformed into a theatrical play by Mou Sen 牟森. I borrowed Różewicz's title for Yu's work, calling it “Kartoteka o,” sending thus a clear signal to Polish readers that the texts in question may effectively interact. I explain

why I did so and ponder the specific aesthetic and epistemological ramifications of my choice, proposing a compairative interpretation of the discussed poem-plays in the context of the authors' performative poetics of the flesh (a term borrowed from Mayra Rivera) and their attempts at creating mimetic grammars of literary language.

As regards interactions between poetry and rock music, I approach the problem from two opposite sides, inquiring into the work of two artists: Polish poet-turned-musician Marcin Świetlicki and Chinese musician-invited-onto-poetry-Parnassus Cui Jian 崔健. I take a closer look at the controversy surrounding various attempts to bring poetry and popular culture together, with special attention paid to what these polemics tell us about the understanding of poetry and its role in Polish and Chinese cultures, societies, and media, to the entanglement of the popular-culture discourse with the discussion of Westernization, and, last but not least, to the ways in which these matters feed into the production and reception of individual poems/songs. I demonstrate how music activates various intertextual connections in Świetlicki's poems, and how Cui's songs initially benefited from the resonance of rock music with the simultaneously developing literary trends—especially Scar Literature (伤痕文学) and Obscure poetry—a blessing that later turned into a curse. I also propose a metaphorical interpretation of poetry and rock music in times of oppression and transformation as social counterparts of soul and conscience.

Chapter 4 moves to the backstage of the Polish and Chinese poetry scenes, introducing “invisible poets” whose work significantly coshaped their respective national poetry discourses in the 1990s. Their long-term impact, however, has not become fully manifest until the end of the polemical decade. The chapter's protagonists are four women authors: (1) Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 and (2) Krystyna Miłobędzka and Zhai Yongming 翟永明. Szymborska and Wang represent an individualistic modernist model of invisibility, while Miłobędzka and Zhai, who experiment with various methods of disappearing in language, can be counted among the pioneers of poetic post-modernism and precursors of posthumanism in Poland and China respectively.

Initially, this chapter was not devised as a chapter about women's poetry, and I had intended to portray some male authors as well. Eventually, however, I abandoned that idea and instead decided that this may become a good opportunity to retell the story of female poetry from an angle that might become an alternative to the plethora of male-dominated narratives on the history of contemporary verse and the growing number of interventionist readings aimed at the demarginalization of women. Such narratives do not always respect the *desire* of some women to remain invisible and reclaim their voices as feminist activists or to contribute to subversive narratives that sabotage patriarchalism.

Thus, a paradoxical situation emerges: the patriarchal discourse denies women the right to visibility, and the women-activist discourse sometimes actually denies women the right to *invisibility*. This holds not only for women but for many other underrepresented groups. I try to find a way out of this stalemate, showing how the authors discussed transform their seemingly disadvantageous social and existential position into an advantage through poetry.

2.3 Chapter 5: *Listening to Individual Voices* (*singularity II* > *singularity I*)

The turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw a significant shift in literary-critical attention toward what I call *individual singularity*. The newly emergent generation of poets, most of whom were born in the 1970s, was referred to as *roczniki siedemdziesiąte* ([born in] the 70s) in Poland and *70 hou* (70 后, Post-70) in China; for simplicity, I will stick to the latter English term (Post-70) in both the Polish and Chinese contexts. The Post-70s were no longer preoccupied with contributing to the big polemics, nor were they willing to take sides in them; critics gradually abandoned the convenient but limiting dichotomies as well. In Poland, this transformation from dualism to polyphony was almost immediate. In China, it took more time and had an intermediary stage: the dichotomy first turned into dialectics and only later started evolving toward actual pluralism.

Unlike chapters 2–4, which focus on general concepts, attitudes, and approaches to poetry, chapter 5 handles poetics directly concerned with the authors' self-positioning in the world, not in literary discourse. In section 1, we meet two sharp-tongued and kindhearted rebels: Krzysztof Siwczyk and Yin Lichuan 尹丽川, the near-coevals with aspirations in cinematography, whose literary debuts made a splash on the Polish and Chinese poetry scenes respectively. Siwczyk and Yin surprised critics with their unpretentious individual idioms, which were unmistakably their own. Their early writings evince incredible mutual resonances which we will trace in their poems. As their careers develop, their increasingly divergent trajectories reflect the notable difference in the evolution of Polish and Chinese verse that I signaled before: the instant transition from the dualisms of the major polemics to pluralism and individualism in Poland versus the gradual shift in China with an intermediary dialectic stage.

In section 2, we will examine two long poems, *Twelve Stations* (*Dwanaście stacji*, 2004) by Tomasz Różycki and “Homecoming” (还乡, 2017) by Li Hao 李浩. In these poems, the two poet-travelers journey back to their places of origin only to find the world of their childhood transformed by the deluge

of civilization. Inspired by the final scene of “Homecoming,” where we see an angel with a catheter at the gates of a cemetery, I propose reading these works within the framework of Walter Benjamin’s messianic-materialist historiography, as formulated in his famous essay “On the Concept of History,” written as a commentary to Paul Klee’s *Angel Novus*, which I combine with the ecocritical notion of solastalgia. In line with Benjaminian thought, one’s individual singularity constitutes itself in the process of saving singular names of those who came before, and of the things and places that disappeared. Li and Różycki exercise their “weak messianic power” with deep awareness of the hopelessness of their mission but are still determined to uphold the secret covenant between generations.

The chapter ends with a panoramic section devoted to the notion of poetic imagination. “Emboldened imagination” (*ośmielona wyobraźnia*), termed so by Marian Stala, became a leitmotif in Polish poetry discourse of the early 2000s, catalyzing its shift from the quest for the singularity of national poetry to the focus on the individual singularities of poets and poems. In China, portents of an “imagination turn” appeared at the threshold of the second decade of the twenty-first century in Chen Chao’s 陈超 literary criticism, specifically in his attempt to arrive at a dialectical synthesis of the antithetical visions of poetry represented by the Intellectual and Popular camps in the concept of “individualized historical imagination” (个人化历史想象力). This section opens a perspective for a sort of compairative barter transaction. Exporting Stala’s category of “emboldened imagination” to China may help us to rediscover poets who never fit the dichotomous/dialectic model of the local poetry scene and for whom the national poetry discourse apparently did not develop efficient methodological tools to approach their work. On the other hand, Chen’s “individualized historical imagination” might prove instrumental in rereading the poetry of the Polish Old Masters and the New Wave.

2.4 *Chapters 6–7: Toward the Limits of Language* (*singularity III, or Capital-S Singularity*)

As mentioned earlier, the third dimension of singularity—*capital-S Singularity*—which plays an increasingly important role not just in Polish and Chinese poetry but in world poetry in general, may be defined by analogy to the notion of Singularity in STEM. It is, in a great simplification, a hypothetical liminal point where the laws of a given discipline break down and are rendered ineffective to approach the reality that presumably stretches beyond the domain that is describable within the available paradigms developed by the discipline. Capital-S Singularities cannot be synchronized with our available

“grammars of understanding” or reproduced within well-proven “grammars of creation,” to use George Steiner’s term,⁷ and require developing alternative paths of thinking that transcend conventional cognitive and creative habits. For physicists, Singularity is a point in spacetime characterized by infinite gravitation at which the laws of physics are believed to collapse and can no longer describe the occurring processes; for example, in the “zero moment” of the cosmic Big Bang or inside a black hole. For mathematicians, Singularity is a point at which a certain mathematical object is not defined or ceases to be “well-behaved,” as they call it, meaning that the geometries and algebras that are at their disposal fail to interpret the object’s performance. Finally, the technological Singularity sought by engineers is a point at which “humans will transcend biology,” in Ray Kurzweil’s formula,⁸ and the technological development will escape our control, when machines will start to program themselves, creating algorithms that do not obey the logic determined by the specific wiring of the human brain. Michael Kanaan, for one, offers the following definition:

The point at which a machine might cross into that hypothetical state is called the singularity—a moment when all knowledge a superintelligent machine possesses runs exponentially rampant, with knowledge building upon knowledge in an endlessly escalating, unstoppable process that would also prompt the machine to divine its own motivations and purposes, arguably its own iteration of consciousness. It’s fascinating to speculate about what would happen if that moment ever occurred. But whether it would be the best or worst thing that ever happened to the human race, or something in between, is only a hypothetical or philosophical question for now, as it’s not a practically possible outcome of any known science.⁹

In the context of poetry, which is made from and codetermined by (human) language, Singularity indicates a hypothetical point at the furthest limits of (human) language, where its structures decompose, the textual reality gets out of hand and requires a new system of signs that will be able to synchronize itself with its dynamic. This is the most far-reaching among the enterprises discussed in the present study. Authors who set out in search of capital-S Singularity are prepared for a one-way expedition. Their poems “leave home and never return,” to quote Andrzej Sosnowski, one of the protagonists of

7 Steiner 2010.

8 Kurzweil 2005.

9 Kanaan 2020: 132.

chapter 6. To paraphrase the other protagonist of the chapter, Che Qianzi 车前子, it is easy to start a poem but impossible to finish it.

Sosnowski and Che have never been interested in defining national poetries or striving for individual singularity in or through poetry. Conversely, they have aimed at redefining the very essence of poetry and tried to annihilate the individual self in order to acquire a greater flexibility of poetic subject that will not be limited to the specific abilities of the human mind. They have drawn inspiration from postmodern philosophies and established a dialogue with prominent twentieth-century American poets, in particular with the New York school (which fascinated Polish authors) and with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets (who easily found a common ground with Chinese authors). Sosnowski's and Che's works, especially in the beginning (i.e., in the late 1980s and early 1990s), created controversy among their confused audiences. Their poems were rendered "incomprehensible" and/or depreciated as mere *language game* or *language play*. To address the first of these charges, I try to demonstrate that the category of (in)comprehensibility is ineffective for describing their poetry, the very nature of which is anepistemological, oriented rather toward ontological transformations of poetic matter. Confronting the second charge, I develop a theoretical argument based on the two often synonymously used categories of game and play. Building on the findings of game studies, I clarify the difference between gaming and playing and transfer it to poetry discourse to bring out the uniqueness of Sosnowski's (gaming) and Che's (playing) artistic propositions. This is also a starting point for a more general reflection on our misunderstanding of the nature of understanding in literature and other spheres of human endeavor.

While Andrzej Sosnowski and Che Qianzi strive to overcome the limitations of human language by means of human language itself, the authors introduced in chapter 7 search for new grammars in nonhuman languages, engaging in extensive interactions with the natural sciences and modern technologies. In the works of Julia Fiedorczuk, Yin Xiaoyuan 殷晓媛, Łukasz Kazmierczak/Łucja Kuttig, Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, Małgorzata Lebda, Ai Fei'er 爱斐儿, and Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiert, we will find attempts at what I call *con-versing with the world* through transcorporeal writing and observe these poets' fascinating *cosomologies* in their monosexual and bisexual variety. From Polish and Chinese ecopoetry and Chinese migrant worker verse, I extract, among other things, the aforementioned metaphorical concept of poetry as a photosynthesizing plant, and in the encyclopedic writings of Fiedorczuk and Yin, I trace attempts to systematically translate the poetry discourse into a discourse of natural sciences. In section 2, I tentatively inquire into the blurred boundaries between the notions of the superhuman, the transhuman, and the posthuman,

and their respective linkages to democracy. I consider selected projects of technologically supported poetry, including works by authors centered around the Polish poetry hub *Rozdzielczość Chleba* (Bread Resolution/Multiplication) and the Chinese literary experiments with AI or, strictly speaking, augmented intelligence (IA, or “intelligence amplified”), proposing a notion of an augmented author to approach poetry’s symbiosis with technology.

2.5 *Singularity IV*

In addition to the three meanings of singularity which constitute the conceptual framework of my narrative, there is one more—which I discovered only several months into the writing of this book—that aptly describes my methodological approach. I am thinking of Derek Attridge’s notion of singularity as laid out in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). As a student, I read the book in Polish translation (*Jednostkowość literatury*, 2006) by Paweł Mościcki, not knowing its original title, which explains why I did not immediately associate Attridge with the term in question. Nevertheless, his idea of literature as a set of events in which the text’s singularity is actualized in an inventive and creative but also deeply ethical act of reading is one which has shaped my approach to literature. Attridge’s definition of reading as a “movement toward the unknown” which gradually pushes one’s way of thinking on new tracks and allows the development of new “modes of mental processing” concurs with my take on a comparative activity as an attempt at restructuring the grammar of literary discourse:

It is only when the event of this reformulation is experienced by the reader (who is, in the first instance, the writer reading or articulating the words as they emerge) as an event, an event which opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs), or, more accurately, the event of such opening, that we can speak of the literary. The predilections and conventions by means of which most events of comprehension occur are challenged and recast, not merely as automatic extensions but as invitations to alterity, and thus to modes of mental processing, ideas and emotions, or conceptual possibilities that had hitherto been impossible—impossible because the status quo (cognitive, affective, ethical) depended on their exclusion. This process of initiation, this movement into the unknown, is experienced as something that happens to the reader in the course of a committed and attentive reading.

This is what a literary work “is”: an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely

insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read.¹⁰

The reading events in my book mostly consist of collisions between poems written by Polish and Chinese authors that generate specific accidents of meaning within my readerly horizon. In this perspective, constructing a comparative narrative can be taken as dealing with the consequences of the accident of meaning.

The selection of texts is to some extent arbitrary, based on many interconnected subjective and intersubjective factors that made the trajectories of these specific poems intersect within my personal milieu. I am not always able to identify the so-called foundational event that initiated a given comparison, but there are two cases where I can precisely reconstruct the process that led to a particular association, and I will share them in the next section. Regardless of the circumstances of the texts' collision, my aim is to optimize their trajectories as they continue traveling together through global cultural space. I consider the potential local disruptions their fusion may cause in the global textual universe, and try to predict various implications of these interferences, possibly maximizing gains and minimizing losses. Gains and losses are obviously anything but fixed, objectively measurable categories, and Attridge rightly notes that

[t]he effects of the literariness of certain linguistic works (whether or not they are conventionally classified as "literature") are not predictable and do not arise from planning, and although artistic inventiveness may play a crucial role in the ethical status of a culture—since a culture that does not continually find ways of opening itself to the excluded other on which it depends can hardly be said to be ethical—there can be no guarantee that the alterity brought into the world by a particular literary or other artistic work will be beneficial. In the worst case, the introduction of alterity could destroy a culture. This is the risk involved in any welcoming of the other.¹¹

Destroying a culture is certainly not a goal I pursue in my academic work, and it would be vain to claim that this modest book can cause such an effect even if it tries. My responsibility as a director-comparatist is to ensure that the alterity brought to the world by the conversations between Polish and Chinese poems

10 Attridge 2004: 59.

11 Ibidem: 60.

which I arrange and document prove possibly stimulating and transformative, and not destructive.

3 Genesis: Two Stories

This section tells two personal stories that illustrate just how unpredictable, and even miraculous, poetic enterprise can be. They also say a lot of the genesis of this book, especially two of its sections: the discussion on Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni in chapter 4, and the comparison of Tomasz Różycki's and Li Hao's long poems in chapter 5. On a more abstract level, they constitute a record of the complex processes of the emergence of meaning from singular reading events that accumulate and gradually develop into more complex constellations which the author can ultimately package into a tidy academic argument. The openness with which I invoke those personal experiences stems from my conviction that starting from one's subjective point of view does not violate academic ethos as long as the argument is not meant to serve one's own subjective interest. Moreover, in the pursuit of nonsubjective interest, the subjective point of departure is reevaluated and readjusted, and this self-correction feeds back into the quality of research. A violation of academic integrity is to pursue one's own subjective interest based on pseudo-objective premises that are adopted to make one's self-serving argument pass as scientific. Transparency matters, and it is particularly important in studies such as this one, which cannot, to my knowledge, be verified by confrontation with other accounts of the same subject.

3.1 *Story No. 1: Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni (ad Chapter 4)*

Ever since I can remember, I have been attracted by complex, tantalizingly difficult things that far exceed my limits of understanding. My favorite poets were those who shared their hardest metaphysical struggles with the reader. At the top of my reading list was Miłosz, whereas “boring and childish” Szymborska languished near the bottom. One day in grammar school, our teacher asked us to write a poem for homework. I do not remember whether there was any specific topic, nor do I remember what I wrote, but I can recall that I was quite satisfied with my work. Apparently, the teacher was satisfied too. She gave me the top mark, and although she did not offer any words of appreciation, she must have talked about it with other students, as the next day a friend told me that the teacher had compared my poem to ... yes ... Szymborska. I knew it was intended as a compliment and that I should be happy, but I, with all my teenage hubris, felt hugely disappointed. Sometimes I entertain myself with a

thought that who knows, had the teacher compared it to Miłosz, I would have kept writing and been a famous poet by now. But this is, of course, just an innocent illusion. I have thus far not discovered sufficient deposits of creativity and artistic sensibility in myself to write poetry, and I suppose that if I were to read that grammar school poem today, I would blush with embarrassment. For that reason, I have no intention of ever digging it up.

I would have probably long forgotten that poetic moment at school if it were not for an experience I had ten years later. As a graduate student, I showed a pile of my translations of Chinese poets to my master's thesis advisor, Anna Legeżyńska, a specialist in Polish poetry. Among the translated texts, there were several poems by Wang Xiaoni. The professor was enthusiastic. One of the first things she said was that these poems reminded her of ... yes ... Szymborska. Again, I should have probably taken this as a compliment, but my first thought was that my translations must have been catastrophic if they inspired such an association. How was it possible that I translated Wang Xiaoni into something that could be taken as Szymborska's style when I had not even read much of Szymborska beyond what was assigned in school? While translating Yu Jian's early works about "simple gray people" (*zwykli szarzy ludzie*), to use Różewicz's signature phrase, I was aware of some influence of Różewicz's poetry style on this kind of verse in the Polish language. Also, my decision to translate "File o" as "Kartoteka o" was based on a careful reflection on the interactions between the two texts/plays. But in the case of Szymborska and Wang, the convergence apparently stemmed from something else.

A couple of years later, I found myself at Peking University as a visiting scholar. At the beginning of my stay, in October 2016, I was invited to participate in a poetry festival in Gansu province. I immediately clarified that I was not a poet, but the organizers assured me that it did not matter and asked me to just read "something" from Polish verse. The next day, they sent me a poem that they wanted me to read: Szymborska's "View with a Grain of Sand" (*Widok z ziarnkiem piasku*). I accepted their choice, if reluctantly, trusting that they had selected something to suit the event's program, but when we arrived at the venue, I instantly realized I was wrong. The festival turned out to be a large commercial event sponsored by a giant agricultural company for the establishment of a poetry foundation. Toward the end of the event, the company's boss handed a huge check to the delegation of Chinese poets. I could not read the exact amount under all the bright lights, but I remember there were a lot of zeros.

The spectacle was in the open air. On a large stage, with dazzling special effects, several well-known Chinese poets emphatically read their works, most of which oscillated around the topic of Gansu. There were also actors and

local TV presenters who recited other famous poems, including Haizi's ecstatic praise of Chinese wheat fields. The event was crowned by the reading of a long, sentimental patriotic poem written and performed by the boss himself. He stood at the lectern with several rows of employees in work uniforms at his side. As he read, they hypnotically recited a chorus of refrains. Imagine, in this magnificent landscape, against the grandiosity of the Chinese native soil sinking into a flood of metaphors and epithets, Szyborska's grain of sand which "calls itself neither grain nor sand. / It does just fine without a name, / whether general, particular, / permanent, passing, / incorrect, or apt."¹²

When it came time for my performance, I could hardly keep my balance. In front of me were several girls wearing tutus dancing something like *Swan Lake* with Chinese characteristics, and around me were swirling celestial spheres projected on the three walls of the stage. Szyborska was probably turning in her grave. During the rehearsal, the director had insisted that I read more "poetically," but I firmly refused and read it in a way that I felt true to the author's intention. It was the only thing I could do to save her (and my) face. This was the first time that I felt a connection with Szyborska. As it happens, that autumn I was writing a section of my PhD thesis on Wang Xiaoni's poem "Becoming a Poet Anew" (重新做一个诗人); its opening lines reverberated in my mind as a perfect summary of what I was witnessing: "At the shortest end of the century / the Earth bobs / humans bustle about like monkeys between trees. // While my two hands dangle idly in China's air. / The table and the wind / are both sheets of pure paper. / I make my sense / happen only at home."¹³ I recalled and, after such a long time, came to appreciate my advisor's strikingly accurate intuition about the affinity between Szyborska and Wang. This unexpected resemblance still does not cease to intrigue me, especially when I read Szyborska in English (in Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak's translations) and Wang in English (in Eleanor Goodman's translations). Despite different translators and a different target language, I can hear the same resonance that was heard in my Polish renditions. In chapter 4, I invite the reader to witness a conversation between the two poets, hoping that they, too, will draw from it aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, and other unmeasurable benefits.

3.2 *Story No. 2: Li Hao and Tomasz Różycki (ad Chapter 5)*

Just like the section devoted to Szyborska and Wang, the comparison between Li Hao and Tomasz Różycki in chapter 5 also originates in a translatorial

¹² Szyborska 2016: 243, translated by Clare Cavanagh.

¹³ Quoted in Krenz 2018: 99–100, trans. J K.

experience—namely, my work on Li Hao's collection *Homecoming*—preceded by a series of fortuitous coincidences. I met Li in late 2016 or early 2017 in Beijing, during my fellowship at Peking University, at a poetic event organized by Wang Jiaxin 王家新, but, as it soon turned out, our paths had crossed earlier several times unbeknownst to us. My first one-year scholarship in China was in 2011/2012 at Wuhan Normal University, whose campus is located across from the campus of Wuhan University, where Li Hao had studied several years earlier. In Wuhan, I befriended a group of Chinese young people who were involved with the underground Catholic Church and soon joined in with some of their activities, including a winter camp and a summer camp for children in the Henan countryside, where the leader of the group, and a good friend of mine, is from. As I later established, his family lives in a village located several dozen kilometers away from Li Hao's native village, an almost negligible distance in China. Moreover, both villages are largely Catholic, which is definitely not common in the PRC. Li Hao too identifies himself as Christian, and echoes of his religious identity are very clear in his poems. This certainly helped me raise Polish publishers' interest in *Homecoming* as a book that could contribute to bridging a cultural gap between Polish and Chinese literature.

In the summer of 2014, my Henan-born friend took me to Taiyuan city in Shaanxi province to visit his parents who, like millions of Chinese people, have to travel to more developed areas to find work. We spent several days living at a construction site in workers' barracks. This experience made an even bigger impression on me than my time in the impoverished countryside, where there was only one public bathroom for several villages and no heating to speak of, so you never took off your winter coat, not even in bed. I learned from Li Hao that after dropping out of university, he, too, did construction work, and dedicated his poem "Elegy: Mourning a Fellow Worker" (哀歌—悼工友) to a friend who had died in an accident after falling from a scaffolding. Intrigued by all those coincidences and prompted by the acute awareness of the importance of the topics raised in Li's writings, I felt an inner urge to translate his poetry. What happened further reconfirmed my decision.

Homecoming was officially published in China in June 2017. A spectacular launch event was held in a hotel in Beijing. Several months later, in autumn, exactly one day after I managed to find a publisher in Poland, and before I managed to inform Li Hao about this, he sent me a scan of an official notification from the censorship bureau that his book would be taken off the shelves. After this intervention, Li started to experience rejection by other mainland poets, including those who had been very supportive before. On the opening pages of *Homecoming*, one can see several enthusiastic recommendations from renowned authors and critics such as Wang Jiaxin, Zang Di 臧棣,

Xiao Kaiyu 萧开愚, Rong Guangqi 荣光启, Geng Zhanchun 耿占春, and others. Most of the former advocates of his work, however, somehow lost their enthusiasm toward Li's artistic activity when the book was banned. During my next visit in China that year, I experienced this hostility firsthand when I casually mentioned Li Hao's name to other authors on the way to a poetry festival. Therefore, I was very surprised when, a couple of weeks after the collection was published in Poland, Li Hao sent me a draft paper by Liu Ping 刘平 from Fudan University, who wrote an insightful analysis of *Homecoming*, asking me to add Polish translations under the Chinese originals of all poems mentioned. It turned out that, since the (Chinese-language) collection was forbidden in China, academic papers discussing it could not be published either. But there were no legal obstacles to publishing an article about a Polish-language book (the Polish translation of *Homecoming*, that is). Later on, I heard from Li Hao that the paper was rejected by the journal anyway as the editors did not want to take the risk, but it is still available online on the *Southern Chinese Art* (中国南方艺术) website, a testament to Li Hao's roundabout way of reaching Chinese audiences via Poland.¹⁴

When I tried my hand at translating some of Li Hao's short poems to assess whether I would be able to take on the entire collection, I felt that my translation tended to slide into what I identified as echoes of Miłosz's poetic idiom and rhythm. I should not have been astonished, because at the time I was helping another Chinese poet verify translations of Miłosz, so it was not unlikely that I was affected by Miłosz's strong diction. This impression was followed by a general observation that Li's imagery is somewhat reminiscent of Miłosz's early and middle-age poetry, which is permeated with catastrophic visions, Manichean struggles between light and darkness, the intense presence of ghosts and spirits, elements of folk beliefs and rituals, and the persistent search for a "more capacious form" (*forma bardziej pojemna*) which included, for example, excerpts from local chronicles and legends; similar to Miłosz, Li Hao drew extensively from the diaries of Gu Zhun 顾准 (1915–1974), which were written when the famous Chinese thinker and forerunner to liberal economy was sent down to Henan, first for reeducation through labor in Shangcheng (商城, 1959–1960) and later as a teacher in Xi County (息县, 1969–1971).¹⁵ Nevertheless, were it not for a conversation I had with Li Hao in 2017, in which he mentioned Miłosz among his favorite poets and insightfully spoke about his work, I would likely have abandoned the idea of translating *Homecoming* for fear of imposing a style on it that had imposed itself on me

14 Liu Ping 2018.

15 Li Hao 2017: 189–190.

but which may have had little to do with Li's actual sensibility and aesthetic preferences. Obviously, this was not a green light for me to recklessly translate the rest of the book into Miłosz's language, but it gave me the necessary confidence that my intuitions were in the right direction. Following the Miłoszean thread in search of younger companions and more contemporary Polishes for Li Hao, I encountered Tomasz Różycki, considered by many as a continuator of Miłosz's legacy, one of his most faithful "grandchildren," as Marta Wyka called the generations of authors born in the 1960s and later,¹⁶ and thus a step-cousin of Li, as one may say in light of my chapter 2, which discusses Miłosz as an adoptive father of Chinese contemporary verse. From Li's and Różycki's oeuvres, I select two long poems that resonate with each other in terms of "plot," imagery, and philosophical and existential reflection. Together, they prompt a larger narrative of the search for singularity in the vanishing world of the past.

4 The Making of This Book

In Search of Singularity was not an easy book to write, even though it is composed almost exclusively of material that I was well familiar with and did not require time-consuming research, such as additional fieldwork or library queries. Most of the poetry publications cited in it can be found on my own bookshelves. One major problem, however, were the logistics, in both a literal and metaphorical sense. As a study on Polish and Chinese poetry written in the English language in an ancient German city, the present work is a miniature of the complex global networks of culture transmission and knowledge circulation, which opens unprecedented opportunities for communication and exchange but also poses enormous challenges. Transporting several shelves of books by bus from my native Poznań to Trier, where I was based for ten months during which the first draft of this book was written, was arguably the easiest of them. Working out the details of balanced content and emphasis distribution between the passages focused on Polish poetry and those focused on Chinese poetry, maintaining efficient semantic and aesthetic load transfer between them via the channel of a third language, and finally unloading everything onto the open field of global literary discourse without overwhelming the audience, put my imagination to the hardest test. Many of my specific doubts are detailed in the following chapters. Here, I will focus on some of the concrete, technical decisions that directly led to the composition of this book.

16 Wyka 2013, chapter 6: "Children and Grandchildren of Miłosz" (Wnuki i prawnuki Miłosza).

As someone born and raised in Poland, with an academic background in comparative studies and sinology and an imperfect knowledge of English, I usually work with Polish and Chinese literature in the source languages; thus, writing *In Search* was one of the few opportunities I have had to delve more deeply into, and appreciate the mastery of, a number of cutting-edge English translations of the languages in question. Polish and Chinese contemporary poetry and, needless to say, its nonnative readers, owe a big debt of gratitude to outstanding scholars and translators whose renditions I extensively quote in this study. Where available, I use existing translations of the discussed poems and provide the translator's name under the poem or in a footnote when a quote appears in the running text. The exceptions where I have translated or retranslated a poem myself (indicated by "trans. JK") include cases in which my interpretation essentially differs from those offered by other translators or when the discussion of a poem requires a literal or near-literal rendition or a multivariant version in order to clarify some language-specific issues or bring out ambiguities. All poetry translations are followed by original versions of the poems. Excerpts from other texts are quoted exclusively in English.

The titles of literary and academic publications are, if translatable, provided first in English and followed by the original Polish/Chinese title at every initial mention in each chapter; if the English translation significantly strays from the original meaning, usually when the title is pun-based, I stick to the Polish/Chinese version. The Chinese characters in authors' names and dates of birth/death are also usually provided at every first mention in a given chapter. I offer Pinyin transliteration of Chinese terms only in very specific cases: when the pronunciation of a word is relevant to the discussion of a poem or when a term is directly incorporated into the running text. Otherwise, for specific terms that may prove useful to Chinese-speaking readers, I include characters in parentheses.

I did my best to make the book accessible for non-Polish- and/or non-Chinese-speaking audiences by including information to help navigate the unfamiliar names, words, titles, dates, and broader cultural context. Those trained in Polish and/or Chinese literature will certainly find some of this information redundant, so I thank them for their patience.

It is my tacit hope that others will benefit from reading this book as much as I have benefited from writing it and, most importantly, will take as much pleasure in the poems as I have. This has been a wonderful intellectual adventure not least because it allowed me to rediscover Polish contemporary poetry on which—and actually *with* which—I grew up as a person born exactly three months and three days before the memorable June Fourth.

Convergent Trajectories

The comparative history of Polish and Chinese verse up to the late twentieth century in this chapter aims at bringing the two poetics closer together to reveal mutual resonances and dissonances that offer a source of narrative potential for intertextual interactions. I will try to actualize this potential in subsequent chapters by asking the text-actors to converse on my comparative stage.

1 Worlds Apart: Polish and Chinese Poetry up to the Early Twentieth Century

That Polish and Chinese poetry are two radically different literary realities may sound like a truism that needs no further elaboration. Until the early twentieth century, there was virtually no direct contact between these two universes. Nevertheless, their premodern histories determined, to a large extent, their later evolution, specific features, and mutual presumptions and expectations. Some simplifications and generalizations are of course unavoidable in such a brief account. But to understand how these two poetic traditions can offer a constructive dialogue, their backstories should be taken into consideration before we invite them to take to the comparative stage.¹

1.1 *Poetry in China*

China has the longest recorded written poetic tradition in the world. It has developed continuously since 1500–1200 BC and was preceded by a centuries-long oral tradition, the beginnings of which can be traced back to the early days of Chinese civilization.² In premodern times, the Chinese poetic tradition's main sources included folk customs, religious-philosophical systems, and court culture, where poetry was widely practiced by officials and emperors themselves; the inclusion of poetry writing in the imperial examination confirms its special status in the country. Buddhist culture was a crucial medium through which foreign, mostly Indian, inspirations and influences reached

1 For a history of Chinese poetry in English, see, e.g., Chang and Owen 2010 (volume 1: to 1375, volume 2: after 1375). For a history of Polish poetry in English, see Miłosz 1983a, 1983b.

2 Hinton 2014, introduction.

Chinese poetry. The importance of these influences is demonstrated in Lucas Klein's study *The Organization of Distance: Poetry, Translation, Chineseness* (2018). Klein's notion of nativization and foreignization as a methodological framework does away with the sustained misperception of the Chinese poetry tradition as a self-contained, hermetic universe.³

For more than two thousand years, beginning with the *Classic of Poetry* (诗经), the first anthology of Chinese verses compiled in the seventh century BC, poetry was written almost exclusively in classical literary language, referred to as *wenyanwen* 文言文, which followed significantly different rules to everyday spoken language. These rules remained largely unchanged throughout the centuries and mastering them was an essential part of one's education. In addition, poetic texts were organized according to relatively strict formal and compositional principles specific to a given genre, with the repertoire of genres regularly expanding in the ensuing periods. These genres evolved in close relationship with poetry's two sister arts: music and painting. The affinity for music is reflected in the strong rhythmicality and melodiousness of these early poems, and the aesthetic qualities of Chinese script made beautifully calligraphed verses a natural component of works in the visual arts. Traditional poetry discourse in China also displayed remarkable self-awareness from early on, evidenced by its abundant metatextual production, including theoretical treatises on literary aesthetics and extensive scholarly commentaries devoted to individual poems and poetics.

Like anywhere else in the world, the history of Chinese poetry has had its twists and turns, codetermined by the twists and turns of China's complex political history, with periods of stability and unity alternating with epochs of unrest, territorial fragmentation, and invasions by neighboring nations and tribes. It is commonly believed that the peak of poetic development was reached during the relatively peaceful Tang dynasty (唐朝, 618–907), and its legacy was subsequently taken up by Song dynasty (宋朝, 960–1279) authors. Although it would be difficult to list all of the poets who contributed to the growth of this impressive tradition, three archetypal figures—all of whom have been canonized as sources of specific models of poethood that have echoed widely also in modern poetry—stand out: Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 343–278 BC), the first Chinese poet known by name, widely regarded as an uncompromised patriot and political exile, whose suicide is interpreted as an act of martyrdom for his homeland; Li Bai 李白 (701–762), “poet saint” (诗仙), a knight-errant of Chinese poetry; and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), “poet sage” (诗圣), famous for his

3 Klein 2018, esp. chapter 3.

deep concern for the lives of the common people, artistic responsibility, and moral principles.

The turning point in the history of Chinese poetry coincided with the social-political breakthrough of the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命), which led to the dethronement of the last emperor and the proclamation of the republic in 1911. The new reality sought alternative forms of artistic expression, prompting a reform of the literary language. The New Culture movement (新文化运动), whose pioneers included Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1942), and Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), brought, among other important developments, the birth of what is known as New Poetry (新诗), which is written in free verse using vernacular language and is viewed as fundamentally separate from the two sister arts. New Poetry drew inspiration from the West, which the early reformers considered more advanced than their native culture. They tried to lead China to what they believed to be a higher level of development represented by Western civilization that was in line with the Hegelian teleological model of history adopted from European philosophy.

That said, the classical-style poetry has never disappeared from China, and today it is still not only read and memorized in schools but also widely practiced by people from all walks of life. As Haosheng Yang shows in her study *A Modernity Set to a Pre-Modern Tune* (2016), even the early twentieth century's most avid advocates of the literary revolution still considered traditional forms more suitable in many situations; for example, for deeply personal content. Among them, the most consistent practitioner of classical verse was Nie Gannu 聂绀弩 (1903–1986), for whom writing in *wenyanwen* became a form of both self-therapy and effective resistance against the politics of Mao Zedong 毛泽东.⁴ Today, the subversive function of classical-style writing and the lingering attachment to traditional forms as a medium of intimate emotions and existential experience can be observed in migrant worker poetry, which we will examine in chapter 7.

1.2 *Poetry in Poland*

The history of written poetry in Poland dates back to the tenth to eleventh century. For around five hundred years, however, it was written almost exclusively in Latin, and the rare exceptions created in Polish were mostly religious hymns. It was only in the mid-sixteenth century that Mikołaj Rej (1505–1569), the first poet to write extensively in Polish, produced one of the most famous passages in his country's literary history, a playful declaration of linguistic emancipation: "Among all other nations it shall always be known / That Poles

4 Yang Haosheng 2016, chapter 5.

don't speak goose language but have a tongue of their own,"⁵ which marks a symbolic beginning of Polish national literature. Yet it is not Rej who is regarded as the father of Polish poetry but Jan Kochanowski (ca. 1530–1579), who refined the literary language and imbued it with unparalleled artistry and deep human emotion. His works range from *The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys* (*Odprawa posłów greckich*, 1578), considered the first Polish tragedy, to the intimate *Threnodies* (*Treny*, 1580), written upon the death of his young daughter. He also translated numerous works of world literature, such as the biblical *Psalms*, into Polish and adapted many genre forms, mostly from Greek- and Latin-language literatures. The development of Polish poetry since has largely followed the development of Western European verse, albeit about twenty-five to fifty years behind.

The sixteenth century is often considered the golden age of Polish history and culture. After annexing Lithuania in 1569, the Commonwealth of Poland was one of the three leading military powers in Europe, along with Russia and the Ottoman Empire. It constituted a strategic part of the so-called *Antemurale Christianitatis* (the bulwark of Christendom), a position confirmed by the spectacular victory of the Polish hussar army over the Muslim Turks at the Battle of Vienna in 1683. I ask the reader to keep this little detail in mind because it will return in one of the Chinese poems about Poland in the final section of this chapter. This narrative is also consistently revived by the current government (as of 2022) as part of its nationalist policy to counter liberal tendencies, and by right-wing Polish cultural circles,⁶ including many poets who, in the 1990s, were counted among Brulion's Classicists (more on which, see section 3 of this chapter).

In the seventeenth century, Poland's borders had already begun to shrink owing to lost battles on its territory and the ineptitude of subsequent kings.

5 This comes from a series of Rej's short, humorous poems titled "Figliki" included in his *Animal Farm* (*Zwierzyniec*) collection from 1562. A digital edition of the book is available online as part of The Great Poland District Digital Library (Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa) at <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/1237?id=1237> (accessed December 22, 2020).

6 Every year on Independence Day, 11 November, xenophobic nationalist groups organize a mass demonstration called the "Independence March" (*Marsz Niepodległości*) in Warsaw. Incidentally, in November 2020, the official poster for the march contained a picture of a kneeling hussar with red-and-white wings, supporting himself on a sword whose tip cuts into pieces a five-arm star (symbolizing communism), which is half-red and the other half in the colors of the rainbow (symbolizing LGBT+). The official slogan was "Our Civilization, Our Principles" (*Nasza cywilizacja, nasze zasady*).

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, it disappeared from the world map for 123 years, following three partitions by the Habsburg Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire. It was not until 1918 that the country regained independence. Nonetheless, under these unfavorable circumstances, Polish cultural life evinced an almost paradoxical, unprecedented vibrancy. One reason for this unusual dynamic between culture and politics was that the beginning of political oppression coincided with the intense reception of Western European and Russian Romanticism on Polish soil. The Romantic verse of the “Four Bards”—Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859), and Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883)—is still regarded as the top achievement of Polish literature. Maria Janion, a prominent Polish literary scholar, called Romanticism a “revolution of imagination” (*rewolucja wyobraźni*). This revolution redirected authors’ interests from objective phenomena to the subjective reality of the individual with their phantasms and desires and led to the breaking of various taboos and the forming of a specific death-driven mysticism. The latter was fueled by the failure of the first major national uprising, the 1830–1831 November Uprising, and, in turn, catalyzed the launch of the January Uprising in 1863. Tellingly, the series of patriotic demonstrations that led to this uprising was preceded in 1859 by a church vigil, where mourners prayed for the souls of Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Krasiński.

After the suppression of the January Uprising in 1864, the Romantic fever gradually cooled and gave way to the more rational postulates of positivism, which lasted roughly until the turn of the twentieth century. Positivism emphasized the necessity of “organic work” (*praca organiczna*) in the social-political and cultural spheres to gradually rebuild Poland’s economy and national institutions, including its educational structures. Whereas Romanticism brought an explosion of poetry, positivism virtually abandoned it and turned to prose instead. The early twentieth century thus witnessed an unprecedented development of the Polish novel, which gained international acclaim, as evidenced by two Nobel Prizes granted to Polish authors in this period: Henryk Sienkiewicz and Władysław Stanisław Reymont. That said, the Romantic paradigm, Janion argues, did not exhaust itself in the mid-nineteenth century. Rather, it extended its impact on Polish culture until today with three upsurges: in the early twentieth century, when pro-independence feeling was awakened in society at large; during World War II, when Romantic ideals sparked hope and courage among the young intelligentsia who boldly volunteered for the underground army; and with the emergence of the social movement “Solidarity” (*Solidarność*) in the 1980s. The Romantic paradigm has

formed two distinct tendencies described by Janion as tyrtean and messianist-martyrological, the legacy of which is still prominent in both Polish literature and Polish public discourse.⁷

2 Coming Closer: From the Early Twentieth Century to the Mid-1980s

It is the Romantic paradigm that became the earliest and most sustained link between Polish and Chinese poetics and brought them closer together. The first translation from Polish literature into Chinese was Henryk Sienkiewicz's (1846–1916) novella *Lamplighter* (*Latarnik*, 1881), rendered via the Japanese by Wu Chou 吴樛 in 1906.⁸ The protagonist, Skawiński, is a veteran of many wars and uprisings. In his old age, he takes up a job as a lamplighter in a lighthouse in Aspinwall, where he finally finds peace after a life of wandering. He maintains his connections to the homeland through books, especially his favorite, Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz: The Last Foray in Lithuania* (*Pan Tadeusz, czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*, 1832), which is deemed Poland's national epic. Many famous figures of the revolutionary movement in early twentieth-century China followed Wu and translated other works by Sienkiewicz; noteworthy contributions include Zhou Zuoren's 周作人 translation of *Charcoal Sketches* (*Szkice węglem*, 1877) and Xu Bingchang's 徐炳昶 translation of *Quo Vadis* (1896).

Sienkiewicz's works were among the main sources of inspiration for Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), who is considered the father of Chinese modern literature. It is likely that Sienkiewicz is the reason that Lu Xun became attracted to Polish Romantic poetry, the spirit of which nourishes Sienkiewicz's novels and novellas. One year after the publication of *Lamplighter* in Chinese translation, in 1907, Lu Xun wrote one of the earliest and the most famous manifestos of Chinese New Poetry, titled “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (摩罗诗力说), in which he claimed:

I let the past drop here and seek new voices from abroad, an impulse provoked by concern for the past. I cannot detail each varied voice, but none has such power to inspire and language as gripping as Mara poetry. Borrowed from India, the term “Mara”—celestial demon, or “Satan” in Europe—first denoted Byron. Now I apply it to those, among all the poets,

7 Maria Janion's studies on Romanticism, its history-creating role, and its presence in the Polish public sphere, belong to the canon of Polish literary studies. See, e.g., Janion 1969, 1972; Janion and Żmigrodzka 1978, 2004. For the discussion above, see Janion 2001.

8 Li Yinan 2016: 172; cf. Krenz 2019b.

who were committed to resistance, whose purpose was action but who were little loved by their age; and I introduce their words, deeds, ideas, and the impact of their circles, from the sovereign Byron to a Magyar (Hungarian) man of letters. Each of the group had distinctive features and made his own nation's qualities splendid, but their general bent was the same: few would create conformist harmonies, but they'd bellow an audience to its feet, these iconoclasts whose spirit struck deep chords in later generations, extending to infinity.

Translated by SHU-YING TSAU AND DONALD HOLOCH⁹

In the second part of the essay, halfway between George Byron and Sandor Petöfi, one comes across several long passages discussing three of the Polish Romantic bards: Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Zygmunt Krasiński. Mickiewicz and Słowacki are treated as poets of revenge, while Krasiński is introduced as a poet of love. Reflecting on masterpieces of Polish Romanticism, including *Forefathers' Eve (Dziady)*, *Grażyna*, *Pan Tadeusz*, *Spirit the King (Król Duch)*, and *Kordian*, Lu Xun emphasizes the role of the poetic impulse in strengthening the will for independence and building the identity of the nation.

In a context similar to that of Lu Xun's work, Polish poetry returns to China in 1920, two years after Poland gained independence, in the work of Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), another reformer of Chinese literature and a renowned writer and translator. Guo identifies Byron's participation in the fight for Greek independence with the struggle of the Polish Romantics. In his long poem *The Victorious Death* (胜利之死), which commemorates Terence MacSwiney, who died after seventy-three days on hunger strike against the injustice of the British occupation of Ireland, Guo incorporates quotes from Thomas Campbell's poem "The Downfall of Poland" (1799). Guo's work revolves around the myth of heroic death for one's homeland, describing the Irish hero as "another embodiment of the God of Freedom," along with Tadeusz Kościuszko portrayed by Campbell, among others.¹⁰

Around roughly the same time, Polish poets turned to Chinese poetry as a source of inspiration for the first time. Until the early twentieth century, China was present in Polish literature almost exclusively in various examples of travel writing, including extensive accounts of Catholic missionaries in Asia.¹¹

9 Denton 1996: 99.

10 Guo 2000: 110–115; cf. Krenz 2019b.

11 For a meticulous account of representations of China in Polish (and Serbian) travel literature between 1720 and 1949, see Ewertowski 2020.

Writers during Young Poland (Młoda Polska), a modernist period in Polish culture between circa 1890 and 1918, shared the Western avant-gardes' fascination with, and misguided fantasies about, Oriental culture. In 1922, Leopold Staff, one of Young Poland's most outstanding representatives, published the first collection of translations from classical Chinese poetry, *Chinese Flute (Fletnia chińska)*, drawing on Franz Toussaint's *La flûte de jade: poésies chinoises* (1920). Staff made extensive use of his translational license (by which I mean the translator's equivalent of poetic license). The Chinese originals are, in many cases, nearly impossible to identify; all works are rendered as short pieces of rhythmic poetic prose in the specific ornamental Young Poland style.¹²

From the very beginning, Polish and Chinese poetries were seeking opposite things in each other, passionately digging into each other's pasts. Chinese authors read Polish literature for Romantic inspiration to advance their own reformatory enterprise, which was expected to lead to the redefinition of national identity through literature and culture. Polish authors, conversely, read Chinese classical poets to discover spiritual experience, consolation, and harmony in the exotic landscapes of China's ancient verse. Yet there was virtually no interaction between contemporaneous Polish and Chinese poets. From a comparatist perspective, this is extremely regrettable because the early twentieth century is a time when Polish-Chinese intertextual dialogue might have developed in a particularly interesting way since the two poetries were facing similar challenges, especially their intense negotiations of their position on the map of world literature.

Among other coincidences, it was during this period that, both in Poland and in China, two discussions began that continued for the following hundred years, culminating at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. One of them was the discussion on the (in)comprehensibility in/of poetry, which influenced the reception of the works of Andrzej Sosnowski and Che Qianzi 车前子 in particular; this will be elaborated on in chapter 6. The other discussion concerned the Nobel Prize in Literature. There is no room to reconstruct this discussion in detail, but a few words should be said about it nevertheless, as the controversy surrounding Nobel laureates helps bring out certain deeply rooted cultural-political factors that underlie many poetic phenomena that will be investigated in chapters 2–5.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, two Nobel Prizes were awarded to Polish novelists: one in 1905 to Henryk Sienkiewicz and the other in 1924 to

12 In 1982, the State Publishing Institute released an annotated edition of the text with a commentary by sinologist Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler who identified most of the titles. See Staff 1982.

Władysław Stanisław Reymont. In 1927, shortly after Reymont's success, Sven Hedin from the Swedish Academy reportedly suggested in his communication with Liu Bannong 刘半农 nominating Lu Xun for the prize. Lu Xun, however, refused, famously claiming that "if the yellow-skinned people were given preferential consideration, it would only encourage the egotism of the Chinese, convincing them they really were equal to the great foreign writers."¹³ This, as Julia Lovell argues, became the first impulse for what later evolved into "China's post-Mao Nobel complex," with its "mix of hurt national pride and authorial ego jostling," and foreshadowed "the feverish, highly speculative debate on the Nobel that took place within post-Mao literary circles."¹⁴ It also became one of the many points of contention in the polemic between the Popular poets (民间诗人) and the Intellectual poets (知识分子诗人) in the 1980s and 1990s, a topic I will return to in the next section. In short, the Popular poets were known for ostentatiously turning their backs on the "Western award," whereas the Intellectuals regarded it with tacit hope. The fact that in 2000 dramatist Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940) and in 2012 novelist Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955) joined the ranks of Nobel laureates did not ease the tensions. Aside from the political atmosphere around their work in China, neither Gao nor Mo Yan have ever been welcomed by their fellow writers with unanimous enthusiasm. Gao has been widely criticized for his perceived lack of solidarity with other China-based authors, and Mo Yan for conforming to governmental censorship or—as others claim—self-Orientalization and catering to Western tastes.

In my communication with Chinese poets, I have often heard them speak with respect about Poland as the homeland of four (as I am writing these words, now five) Nobel Prize laureates. Nevertheless, from a Polish perspective, the achievements of the "Polish Nobels" were certainly not as obvious as they were to Chinese authors. Many of Lovell's diagnoses of the situation in China's cultural discourse might, with some adjustments, be applied to Poland. Among participants of Polish cultural discourse, self-deprecatory utterances that resembled Lu Xun's response to Hedin, arrogant anti-Nobel declarations, and criticisms of the "Western committee's" decisions as foreign interventions into Poland's internal affairs were common reactions. In 1905, when Sienkiewicz was awarded the Nobel Prize, his serious counter-candidate was another Polish author, Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910), whose novels were not as rich in patriotic content as Sienkiewicz's but were more concerned with universal themes. In 1924, as the protocols of the Swedish Academy reveal, Reymont, who was honored for *Peasants* (*Chłopi*), competed against Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925),

13 Quoted in Lovell 2006: 83.

14 Ibidem: 84.

whom the committee had rejected four times (despite enthusiastic recommendations from many Polish institutions) due to his pathetic and sentimental patriotism, which had once been so much appreciated in Sienkiewicz. Many disappointed commentators maintained that the decisive factors were in fact Żeromski's socialist sympathies and anti-German attitudes, which were shared by a large part of Polish society at the time, and not the inferior artistic quality of his writing.¹⁵ Both verdicts ignited politically charged polemics in the country. Near-identical scenarios played out again toward the end of the century, after the award of two Nobel Prizes for poetry: Czesław Miłosz's in 1980 and Wisława Szymborska's in 1996, which I will discuss in chapters 2 and 4 respectively, and again after Olga Tokarczuk's prize in 2019, which has been interpreted by radical-conservative cultural and political circles as evidence of Western attempts to impose liberal values on Poland—liberalism, in their vocabulary, referring to everything from vegetarianism and animal rights to feminism and “gender ideology.”

It would be an exaggeration to argue that the current political situation in Poland resembles that of China and Poland's image in Western media is often overtly demonized. However, certain underlying processes that started to emerge in the early twentieth century, when the young republics sought to position themselves in the world, are convergent. The disproportionately large political importance that was attached to Nobel Prizes and other honors granted to individual authors betrays the two nations' lack of self-confidence on the global cultural and political stage. This has limited their ability to engage in an equal dialogue with the West, moving instead between self-victimization, self-doubt, and the need for legitimization of internal order by foreign powers at one extreme, and uncontrolled, arrogant outbursts of national pride at the other. This is not a comfortable situation for poetry and literature at large, but it is worth emphasizing that, unlike in the prewar period and even in the 1980s and 1990s, many authors today have an acute awareness of how these tricky mechanisms work and actively seek a way out of them, producing truly independent works.

Although there have been many topics since the early twentieth century that the contemporaneous authors from the two countries could effectively converse on, the first encounter between Polish and Chinese modern poetics only took place after World War II, shortly before the proclamation of the PRC. In the late 1940s—that is, in the period of his fleeting romance with socialism—Czesław Miłosz, drawing on Robert Payne's 1947 anthology *The White Pony*, translated a number of works by his Chinese contemporaries. Among them

15 Goźliński 2002.

were Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996), Wen Yiduo 闻一多 (1899–1946), Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000), Zang Kejia 臧克家 (1905–2004), and Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976), who at the time was still better known in the West as a man of letters than as a political leader. In a 2005 collection of Miłosz’s translations of world poetry, the Chinese section is preceded by a short introduction which contains a reflection on Payne’s work, praise for Staff’s renditions of *Chinese Flute*, and Miłosz’s impressions on the emerging New Poetry in China:

It is easy to note that modern Chinese poetry merges its own national tradition with influences from European and American poetry. Its moving humanness and concreteness, the tangibility of every single image—this is what prompted me to render these poems into the Polish language. Moreover, I think people who can read will find abundant material for reflection on the history of modern China in this verse.¹⁶

This passage is followed by chaotic biographical notes concerning those authors of whom Miłosz managed to obtain information. About Mao, he wrote:

Mao Tse-tung; b. 1893 in Punan [Hunan] province. During the war against Japan, he was a high-ranking soldier in Chiang Kai-shek’s army. The poem *Snow* was written in Chongqing in late 1945 and is reportedly equally popular on both sides of the frontline during the current war.¹⁷

Aside from the credibility of Miłosz’s sources, it seemed for some time that Polish and Chinese poetry would indeed assume a very similar course in the second half of the century. When Mao Zedong, whom Miłosz praised as a poet, came to power, he almost destroyed poetry in China. Mao’s views on the role of culture in the country were systematized and proclaimed in 1942 during the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Arts (延安文艺座谈会), where he gave his seminal talks.¹⁸ Adjusting the Soviet Marxist-Leninist model to the Chinese reality, he outlined his concept of literature as revolutionary activity “in the service for the people” (为人民服务), which had both aesthetic and political consequences for authors after Mao officially became leader of the newly proclaimed People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Incidentally, 1949 is also the year when socialist realism was adopted as the official artistic and

16 Miłosz 2005b: 190, trans. J K.

17 Ibidem: 191, trans. J K.

18 The full original text of Mao’s talks in Yan’an is available online. See Mao 1942.

ideological line by the Association of Polish Writers at a forum in Szczecin on January 20–21.

Fortunately, Miłosz soon realized his mistake. After two years of diplomatic service in the US and France, he severed his connections with the communist government and joined the cultural elites in emigration. The long tradition and provisional institutional backup of Polish émigré literature dates back to the Romantic Great Emigration in the nineteenth century, when the country's partition began, sparking a mass exodus of persecuted intellectuals and artists and prompting them to develop basic *modi operandi* of national cultural life in exile. Its loosely organized structures, which gradually evolved throughout the following decades, became one of the two crucial pillars that contributed to preserving the continuity of Polish poetry after World War II. The two main centers of activity of the Polish intelligentsia were Jerzy Giedroyc's journal *Culture* (*Kultura*) in Paris and the London-based *News* (*Wiadomości*) established by Mieczysław Grydzewski. *Culture* was relatively liberal and forgiving of those who, like Miłosz,¹⁹ had once been seduced by communism and had admitted their mistake, whereas *News* was perceived as more conservative in its attachment to national Romantic myths; therefore, inevitable frictions and conflicts often emerged between the two publications. They, however, shared the same aim: to preserve the heritage and prompt further development of Polish literature and arts, publishing what was unpublishable in Poland and providing in-country audiences with banned books smuggled through various channels; this phenomenon is broadly known under the Russian term *tamizdat* (тамиздат, "published there").

The other crucial pillar of literature under communist rule in Poland was *samizdat* (самиздат, "self-published"); that is, self-made, unofficial publications of individual texts, journals, and books, usually copied on mimeographs and distributed among authors in "second circulation" (*drugi obieg*), as "first circulation" (*pierwszy obieg*) referred to government-approved titles. Second circulation comprised not only literary publications but also political content, including a variety of workers' magazines and brochures popularizing democratic postulates. Among the second-circulation literary phenomena one should mention, for example, the legendary underground spoken journal *NaGłos*, whose pun-based title may be loosely translated as "ALoud." *NaGłos*

19 On the controversy surrounding Miłosz's break with the communist government and the reactions of émigré circles, see, e.g., Bikont and Szczęsna 2004; Franaszek 2011: 459–578. A detailed account of the ambiguous relationship between Miłosz and Giedroyc can be found in the collection of letters exchanged by the two published in 2008; see Miłosz and Giedroyc 2008.

was a forum of independent thought in the 1980s. It functioned as a series of regular meetings at the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia in Krakow, during which authors read their work. Each meeting started with a presentation of the cover and ended with the list of contributors.

Unlike Polish poets, Chinese poets had virtually no opportunities to publish abroad. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a large group of young people left China to pursue education in Japan and in the West, including literary reformers such as Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Guo Moruo. Most of them, however, returned to their homeland to help build it into a modern country. Emigrant circles with some informal structures and regular initiatives, such as the publication of the *Today* (今天) journal, were only formed after June Fourth, when many prominent authors and scholars were forced to settle abroad. Moreover, international exchange in the PRC was subject to much tighter control than in Central Europe. Therefore, *tamizdat*, which played a vital role in Poland, was virtually nonexistent in mainland China, and *samizdat* was the only way to sustain the independent stream of poetry.

Chinese poetry after 1949 was divided into orthodox poetry (正统诗歌)—that is, poetry in line with the officially adopted aesthetic standards and within the official institutional framework—and unorthodox poetry, which was developing unofficially. After the war, many authors representing the so-called first wave of Chinese modernism, who had actively participated in the literary reform of the prewar period, offered their talents “in the service of the people,” joining the ranks of orthodox poets and accepting government positions. This was the case, for example, of Guo Moruo, who held important offices while at the same time remaining a prolific writer and scholar. Of course, not all intellectuals accepted Mao’s vision of literature. The most outspoken opponent of the Party’s cultural policy was the Marxist poet and critic Hu Feng 胡风 (1903–1985), who expressed his views in his “Report on the Real Situation in Literature and Art Since Liberation” (关于几年来文艺实践情况的报告), better known as the “Three-Hundred-Thousand-Word Letter” (三十万言书) submitted to the politburo in 1954. A committed leftist and supporter of literary realism, Hu nevertheless called for the greater autonomy for writers and embracing of their subjective artistic perspectives by officially adopted aesthetics. Firmly rejected by Mao, Hu’s well-argued literary-theoretical propositions soon became a pretext for attacking and imprisoning him on political grounds and launching a campaign against the alleged members of his “clique” as counterrevolutionaries.²⁰ This was followed by a short period of apparent relaxation known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花齐放) during which

20 Endrey 1981.

intellectuals were encouraged to share their opinions about the Party line. Their response was crushing to Mao, who did not expect such a critical assessment, and decided to nip the freedom of expression in the bud by announcing the Anti-Rightist Movement (反右运动) against those who dared to express their dissatisfaction. This resulted in incarceration, sentencing to reform or reeducation at labor camps, banishment to remote rural areas in northern China, and other sanctions targeted at many leading intellectuals and artists.

Meanwhile, the underground poetry scene functioned mostly as secret clubs or salons where unorthodox poets shared their writings and exchanged illegally circulating texts of foreign authors. One of these salons, “X Poetry Society” (X 诗社), was organized by Guo Moruo’s son, Guo Shiying 郭世英 (1942–1968), who was denounced for his activity, persecuted, and driven to suicide during the Cultural Revolution. Another well-known club was “The Sun’s Column” (太阳纵队), established by one of the participants of Guo’s society, Zhang Langlang 张郎郎 (b. 1943). “The Sun’s Column” had, among other things, its own ambitious magazine which published works openly critical of the Party’s politics.²¹ It, too, was deemed counterrevolutionary, and Zhang was arrested in 1968 and spent the next nine and a half years in prison.²²

However, the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966–1976) disturbed this two-track development of Chinese poetry, putting orthodox and unorthodox authors alike at the mercy of the insatiable Red Guards (红卫兵) in whose eyes any form of intellectual work was tantamount to a crime. During the Decade of Chaos, the veterans of New Poetry, such as Niu Han 牛汉 (1923–2013), Zang Kejia, Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977), Lu Yuan 绿原 (1922–2009), Ai Qing, and others continued their artistic work in hiding or used this time to rethink their understanding of poetry and reemerge as “Returners” (归来者) with new programs in the late 1970s. At the same time, new talents were born and new literary friendships germinated among young people, including the educated youth (知识青年) who shared the generational experience of learning from peasants (向农民学习) in the countryside.²³ This was the case for the Baiyangdian Poets (白洋淀诗人)—three Beijing schoolmates, Mang Ke 芒克 (b. 1950), Genzi 根子 (b. 1951), and Duo Duo 多多 (b. 1951), who were sent down (下乡) to Baiyangdian in 1969. The Three Musketeers of Baiyangdian (白洋淀三剑客) spent their time writing what would later be called experimental poetry and

21 Zhang Langlang’s account of the “legend of The Sun’s Column” is found in his collection of essays: Zhang Langlang 2013.

22 This paragraph draws extensively on van Crevel 1996: 21–27.

23 On underground poetry life in China during the Cultural Revolution, see more in van Crevel 1996: 21–68; Li Runxia 2001.

secretly reading “gray” and “yellow” books (i.e., foreign works translated into Chinese for internal use by Party officials) smuggled by Genzi from his parents’ collection or obtained at underground literary salons in Beijing. In the late 1970s, they established closer contacts with Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949) and Jiang He 江河 (b. 1949) and formed the most famous informal poetry movement in contemporary China: Obscure poetry (朦胧诗).²⁴ When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and the poetry scene could safely resurface, the confrontation between the Returners and the Obscure poets turned into one of the fiercest debates in Chinese New Poetry, which will be revisited in chapter 2.

In the early years of Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 “reform and opening up” (改革开放) policy, when the cultural airspace over China was being demilitarized, a swallow that heralded political thaw arrived from Poland. The first foreign work published in the PRC after the Cultural Revolution was Part III of Mickiewicz’s Romantic drama in verse *Forefathers’ Eve*. The initiative reportedly came from the prime minister, Zhou Enlai 周恩来, who expressed an interest in the Polish masterpiece. It was translated by a pioneer of Polish literary studies in China, Yi Lijun 伊丽君, under the pseudonym Han Yi 韩逸, which she adopted to protect herself from persecution. She showed great courage and determination, working on Mickiewicz’s masterpiece during her forced reeducation at a labor camp in the countryside after returning from Warsaw, where she had studied Polish language and literature from 1954 to 1960.²⁵

Yi Lijun’s enterprise assumes a symbolic meaning if one considers the unique role the postwar stage interpretations of *Forefathers’ Eve III* had played in Poland’s struggle against communist rule ten years earlier. In 1968, theatrical performances directed by Kazimierz Dejmek inspired student antigovernment protests; the subsequent intervention of the authorities and attempts to cancel further performances led to a series of antitotalitarian publications and initiatives by the Polish intelligentsia. In 1973, Konrad Swinarski reinterpreted *Forefathers’ Eve* for the stage, challenging not so much political oppressors as the naive version of the Romantic paradigm with its misguided ideas and ideals, thereby prompting society’s self-reflection and self-awareness.²⁶ Of course, the reception of *Forefathers’ Eve* in China was much less intense than

24 See Guo, Song, and Zhou 2015: 28–29.

25 Li Yinan 2015: 55–56; 2016: 174.

26 In October 2020, when mass protests against the Law and Justice party’s rule erupted in Poland, triggered by the tightening of abortion law, one of the most spectacular events was a performance in the windows of apartments located vis-à-vis Jarosław Kaczyński’s house in Warsaw being a modern reinterpretation of *Forefathers’ Eve*. The specific form of the performance was determined by the safety regulations during the pandemic and the ban on open-air cultural events.

in Poland, and its social impact was inevitably smaller. Nevertheless, the play was a long-awaited portent of change, which many authors still remember. The work was staged at the China Youth Art Theater and adapted for a radio drama by the People's Radio.²⁷ It also became one of several links in the chain of events that, in the following years, allowed for the transcription of the Chinese identity discourse into the code of Polish national symbols, myths, phantasms, and traumas, opening the perspective for a conceptual translation of the reality of contemporary China into the Polish historical-cultural topography. We will observe this process of translation in the discussion of the reception and rejection of Miłosz among Chinese poets in chapter 2.

In Poland, the period from 1968 to 1976 marked the peak of activity for the New Wave (Nowa Fala) poets. They disagreed with what they perceived as the excessive aestheticism of younger authors and called for politically engaged writing, emphasizing the ethical aspect of literary creation. To Adam Zagajewski (1945–2021) and Julian Kornhauser (b. 1946), the authors of the programmatic literary-critical book *The Unrepresented World* (*Świat nie przedstawiony*, 1974), such engagement meant what they described as “nonnaive realism,” with poetry as a sophisticated commentary on the current national experience. To Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014) and Ryszard Krynicki (b. 1943), this engagement called for linguistic creativity aimed at freeing the Polish language from the influence of the socialist Newspeak (*nowomowa*). Ewa Lipska (b. 1945), the only woman associated with the New Wave, explored the political potential of existential irony, and Krzysztof Karasek (b. 1937) turned to cultural-historical themes.

The importance of the New Wave tends to be underestimated in literary-critical discourse and its program is often reduced to artistic intervention against totalitarianism. In fact, among its postulates, one can also point out many universal philosophical concerns which—as Bożena Tokarz demonstrates—partly resonated with the goals of the Western counterculture movement developing at the time in countries like the US, France, and West Germany. Needless to say, Polish authors did not share their Western coevals' fascination with socialism (and Maoism) and life in communes; instead they craved the capitalism and consumerism that the young Westerners had already become fed up with, but their respective ideals and deeply critical attitudes showed many mutual convergences. One was a painful awareness of the sheer discord between language and reality in public discourse. Westerners observed it in omnipresent commercial advertisements, whereas Polish poets saw it in state propaganda, hence their common calls for authenticity in speech and

27 Li Yinan 2015: 96–97.

actions, and emotional—often desperate—attempts to unmask the “great mystification” which had become their natural existential environment.²⁸ Another tangential point between the New Wave and Western counterculture was the poets’ frequent recourse to Zen Buddhism, where the spiritual refugees of communism and capitalism crossed paths.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the New Wave poets themselves have never been particularly enthusiastic about what in Chinese poetry discourse is referred to as “connecting with the West” (与西方接轨). They did not want to turn Polish cities into Paris; instead, they aimed to create and promote a unique quality that would attract Parisians to Poland. Zagajewski and Kornhauser argued that “peripheral culture may liberate literature from backwater condition only if it is able to turn province into the capital of the world.”²⁹ Although they never managed to put these ideals into practice, the New Wave poets were, in fact, the first to underscore the singularity of national poetry as an independent, collective organism.

The year 1976, which was marked by intensified antigovernment strikes and protests among the working classes, was pivotal to younger authors such as Jan Polkowski (b. 1953), Tomasz Jastrun (b. 1950), and Bronisław Maj (b. 1953), the generation whom critic Edward Balcerzan referred to as advocates of “poetry as a frame of mind” (*poezja jako samopoczucie*). In this case, “frame of mind” meant not so much personal attitudes as social attitudes in Poland, the “psychosphere” of which they were consistently exploring.³⁰ The 1976 Generation’s alleged obsession with national topics and the New Wave’s ethnicism sparked harsh criticism from the Brulion Generation, which took the poetry scene by storm in the late 1980s. In China, a similar role was assumed by the Third Generation (第三代), which rebelled against the Obscure poets.

3 June Fourth and the Polemical Decade of Transformation

At the time of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 the two poetries were in the early and enthusiastic stages of what would turn out to be a protracted and stormy process of negotiating a new vision of writing and forming new hierarchies on the literary scenes. In both countries, this process had started in the late 1970s with the New Wave in Poland and Obscure poetry in China. The year 1989 deepened divisions that dated back to the mid-1980s, when the

28 Tokarz 1990: 222–223.

29 Quoted in Tokarz 1990: 216, trans. J. K.

30 Balcerzan 1990.

literary influence and moral authority of New Wave and Obscure authors was first openly challenged by younger generations.

In addition to social-political factors, such as the easing of state control and increasingly optimistic attitudes among the people in the 1980s, many cultural and literary phenomena played a role in the transformation of poetry that would gain momentum in the middle of the decade. One of these phenomena, in both Poland and China, was a growing number of translations from modern foreign literatures, especially from Western languages, which launched an avalanche of further changes. For all the differences in social-political environment, the poetry scenes in Poland and China had evolved along near-identical trajectories for about a decade. This is reflected in the two major polemics of the 1990s in which the definition of, and the right to define, national poetry were at stake. I will summarize them in detail, because they contain resonances that constitute promising comparative capital for the joint Polish and Chinese narrative on poetry's quest for singularity.

In Poland, one of the milestones in the evolution of poetry discourse was the publication of a so-called "blue issue" (July 1986) of the periodical *World Literature* (*Literatura na Świecie*), which presented selected works by poets from the New York school, including Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, translated by Piotr Sommer (b. 1948)—editor-in-chief of *World Literature* and poet, essayist, and idol of many Brulioners³¹—and Andrzej Sosnowski, then a budding author with revolutionary ambitions. It also featured essays on American poetry by Marjorie Perloff, Leslie Wolf, and David Shapiro, among others. The blue issue was followed by several book-length collections, including the almost legendary 1987 edition of selected poems by O'Hara, *Your Singularity* (*Twoja pojedynczość*), in Sommer's translation. In 1994, a sequel came out, the "black issue" (March 1994), which included several new names. Along with O'Hara and Ashbery, the editors introduced Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Harry Matthews, and Edmund White.³² The New York school, previously almost unknown in Poland, in addition to the American Beat Generation, became a primary source of inspiration for many emerging Polish poets, who did not want to sit back and passively observe how "space is disappearing and your singularity," to quote the final line of O'Hara's cult poem "Sleeping on the Wing."³³

31 On Sommer's influence on Polish poetry of the 1980s and 1990s, see Jaworski 2018: 26–33.

32 The "blue issue" has a dedicated entry in Polish-language Wikipedia, available at https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niebieski_numer. On the New York School and its reception in Poland, see Pióro 2014; Jankowicz 2010b; Sływyski 2009. Sływyski's paper also discusses how the New York School, via Poland, traveled to Ukraine and influenced authors such as Serhiy Zhadan, Yuriy Andrukhovych, and Andriy Bondar.

33 O'Hara 1995: 236.

The reception of American poetry catalyzed the erosion of the tyrtean mode, as Piotr Śliwiński noted, alluding to Janion's distinction between tyrtean and messianic-martyrological versions of the Romantic paradigm in Poland.³⁴ At the same time, for all its disengagement and disinterest in public issues, the New York school strengthened the other, messianic-martyrological, mode of Polish Romanticism, entering into complex interactions with the still vivid lore of the "cursed poets" of the 1970s: Rafał Wojaczek (1945–1971) and Edward Stachura (1937–1979). Even if the Polish poets who drew inspiration from American authors did not consider themselves prospective spiritual leaders of their nation, there were many critics, publishers, and scholars who launched an informal search for a *poeta vates*. Indifferent, self-sufficient individuals who were focused on their individual singularities became, ironically, principal candidates for this role in the process of defining national poetry. Marcin Świetlicki (b. 1961), a protagonist of chapter 3, is the most evident case in point.

After 1989, participants and observers of the poetry scene in Poland desperately sought new justifications of poetry's significance in the country. Poets were no longer considered indispensable as bards of independence and full-time chroniclers of the "besieged city," to recall the title of Zbigniew Herbert's 1982 collection. The new situation brought, among other things, the dethronement of the Old Masters, who had been regarded as witnesses of the century and the living links that connected the culture of socialism-stricken Poland to the idealized interwar period, the only two decades of a free Poland since the partitions of the late eighteenth century. Among them were Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Wisława Szymborska, but the rebellion of the young poets was targeted mostly against the former two, as Różewicz and Szymborska never aimed to become voices or icons of the nation. In fairness, Miłosz was not eager to take up this role either, but he had a tendency to "talk big," and this was the kind of diction that the new generation found particularly difficult to accept. Only Herbert had some actual aspirations to moral leadership. However, it was perhaps because of his unambiguous ideological stand and a putatively clear message of his poetry that he was perceived as a relatively easy target. Some painful blows were also landed on the New Wave poets and on the Generation of 1976. Among the latter, one should mention especially Jan Polkowski, who became the addressee of the most-quoted poetic manifesto of the 1990s, namely Marcin Świetlicki's "For Jan Polkowski" (Dla Jana Polkowskiego, 1990):

34 Śliwiński 2007: 18–19.

For Jan Polkowski

It's time to shut tight the little cardboard door and open up the window,
open the window and ventilate the room.
So far it's always been successful, but this time
it is not.
The only case,
when after poems
stench remains.

The poetry of slaves feeds on ideas.
Ideas are watery substitutes of blood.
Protagonists were in prisons,
and the worker is ugly, but touchingly
useful—in the poetry of slaves.

In the poetry of slaves, trees have crosses
inside—under the bark—made from barbed wire.
How easily a slave travels a dauntingly
long and almost impossible road
from the letter to God, it takes only an instant, like
spitting—in the poetry of slaves.

Instead of saying: I have a toothache, I'm
hungry, I'm lonely, two of us, four of us,
our street—they say quietly: Wanda
Wasilewska, Cyprian Norwid,
Józef Piłsudski, Ukraine, Lithuania,
Thomas Mann, the Bible, and obviously something
in Yiddish.

If the dragon still lived in this city today
they would glorify the dragon—or ensconced
in their hideouts, they would write poems
—little punches threatening the dragon
(even love poems would be written
in dragon letters ...)

I'm looking in the eye of the dragon
and shrug my shoulders. It's June. Clearly.
In the early afternoon there was a storm. Dusk falls first
on perfectly square city squares.

Dla Jana Polkowskiego

Trzeba zatrzasnąć drzwiczki z tektury i otworzyć okno,
 otworzyć okno i przewietrzyć pokój.
 Zawsze się udawało, ale teraz się nie
 udaje. Jedyne przypadek,
 kiedy po wierszach
 pozostaje smród.

Poezja niewolników żywi się ideą,
 idee to wodniste substytuty krwi.
 Bohaterowie siedzieli w więzieniach,
 a robotnik jest brzydki, ale wzruszająco
 użyteczny—w poezji niewolników.

W poezji niewolników drzewa mają krzyże
 wewnątrz—pod korą—z kolczastego drutu.
 Jakże łatwo niewolnik przebywa upiornie
 długą i prawie niemożliwą drogę
 od litery do Boga, to trwa krótko, niby
 splunięcie—w poezji niewolników.

Zamiast powiedzieć: ząb mnie boli, jestem
 głodny, samotny, my dwoje, nas czworo,
 nasza ulica—mówią cicho: Wanda
 Wasilewska, Cyprian Kamil Norwid,
 Józef Piłsudski, Ukraina, Litwa,
 Tomasz Mann, Biblia i koniecznie coś
 w jidysz.

Gdyby w tym mieście nadal mieszkał smok
 wysławialiby smoka—albo kryjąc się
 w swoich kryjówkach pisaliby wiersze
 —małeńkie piąstki grożące smokowi
 (nawet miłosne wiersze pisane by były
 smoczymi literami ...)

Patrzę w oko smoka
 i wzruszam ramionami. Jest czerwiec. Wyraźnie.
 Tuż po południu była burza. Zmierzch zapada najpierw
 na idealnie kwadratowych skwerach.³⁵

35 Polish version reprinted in Pawelec 1999 from the original place of publication, that is *Literature Weekly* (January 1990). Trans. J K.

Świetlicki's poem says a lot about the young rebels' attitude toward the national poetry tradition; it also indirectly reveals the reasons behind their interest in American literature. This was probably the first time that Polish modern authors had turned to the West, not for the light of civilization, high culture, or development, but for a breath of wilderness, to "ventilate the room" cluttered with various high-cultural developments displayed like fancy gadgets from all over the world.

The association of "Western influences" with the sphere of popular culture in Poland may be interpreted as a manifestation of the gradual decolonization of the nation's mentality and a casting off of the deeply rooted self-deprecatory hierarchies that considered the West the domain of "high" things and Poland and the territories beyond its eastern border the domain of "low" things. One may recall, for example, Herbert's essay volumes *Barbarian in the Garden* (*Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, 1962), *The Labyrinth on the Sea* (*Labirynt nad morzem*, 2000), and *Still Life with a Bridle* (*Martwa natura z wędzidłem*, 1993), in which the author describes his sojourns in Western Europe from the position of a guest from an uncivilized world who visits sacred temples of art in Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Miłosz, likewise, speaking of his first visit to Paris, in "Rue Descartes" describes himself as a "young barbarian" in the capital of the world.³⁶ Among the authors born in the 1960s, the demand for Western high culture for some time disappeared almost entirely.

It is also interesting to compare the reception of American poetry in Poland with the reception of Polish poetry in America—as if the two countries made a mutually beneficial exchange, importing what they needed from each other most. Krzysztof Siwczyk (b. 1977) cites his conversation with Kacper Bartczak (b. 1972), poet and specialist in American poetry, with some observations on this phenomenon:

I've always wondered about the splendor and fame of Zbigniew Herbert in America. I love to read what Miłosz has to say of it. A sort of submissiveness and admiration with which Americans received this work full of pathos, displaying the struggle with history and myth, is incredible. Almost as if Herbert put all those American butterflies, including Ashbery and Koch, in their place with the Decalogue in his hand. I've once asked Kacper Bartczak about this phenomenon. He answered straightforwardly: "Come on, they were sick and tired of this *flow chart!* They finally got a serious dose of serious poetry!" Serious poetry, that is the spirit of a stout-hearted prince, ethical signposts, and not the moral and epistemological

Pawelec's paper contains elaborated analyses and interpretation of the poem including its historical, intertextual, and ideological implications.

36 Miłosz 2011: 765–766.

arbitrariness of narratives such as “the New Spirit” of Ashbery. And in Poland it was apparently the contrary. Ashbery “unblocked” perhaps not only Zadura, but also many of the “snappiest,” to use Sommer’s word, new poets for whom the translations [of American poetry] became a kind of alibi justifying their exhaustion with the appeals with which they were bombarded by Herbert.³⁷

The name of the generation of revolutionists comes from the *Brulion* magazine (also written as *brulion* or *bruLion*), around which the leaders of the Polish poetic coup gathered. The title means literally “scrap paper,” but I use the original Polish form due to its simplicity and regular presence in international discourse on Polish poetry. *Brulion* was launched in 1986 by Robert Tekieli, who also served as its editor-in-chief. The magazine introduced Polish readers to many phenomena that, at the time, were seen as alternative culture; for instance, techno music, cyberpunk, yoga, and all sorts of fashionable performative forms of literature and arts. It also exposed readers to new and controversial topics of social relevance, including feminism, homosexuality, New Age, consumerism, and drug legalization. Along with Świetlicki, *Brulion*’s team included authors such as Marcin Baran (b. 1963), Marcin Sendeci (b. 1967), Krzysztof Koehler (b. 1963), Krzysztof Jaworski (b. 1966), and Jacek Podsiadło (b. 1964), to name the most active. In 1991, *Brulion* published an anthology of twenty-nine young authors loosely affiliated with the magazine *Barbarians Have Come* (*Przyszli barbarzyńcy*) whose title alludes to the poem by Constantine P. Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians.” Since then, the name “Barbarians,” enthusiastically taken up by critics, has stuck. The next year, another collection came out, a two-volume anthology titled *After Wojacek* (*Po Wojaczku*). Its first volume, subtitled *Anthology of Polish Poetry 1971–1991* and edited by Kamil Ratyniecki, featured a greater number of recognized authors ranging from Old Masters and Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II) to the New Wave and almost forgotten early postwar avant-gardes and several lesser-known “cursed poets.”³⁸ The second volume, *After Wojacek: Brulion and Independent Authors* (*Po Wojaczku. Brulion i niezależni*) edited by Jarosław Klejnocki, promoted the work of the emerging generation.³⁹ Thus *Wojacek* was tacitly elected a patron of the poetic revolution, and his suicide became a foundational myth for new poetry in this peculiar blend of Polish messianic-martyrological Romanticism and the “butterflyish” (to allude to Bartczak’s observation) American postmodernism.

37 Kałuża and Jankowicz 2013: 207, trans. J K.

38 Ratyniecki 1991.

39 Klejnocki 1992.

Many prominent poets and critics were skeptical about this new “barbaric” mode in poetry.⁴⁰ Two texts that, as Marcin Jaworski argues, played a crucial role in sparking the nationwide polemic were authored by the New Wave poet Julian Kornhauser, whose concerns revolved around the lack of Ideas and Ideals in the Brulioners’ poetics.⁴¹ *Brulion’s* three Marcins (Świetlicki, Senddecki, and Baran) replied with “A Semi-Final Poem” (Wiersz półfinałowy) written jointly before a 1992 World Cup game, in which they ironically declared that they would be glad to write poems with some decent ideas, but “behind the window no idea waits. / Yeah, no, fuck all, idea” (żadna nie stoi za oknem. / Tak, za oknem ni chujja idei). In the following stanzas each describes an everyday landscape of a city street as seen from the windows of their respective rooms.⁴² The discussion continued for several months in *Catholic Weekly* (*Tygodnik Powszechny*) and in several high-quality literary journals. Among the contributors were critics such as Grzegorz Musiał, Natasza Goerke, Rafał Grupiński, Jerzy Jarzębski, Krzysztof Varga, Grażyna Borkowska, and others. It would have likely died down after this semi-academic exchange were it not for Wojciech Wencel (b. 1972) whose polemical temperament immediately heated the atmosphere.

Wencel, who was then still a student, became the leader of the poetic “right wing” after several of his zealously conservative essays were published in 1995. This right-wing movement was characterized by strong attachment to traditional and religious values and a pursuit of formal perfection Wencel proposed as an antidote against what he considered a crisis of poetry caused by the arrival of the Barbarians. The polemic played out in the Poznań-based biweekly magazine *New Stream* (*Nowy nurt*). Though the magazine had only existed for about three years at the time (from May 1994 to June 1996), its significance in shaping the poetic field, its forces, and hierarchies cannot be emphasized enough. It is in *New Stream* that Wencel published his most influential article in the dispute: “Problems with Language” (Kłopoty z językiem). Karol Maliszewski (b. 1960) replied to it in “Our Classicists, Our Barbarians” (Nasi klasycyści, nasi barbarzyńcy), an essay that has weighed heavily on the history of contemporary poetry in Poland. Maliszewski, both a poet and among the most prolific poetry critics, concisely characterized the poetics of the two emerging factions. His sympathies were generally on the side of the Barbarians, but he

40 A collection of contributions to the polemic between the Barbarians and the Classicists preceded by a comprehensive, chronological account and literary-historical commentary was edited by Marcin Jaworski (Jaworski 2018). Unless otherwise indicated, details concerning the timeline of the polemic in the following paragraphs come from this book.

41 Jaworski 2018: 40–43.

42 Cited in Jaworski 2018: 44–45, trans. J.K.

nevertheless tried to paint a balanced picture. This is how he summarized the stances in the polemic:

Classicizing authors [*autorzy klasycyzujący*]: Yes (to this world), restraint, trust, “primacy of forms,” belief in history (also literary history), antirealism and objectivism, prioritizing “oldness”: preference for forms rooted in culture, openly adopted authorities, “tradition says,” illusion of a pursuit for perfection (living up to a role model), emphasizing togetherness, that is, evocation of a timeless community, balance hinged on well-proven values, observation of existence (describabilism), pulchritude, rhythmism, and new rhyme-making, expanding and illuminating anthropological horizon: positive metaphysics. Belief in a bis-reality, basing oneself on mediated data. Linguistic passivism, that is, treating language as a medium that preserves the timeless, symbolic stability.

Barbarizing authors [*autorzy barbaryzujący*]: No (to this world), lack of restraint, mistrust, “primacy of content,” belief that history (including literary history) is a fiction—it is a history of specific expressions, confessions, concrete beings, and appearances; realism, sensualism, prioritizing freshness, newness (discovery); rather unclear authorities, “tradition doesn’t say”; illusion of rejection of any form of perfection and lack of role models, emphasizing oneness, singularity, the present, participating in being (witness), desperately searching for and testing values, turpitude, crippled rhythm, cagey rhyme (remote or inexact, if any). Belief in reality, basing oneself on directly available data. Linguistic iconoclasm, colloquial semantic anchorage. Darkening and narrowing the horizon: negative metaphysics.⁴³

The division was reinforced in the subsequent years as new voices joined the polemic, including Klejnocki who took the side of the Classicists (*klasycyści*)—referred to by some as the “Classics” (*klasycy*)—scolding Maliszewski for primitive simplifications, and the *Brulion* poet Krzysztof Koehler, whose writing also gravitated toward “classicizing” diction. All in all, it is difficult to say who won, but looking back with the hindsight history affords us, it seems that the legacy of the Barbarians proved more convincing for the subsequent generations of poets. Interestingly, the *Brulion* magazine, the hotbed of “barbaric” ideas in Polish poetry, underwent a conversion to conservatism in the final years of its existence, following its editor-in-chief, who at some point had

43 My translation is based on the version reprinted in Jaworski 2018: 159–177.

converted to radical patriotic Catholicism, and was gradually transformed into a tribune of rightists.

In China, the late 1970s and 1980s were marked by the domination of Obscure poetry, whose popularity in society was unprecedented and still remains unmatched in the contemporary history of Chinese poetry. Its commonly recognized significance is reflected in the notion of “post-Obscure” poetry (后朦胧诗), which is sometimes used to refer to everything that came chronologically after the movement’s peak, be it as a direct response to it or without a clear causal connection. A thick two-volume anthology edited by Wan Xia 万夏 and Xiao Xiao 潇潇 in 1993 titled *Collected Post-Obscure Poetry* (后朦胧诗全集) certainly contributed to the popularization of this category.⁴⁴ In 1978, the Obscure poets, unwelcome in state-funded literary publications, launched *Today* (今天), one of the first and certainly one of the most influential unofficial journals after the Cultural Revolution. *Today* was shut down due to censorship in 1980 and only revived in 1990 in emigration. In the meantime, however, smaller self-published and often quite ephemeral journals started to spring up all around the country. Most of them were associated with specific “poetry schools” (诗派), “poetry societies” (诗社), or “isms” (主义) proclaimed in manifestos which proudly opened the first issues of the periodicals.⁴⁵ Two titles that will return in the following chapters are *Not-Not* (非非) edited by Zhou Lunyou 周伦佑 (b. 1952) in Chengdu, and *Them* (他们) edited by Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954) and Han Dong 韩东 (b. 1961) in Nanjing.

In the 1980s, several attempts were made to unite the nationwide avant-garde movement through common events and publications, such as the “Grand Exhibition of Modern Poetry Groups on China’s Poetry Scene 1986” (中国诗坛 1986 现代诗群体大展) and the subsequent book, *A Grand Overview of Chinese Modernist Poetry Groups 1986–1988* (中国现代诗群大观), compiled by Xu Jingya 徐敬亚 (b. 1949) and others and published in 1988 by the Shanghai Tongji University Publishing House, or *The Third Generation Poets Exploratory*

44 Wan Xia and Xiao Xiao 1993.

45 A two-volume anthology of Chinese unofficial (民间) journals, *Geography of Contemporary Chinese Unofficial Journals* (中国当代民间诗歌地理), was edited by Zhang Qinghua 张清华. It contains a large number of poems that are representative of the included journals, manifestos by editorial teams which usually opened the first issues, recollective essays by editors or important contributors, and a considerable amount of critical commentary (Zhang Qinghua 2015).

A unique collection of journals gathered by Maghiel van Crevel is available in digital form via the Leiden University Library. The material can be accessed at <https://disc.leidenuniv.nl/unpo> and it is accompanied by a fascinating introduction (van Crevel 2017d) and a web lecture by van Crevel (<https://weblectures.leidenuniv.nl/Mediasite/Play/cb8fd345efb34e6098c85a191b673d7c1d>).

Poetry Selection (第三代诗人探索诗选, 1989).⁴⁶ Yet, as differences and tensions between various local poetry centers and especially between Beijing and the “peripheries” accumulated, such common endeavors led to ever more acute conflicts, which escalated in 1998 after the publication of a poetry volume of the anthology *A Funeral Portrait of Bygone Years: Literature of the Nineties* (岁月的遗照: 九十年代文学书系).

Around the mid-1980s, among the plethora of new artistic projects and programs, two increasingly distinct general standpoints known as Intellectual poetry (知识分子诗歌) and Popular poetry (民间诗歌) started to emerge. The former had its headquarters in the capital city, while the latter was scattered across the “Poetry Rivers and Lakes” (诗江湖), as the Chinese “provincial” unofficial poetry scene is sometimes called (an alternative translation of the term is “Poetry Vagabonds”). In his monograph, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, Maghiel van Crevel characterizes the two camps as sitting at the Elevated and Earthly end of the aesthetic spectrum respectively and offers a brief summary of the dichotomies that underlay the split in China’s poetry scene:

heroic v quotidian
 literary v colloquial
 cultural v anti-, pre- or non-cultural
 lyrical v anti-lyrical
 mythical v anti-mythical
 sacred v mundane
 utopian v realist
 absolute v relative
 elitist v ordinary
 academic v authentic
 Westernized v indigenous
 central v local
 Northern v Southern
 mind v body
 intellectual v popular⁴⁷

46 A detailed discussion of the “Grand Exhibition” and the subsequent publications is found in Day 2005, chapter 8.

47 van Crevel 2008: 25. Chapter 12 of the monograph contains a detailed description of the Popular-Intellectual polemic and a list of articles published by contributors to the polemic.

Except from “Westernized v indigenous” and “Northern v Southern,” van Crevel’s dichotomies more or less overlap with the dichotomies on the Polish poetry scene identified by Maliszewski, with Intellectual poetry a Chinese counterpart of the Classicists, and Popular poetry a counterpart of the Barbarians. Whereas the “Northern v Southern” exception stems from the general difference in the cultural geographies of Poland and China, the “Westernized v indigenous” exception requires some elaboration. Unlike in Poland, where Western inspirations contributed to the surge of the Barbarian tide, in China, Western poetry remained a source of “civilized” poetics for the Intellectuals. On the one hand, one may argue that there was still a relatively strong Western complex among Chinese poets in the 1990s, especially among the Intellectual camp, for whom Euro-American culture was a near-synonym of high culture. This is perhaps an echo of the Hegelian teleological model of historical development adopted by prewar modernists, with Western culture seen as evincing a higher level of advancement, something China was yet to pursue. On the other hand, we should not forget that Western “low” culture (i.e., popular culture) reached China much later than it reached Poland. In Poland, it was present, especially in music, during the entire postwar period, so by the 1990s the West was already largely demythologized. In China, it began to spread only in the mid-1980s. Someone who played a crucial role in this process was the rock musician Cui Jian 崔健 (b. 1961), whose ambiguous status in poetry discourse, as an object of interest to both the Intellectual and Popular factions, will be discussed in chapter 3.

While it is true that the antagonisms between the two groups on the Chinese poetry scene started several years earlier, 1989 brought two crucial sets of circumstances that made the division practically irreversible. The first was the suicide of Haizi 海子 (1964–1989) in March and the death of Luo Yihe 骆一禾 (1961–1989) in April, the latter reportedly due to exhaustion caused by being on long-term hunger strike at Tiananmen Square and/or involvement in editing Haizi’s posthumous poetry collection together with their mutual friend Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963). The second was the massacre on June Fourth and the subsequent unprecedented wave of emigration among authors, artists, and scholars. These tragic events paved the way for a model of heroic poethood that was adopted by the Intellectuals and pitilessly ridiculed by the Populars. Opponents of the Intellectual poets saw them as imitators and usurpers of the legacy of the Obscure movement. When Wang Jiaxin 王家新, after losing his job as the editor of *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊), moved to London for less than two years (1992–1993), he became the main target of the Popular camp’s attacks. Yi Sha 伊沙 (b. 1966) called him a pseudo-exile (伪流亡者) and Shen Haobo 沈浩波 (b. 1976) addressed him with the following tirade:

Granted, Wang Jiaxin's "Pasternak" is a good piece of work, but that's all. In most of his poems, the best lines are always those in quotation marks (and what he quotes is other people's poetry!). He is always in London or in Russia, always pouring out his Brodsky, his Pasternak, his Kafka—he simply doesn't grow on Chinese soil! All day long, over and over again, he says "exile" "exile" "exile," but the problem is: who is it has exiled you, Wang Jiaxin? You're not Bei Dao, you're not Duoduo, you're not Brodsky, and you will always be that overcautious Wang Jiaxin, imitating the Russians with that big scarf 'round your neck, Wang Jiaxin!

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁴⁸

Perhaps the mutual jostling would have remained a small family dispute within the Third Generation if it had not been for critics constantly turning up the heat. Similar to Karol Maliszewski in the confrontation between the Barbarians and the Classicists, the poet and critic Cheng Guangwei 程光炜 played a key role in the dispute between the Intellectual and Popular poets. Cheng was the editor of *A Funeral Portrait of Bygone Years* and the author of the controversial foreword "Journey with Unknown Destination" (不知所终的旅行). In the collection, which is presented as representative of the entire poetry scene of the 1990s, Cheng included only Intellectual authors, and in the introduction he dwelled extensively on the importance of foreign literature in the development of Chinese poetry:

On the one hand, we look to Pound, Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Miłosz, Mandelstam, not to mention the biases and ever-changing tastes of foreign sinologists, and we attempt to establish what is in fact the fiction of a "tradition" of modern poetry in Chinese; on the other, in our heart of hearts, in the insight into Han culture and language that is carved into our bones, we lack any and all confidence regarding this "tradition," which is built on sand. We are sufficiently vigilant vis-à-vis the "international poetry stage" but at the same time yearn for recognition on that very stage, to use this as a standard for greatness in poets.

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁴⁹

Cheng's piece generated a series of angry responses from the Popular poets and further ripostes from the Intellectuals. The culmination of the polemic was the poetry conference in the Panfeng Hotel in Beijing in mid-April 1999

48 Quoted in van Crevel 2008: 406.

49 Ibidem: 404.

during which the two factions crossed swords. Their direct confrontation catapulted the entire debate onto the first pages of influential cultural and literary magazines like *Poetry Exploration* (诗探索) and *Beijing Literature* (北京文学), among others; articles also appeared in mainstream publications such as *Beijing Daily* (北京日报), *Southern Weekly* (南方周末), and *Science Daily* (科学日报), making the polemic a public issue. Van Crevel lists 120 literary-critical pieces that appeared between April 1999 and January 2001, many of them written in an arrogant, sarcastic tone.⁵⁰

As was the case in the polemic between the Barbarians and the Classicists, it is not possible to indicate a winner in the feud between the Intellectuals and the Populars. By and large, it seems as though, like in Poland, the overall situation of the poetry scene in China lends itself to descriptive categories closer to the Earthly than the Elevated end of the aesthetic spectrum,⁵¹ and the emerging grassroot movements and poetics are now receiving increased international attention. On the other hand, most positions in leading academic and cultural institutions in China today are held by former Intellectual poets and younger continuators of the Intellectual poetic legacy who thus have an arguably larger impact on the forming of literary canons.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, a new trend in the Intellectual-Popular dynamic has become increasingly visible: the Third Generation seems to be gradually reuniting to face new challenges posed especially by the development of new media and digital culture. For instance, in 2013, Yu Jian launched what he hoped to become a regular book series: *Poetry and Thought* (诗与思). In the two volumes of essays published to date, former adversaries from both camps together ponder the role of poetry in the new, hypermodern reality.⁵² Another common front can be found in the reaction of the Chinese poetry community to the debut book by AI poet Xiao Bing 小冰 in May 2017, which I will discuss in the final chapter. While younger authors were enthusiastic about this new technological development, some even competing against a bot in a TV show, the Third Generation spoke out, almost in one voice, against such experiments.⁵³

The two nationwide polemics echoed for many years in literary-critical discourse in Poland and China alike. Nonetheless, in Polish literature, the showdown between the Classicists and the Barbarians quickly turned into a sort

50 Ibidem: 451–458.

51 See, e.g., Maghiel van Crevel's fieldwork essay "Walk on the Wild Side" (van Crevel 2017c).

52 Yu Jian 2013, 2015.

53 A collection of the utterances of Chinese poets on Xiao Bing can be found in Dafenghao 2017; cf. Krenz 2020. See also chapter 7 of the present book.

of a legend with limited impact on the actual shape of the discussion among authors representing the younger generation. By contrast, in China, those born in the 1970s still remained, minimally in the eyes of critics, divided and defined by the old dichotomy, as will be substantiated in chapter 5. There, I will also provide a more detailed account of the social-political context of the postpolemic stage in both countries.

4 From Brotherhood in Socialism to Elective Affinities

To date, contemporary Chinese poets have been far more interested in contemporary Polish poetry than the other way around. This is reflected, among other things, in the number, profile, and authorship of translations. There are a considerable number of book-length translations of contemporary Polish poets in Chinese, particularly of works by Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, plus several books and countless scattered renditions of Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Adam Zagajewski published in various literary magazines and on internet platforms. Their quality varies from amateurish to impeccable. Zagajewski, for instance, has his translators to thank for two prestigious poetry awards received in 2013: the Poetry and People International Poetry Prize (诗歌与人国际诗歌奖) and the Zhongkun International Poetry Prize (中坤国际诗歌奖), which is sometimes referred to as China's Nobel Prize in Poetry.

Some of these translations were made directly from the Polish, mostly by scholars from the Chair of Polish Studies at Beijing Foreign Languages University, such as Yi Lijun, Zhang Zhenhui 张振辉, and Zhao Gang 赵刚, and by Yang Deyou 杨德友 from Shanxi University. Some have also been made by nonacademic translators, including Lin Hongliang 林洪亮 and Wei-Yun Lin-Górecka 林薇昀 (from Taiwan). Very common, too, are relay translations via English, eagerly undertaken by poets, especially those associated with the Intellectual camp, including Zhang Shuguang 张曙光, Xi Chuan, Wang Jiaxin, Huang Canran 黄灿然, Hu Sang 胡桑, Li Yiliang 李以亮, and others. Moreover, inspirations from the five Polish authors mentioned above have deeply infiltrated Chinese poetics. Later in this section, we will observe this phenomenon in Wang Jiaxin's intertextual dialogue with Zagajewski. In the next chapter, I will also discuss Miłosz's role as an "adoptive father" of Chinese contemporary poetry.

The only book-length—or, actually, chapbook-length—translations of a Polish poet of a younger generation that I have managed to identify are Tomasz Różycki's (b. 1970) *Scorched Maps* (*Zapomniane mapy*, 被遗忘的地图, English

translation by Mira Rosenthal, Chinese translation by Zhao Gang) and Julia Fiedorczuk's (b. 1975) *Orion's Shoulder* (*Ramię Oriona*, 猎户臂, English translation by Bill Johnston, Chinese translation by Lin-Górecka) published in Hong Kong on the occasion of the Hong Kong Poetry Nights, in which the two poets participated in 2013 and 2017 respectively.

The number of translations in Polish of Chinese postwar poetry pales in comparison. And although the diversity of these translations is arguably greater, this does not necessarily testify to, or result in, Polish readers having a broader knowledge of Chinese contemporary verse. Among the individual collections of modern authors, one should mention Bei Dao's *A Window over a Cliff* (*Okno na urwisku*) in Izabella Łabędzka's translation from 2001, small and already almost unavailable collections of Wang Yin's 王寅 (b. 1962) *Call by Name, Tears* (*Zawołaj po imieniu, łzy* / 直呼其名吧, 泪水) and Zhu Hao's 朱浩 *A Lonely Stroller* (*Samotny spacerowicz*) in Jarek Zawadzki's translation from 2009, and the *Selected Poems* (*Wiersze wybrane*) of Duo Duo in Małgorzata Religa's translation from 2013, published on the occasion of the Miłosz Poetry Festival in Krakow, to which Duo Duo was invited. Earlier on, in 2011, Bei Dao was a guest at the festival as well, and Wang Yin and Zhu Hao visited Katowice for the Ars Cameralis Festival in 2007. In 2015, Religa published Jidi Majia's 吉狄马加 (b. 1961) *Words and Flames* (*Słowa i płomienie*); the same year Huang Lihai's 黄礼孩 (b. 1975) *Who Runs Faster Than a Lightning* (*Kto biega jeszcze szybciej niż błyskawica* / 谁跑得比闪电还快) appeared in Wu Lan's 乌兰 translation with Zagajewski's preface. In 2017 and 2018 respectively, I threw my modest contributions into the pot: a selection of Yu Jian's poetry *Come In World* (*Świecie wejdz* / 世界啊 你进来吧) and Li Hao's 李浩 (b. 1984) collection *Homecoming* (*Powrót do domu* / 还乡). In June 2021, shortly before the submission of the final manuscript of this book, an anthology of works by nine laureates of the Chinese Lu Xun Literary Award was published, with an introduction by Jidi Majia. The collection is titled *Lights in Amber* (*Światła w bursztynie*) and was translated jointly by Małgorzata Religa and Katarzyna Sarek. A two-volume anthology in my translation including works by the Third Generation and younger authors is currently in the making, and will be completed in the coming years.

The above books were translated from Chinese by academics with a background in sinology, and they caused little resonance on the poetry scene. Two exceptions are Huang Lihai's collection, with an introduction by Zagajewski, and the poetry of Jidi Majia, which drew the attention of the poet Dariusz Tomasz Lebioda, who subsequently translated into Polish three of Majia's collections from the English: *Rites of Eternity* (*Ryty wieczności*, 2016), *Snow Panthera* (*Śnieżna pantera*, 2017), and *Blackness and Silence* (*Czerń i cisza*, 2018); in 2019,

Lebioda published a monograph titled *Eternal Fire: Life and Works of Jidi Majia (Odwieczny ogień. Życie i twórczość Jidiego Majii)*.⁵⁴ This last work is currently being translated into Chinese by Zhang Zhenhui.⁵⁵ The relationship between Zagajewski and Huang and between Lebioda and Majia extends beyond just one book; in both cases the poets are/were personal friends. Zagajewski's Poetry and People award was founded by a periodical edited by Huang, and the award ceremony became the occasion on which the two authors first met. Lebioda visited China as well. In 2009, he participated in an exchange program between European and Chinese authors. Before he undertook the translation of Jidi Majia's poetry, the two had certainly met at least once, as Lebioda had been on the jury of HOMER, The European Medal of Poetry, which was awarded to Jidi Majia in 2016. In 2018, Majia was awarded Tadeusz Miciński's PHOENIX Poetry Prize, founded by the Toruń/Bydgoszcz branch of the Polish Writers' Association chaired by Lebioda. Another example of a poet translating another poet is Wioletta Grzegorzewska's rendition of selected works by the Chinese migrant worker author Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014): *Nekrolog orzeszka ziemnego (Obituary for a Peanut, 2017)*.

This list is certainly not exhaustive since it does not include, for example, a number of scattered publications in periodicals, but it gives an idea of the consistency of Chinese readers' interest in a specific kind of Polish poetry and the comparative randomness of Polish audiences' interest in Chinese poetry. In our personal conversations and sometimes when introducing me to others, Wang Jiaxin used to repeat that Poland, "just like China, is a country of poetry," that Poland, like China, is a poor country, which is why it has raised so many good poets. This is merely an anecdote, of course, but—questionable causal logic aside—it confirms what can be otherwise observed in poetic texts: in Chinese poetry's search for identity and singularity, Poland has been perceived as China's fellow sufferer, especially by the poets of the Third Generation who experienced the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and June Fourth. At the same time, Polish authors have tended to see China as a distant Other, not necessarily hostile, but one that may serve as a (counter)point of reference in the process of self-definition, or as a utopian asylum into which one can escape social-political reality.

This difference in approach is visible, for example, in the poetry of Wang Jiaxin and Adam Zagajewski. Commenting on Zagajewski's work, Wang explains his success among Chinese audiences thus: "besides the beauty of

54 Lebioda 2019a. Extensive excerpts from the monograph are available on Lebioda's blog (see Lebioda 2019b).

55 Zhang Zhenhui, personal communication with the author, February 21, 2020.

his poems and humanist consolation they offer, this might be because of their spiritual character (精神品质) and moral responsibility that are specific to East European authors.⁵⁶ To Wang, Zagajewski's work contains traits of Eastern Europeanness (东欧性), which manifests itself in the abundance of "snow and silence" in his writings, and in the ability to cohabit with ghosts of the past.⁵⁷ At the same time, confronted with Miłosz, an unmatched, "strong poet," in the Bloomian sense of the term, Zagajewski is in Wang's opinion a "weak poet." This allows Wang to identify "a spiritual kin" (精神同类) in him.

Wang himself, too, translated, as he imprecisely recalls, "ten, twenty" poems by Zagajewski, including "The Swallows of Auschwitz" (Jaskółki Oświęcimia/ 奥斯维辛燕子), "Blizzard" (Zawieja / 风暴雪), and "Three Histories" (Trzy historie / 三种历史), a selection that says a lot about his reception of the Polish author.⁵⁸ His melancholy Romantic interpretation of Zagajewski's writing (and Polish poetry in general) is also reflected in Wang's poetic triptych "On the German-Polish Border" (在德波边境) from 2011,⁵⁹ written after his stay near Görlitz/Zgorzelec in the house of his friend, a Belgian visual artist. Its motto is borrowed from Zagajewski's "Poems on Poland" (Wiersze o Polsce, 1982):

kraj,
którym żywią się czarne orły, głodni
cesarze, Trzecia Rzesza i Trzeci Rzym.

land
on which feed black eagles, hungry
emperors, the Third Reich, and the Third Rome.

Notably, Wang uses the decontextualized quote in a sense that seems to be precisely the opposite of Zagajewski's intention. Zagajewski's work is ironic, filled with subtle mockery targeted at Polish people who, through poetry (and in other ways), export a self-victimizing image of their own homeland abroad, and also at the foreign authors who buy into this illusionary narrative and write about Poland in a semi-exoticizing and semi-Romanticizing way. The full poem reads:

56 Quoted in Li Yiliang 2015.

57 Wang Jiixin 2017c: 223.

58 Ibidem: 222–223.

59 In the extracts of "On the German-Polish Border" presented here, my translation is based on a manuscript received from the author.

Poems on Poland

I read poems on Poland written
 by foreign poets. Germans and Russians
 have not only guns, but also
 ink, pens, some heart, and a lot
 of imagination. Poland in their poems
 reminds me of an audacious unicorn
 which feeds on the wool of tapestries, it is
 beautiful, weak, and imprudent. I don't know
 what the mechanism of illusion is based on,
 but even I, a sober reader,
 am enraptured by that fairy-tale defenseless land
 on which feed black eagles, hungry
 emperors, the Third Reich, and the Third Rome.

Translated by RENATA GORCZYNSKI⁶⁰

Wiersze o Polsce

Czytam wiersze o Polsce pisane
 przez obcych poetów. Niemcy i Rosjanie
 mają nie tylko karabiny, lecz także
 atrament, pióra, trochę serca i dużo
 wyobraźni. Polska w ich wierszach
 przypomina zuchwałego jednoroźca,
 który żywi się wełną gobelinów, jest
 piękna, słaba i nierozważna. Nie wiem,
 na czym polega mechanizm złudzenia,
 ale i mnie, trzeźwego czytelnika,
 zachwyca ten baśniowy, bezbronny kraj,
 którym żywią się czarne orły, głodni
 cesarze, Trzecia Rzesza i Trzeci Rzym.⁶¹

In “On the German-Polish Border,” Wang Jiaxin actually does the same thing that the “foreign poets” anonymously invoked by Zagajewski did. The first part of Wang’s triptych may look like an attempt to humorously dismantle the Romantic paradigm that weighs so heavily on Polish poetry. Romanticism is

60 Zagajewski 2003: 133.

61 Zagajewski 2010: KL 429–436.

represented by the hussars (see section 1 of this chapter) engrossed in Chopin's music:

After crossing a bridge from Görlitz
you find yourself in Polish Zgorzelec

The Neisse River has become a meandering border
A river separates also
two poets
Zagajewski and Benn

separates, that is connects
a river once peaceful once furious
flows between us

Oh Poland, your hussars
still waving their sabers to the sounds of Chopin's *Polonaise*
only the helmeted sentry on the bridge
have long switched to another business
the black market trade

从格尔利茨一过桥
就是波兰的茨戈热莱兹了
一条尼斯河，成为蜿蜒的边境线
在扎加耶夫斯基与本恩
这两个诗人之间
也隔着一条河

隔开，也就是联系
一条时而平静、时而凶险的河
从我们中间流过

啊波兰，你的轻骑兵
仍在肖邦的波罗乃兹舞曲中挥舞着马刀
而桥头上那些戴钢盔的岗哨
却早已改行
做起了黑市上的生意

Parodying hussars and Chopin, Wang indeed hits at the very heart of Polish Romanticism. The dismantled great narrative leads him to the same place

where it led Western deconstructionists—to the fragmentation of the subject and the disintegration of the vision of the world. Yet, in Wang’s poem, this split vision lacks the postmodernist dynamic, the element of deconstructionist play. The text, instead of disseminating and absorbing new contexts that “defer” the arrival of its meaning, to use Derrida’s jargon, congeals in this exilic model of subjectivity, a new myth to replace the discredited Romantic-heroic one. In the second part of the triptych, Wang has a “translingual” conversation with animals and ghosts, to whom no national borders exist:

Wonderful world
 every day at dawn fawns of unclear citizenship
 together with little squirrels prowl around the garden
 every night I stay alone with ghosts
 trudging between several languages
 do I need interpreters? I seem to understand
 a hymn of praise that floats to me from a nearby chapel
 without translation

美丽新世界啊
 每天清晨，总有一些国籍不明的小鹿
 和小松鼠来花园里探访
 每天夜里，我都与幽灵独处
 在几种语言之间跋涉
 需要翻译吗？每天上午
 从门前小天主教堂飘出的赞美歌
 似乎不用翻译我也能听懂

However, this conversation does not alleviate his loneliness either and does not help him break out of stagnation. Conversely, it seems to be deepening his snow-colored nostalgia, which he experiences in part two of “On the German-Polish Border.”

In part three, Wang continues his attempts to dispel the lofty atmosphere by interspersing the story with details, interjecting random observations that “Polish bread is cheaper than German bread” (波兰的面包比德国的便宜) and “German women are slimmer than Polish women” (德国的女孩比波兰的苗条). Eventually, however, he returns to the idea of (Polish) poetry that is carved in his mind: “Polish coffee as Polish poetry / always half cup of bitter grounds” (而波兰的咖啡，像是波兰的诗歌 / 竟带有半杯苦渣). It may seem like the poet is finally managing to spit out these bitter grounds and take a fresh look at the reality around him. In the final stanza, a reflection on the poetry-writing

process as one of destabilization and renegotiation of the order of the world emerges. Still, ultimately this rethinking comes down to the remapping of the author's own spiritual condition on Polish territory:

There, at the very bottom of our selves
 if I write a poem
 every line
 will repeat the meanders of the borderline

—在那里，在我们自我的底部
 如果我写作
 每一行诗
 都将重新标出边境线。

In contrast to Wang's interpretation of Polish poetry, let us look at Zagajewski's interpretation of Chinese poetry in a work titled "Chinese Poem" from the collection *Fiery Land* (*Ziemia ognista*, 1994):

Chinese Poem

I read a Chinese poem
 written a thousand years ago.
 The author talks about the rain
 that fell all night
 on the bamboo roof of his boat
 and the peace that finally
 settled in his heart.
 Is it just coincidence
 that it's November again, with fog
 and a leaden twilight?
 Is it just chance
 that someone else is living?
 Poets attach great importance
 to prizes and success
 but autumn after autumn
 tears leaves from the proud trees
 and if anything remains
 it's only the soft murmur of the rain
 in poems
 neither happy nor sad.
 Only purity can't be seen,

and evening, when both light and shadow
forget us for a moment,
busily shuffling mysteries.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH⁶²

Chiński wiersz

Czytałem chiński wiersz
napisany przed tysiącem lat.
Autor opowiada o deszczu
padającym przez całą noc
na bambusowy dach łodzi
i o spokoju, który nareszcie
zagościł w jego sercu.
Czy to zbieg okoliczności,
że znowu jest listopad i mgła
i ołowiany zmierzch?
Czy to przypadek,
że znowu ktoś żyje?
Poeci przywiązują wielką wagę
do sukcesów i nagród,
ale jesień po jesieni odziera z liści dumne drzewa
i jeśli coś zostaje to delikatny szmer deszczu
w wierszach, które nie są
ani radosne, ani smutne.
Tylko czystość jest niewidoczna
i wieczór, kiedy i cień i światło
zapominają o nas na moment
zajęte tasowaniem tajemnic.⁶³

It is essential to consider the moment in which “Chinese Poem” was written. *The Fiery Land* was published eight years after Zagajewski had moved from Poland to Paris and started a new period in his career, with frequent stays in the US where he taught at a university. His New Wave poems and essays published in the 1970s were epitomes of socially and politically engaged literature. In 1974, together with Julian Kornhauser, he published a book titled *The Unrepresented World* (*Świat nie przedstawiony*), in which the two authors emphasized the responsibility embedded in all forms of cultural activity and

62 Zagajewski 2003: 271.

63 Zagajewski 2010: KL 1509–1520.

accused the Polish postwar intelligentsia of escapism and a lack of interest in public affairs.⁶⁴ In 1975, after cosigning the “Letter of 59”—an open letter to the Polish authorities written by intellectuals in protest of the changes in the constitution made by the Communist Party of Poland—Zagajewski’s works were banned. In the 1980s, a notable shift in his poetics emerged, and the author started to distance himself from the social-political reality, claiming that a poet and an intellectual at large should be detached from their surroundings so as to create works of universal value. His 1986 book of essays, *Solidarity and Solitude* (*Solidarność i samotność*), as Barbara Toruńczyk notes, testifies to the fact that he finally

made a choice, his aim is artistic creation; this has consequences also for his way of life. Artistic creation loathes collective existence. It allows for a brotherhood of kindred spirits, a friendship between artists, mutual understanding between people who share a creative attitude toward the world and are connected with a secret, invisible tie. It is these ties that Miłosz meant when he spoke of lonely islands which, he believed, still exist in our civilization and are ruled by spiritual values.⁶⁵

One cannot live for others without first ensuring oneself a space of solitude in which one can grow and perfect one’s art. This is the only way to be fully creatively responsible. This was, in short, Zagajewski’s credo during a large part of his emigrant life. *Vita activa*, adds Toruńczyk, referring to Hannah Arendt’s distinction in *The Human Condition*,⁶⁶ was thus complemented in his work by *vita contemplativa*.⁶⁷ It was arguably this *vita contemplativa* that Zagajewski hoped to find in Chinese classical poetry, perceiving it as a spiritual shelter where one can hide oneself and be forgotten by the world for a while. Similar to Wang in “On the German-Polish Border,” he projected his own needs and moods on the Chinese literary map, fitting them into a conventionalized notion of Chineseness, just as Wang fits his into the specific idea of Eastern Europeanness. Rey Chow and Michelle Yeh would likely consider this an example of an essentialization or reification of the concept of Chineseness confined to the (distant) past.⁶⁸ In fact, the same sin of reification is perpetrated by Wang in regard to Polishness.

64 Zagajewski and Kornhauser 1974.

65 Toruńczyk 2015, trans. J K.

66 Arendt 1958: 7–21.

67 Ibidem.

68 Chow 1993: 1–7; Yeh 1998b, 2008.

On March 20, 2020, another Chinese author, Zhuang Xiaoming 庄晓明 (b. 1964), posted a short poem in which he aptly summarizes Zagajewski's reception of Chinese poetry and the Chinese reception of Zagajewski's poetry. The text reads:

Polish Sorrow

From a Chinese poem

Zagajewski read out a peace from before thousand years
the sound of rain and time on the bamboo roof of a boat
the void and accidentality of a Chinese poet

From Zagajewski's poems

I in turn read out Poland's sorrow
peacefully infiltrating time like the sound of rain
there's no map or territory
on which to nail it.

《波兰的忧郁》

在一首中国诗中

扎加耶夫斯基读到了一千年前的平静
读到了一只船篷上的雨声与时间
读到了诗人的虚妄与偶然

而我在扎加耶夫斯基的读诗中

读到的是波兰的忧郁
它雨声一般在时间中平静地渗透
没有一种地图或疆域
能够将之固定⁶⁹

Ancient (Chinese) poetic peace and modern (Polish) poetic sorrow are mutually complementary visions and they may become a foundation of sustained, mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, but they do not open perspectives for actual dialogue in the sense of creating a joint narrative through con-versing.

Netizens, among whom the work in question is tremendously popular, tried to establish which "Chinese poem" Zagajewski is referring to. Ji Shi 吉士, who carried out a thorough investigation to identify the source, offers

69 Zhuang 2020, trans. J.K.

several possibilities. Ji's first suggestion is Song dynasty author Lu You's 陆游 poem "Dongguan" (东关), which is not unlikely because Lu You's poems were available at the time to English-speaking readers through Burton Watson's translations.⁷⁰ But although the general lyrical situation in the alleged source poem is similar, many details cited by Zagajewski are missing. Ji Shi's other propositions include three Tang dynasty authors: Wei Zhuang's 韦庄 "Living on a Boat" (宿蓬), Wen Tingjun's 温庭筠 "Seeing Off a Monk on His Journey to the East" (送僧东游), and Tang Xuanzong's 唐玄宗 "The Rain-Soaked Bell" (雨霖铃).⁷¹ Zagajewski has probably never come across these three texts, but the intuition that "Chinese Poem" might be something like an (imagined) universal Chinese poem, or a contamination of various Chinese poems, is arguably a good departure point for further exploration. In my interpretation, the poem is a blur of two other texts from Lu You's oeuvre: "Four Early-Autumn Poems (Two)" (早秋四首 其二) and "A Tempest on the Fourth Day of the Eleventh Month" (十一月四日风雨大作), because the former tells the story of a boat during a storm, and the latter contains a clear reference to time: the eleventh month, which also appears in Zagajewski. However, there is no hard evidence to support this hypothesis.

In his 2014 award acceptance speech, Zagajewski sheds light on the genesis of the poem, which suggests that the text indeed constitutes an abstract construct of Chinese poetry and of the China he "saw" through it, rather than an attempt at intercultural dialogue. He mentions his interest in China in his early youth when he read Marco Polo's accounts of the expedition to Asia, how he learned about Confucianism and Daoism during his studies at the Jagiellonian University's philosophy department, and then, how after moving to America, he encountered Chinese classical verse:

Later on, for many years, and from time to time, I read Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei, and other authors to better understand China. Of course, this didn't allow me to completely understand China. I bought Chinese poetry collections and read them many times in English. Reading silently, I was carried away by these poems, as if life stopped for a while. I wrote a poem called "Chinese Poem." When I was working on it, I had a feeling as if a spirit of a great Chinese poet had entered my soul. I experienced a deep peace in my heart. I think that reading classical Chinese poetry (but also some New Poetry) helped me, I don't dare to say to understand

70 Lu Yu 1973. Lu Yu is the Wade-Giles transliteration of the name rendered in Pinyin as Lu You.

71 Ji Shi 2018.

China (would anybody dare to claim so?), but certainly to “see” China. I admire the perfect manner in which the unique scenery of Chinese paintings and the bewitching tradition of calligraphy are matched with poetry. This beautiful communion between poetry and painting helps me experience the profound content of this verse, its emotional load and aesthetic exquisiteness.⁷²

Twenty years after writing “Chinese Poem,” Zagajewski realizes that this image is a mere illusion, just like the image of his own homeland as a country of unicorns that emerges from the poems about Poland by foreign authors. In the very next sentence of the speech, he adds: “On the other hand (there is always the other hand), I have also realized the tragedy of China, the tragedy of Cultural Revolution, the tragedy of destruction of the great cultural heritage accumulated during the several thousand years of Chinese civilization,” and presents a rough reconstruction of China’s difficult road to modernity. Based on this historical recapitulation, Zagajewski goes on to construct a narrative of the global community between artists and the universality of art, assuring that “[a]fter reading verses of Chinese [contemporary] poets, I realized that there is an astounding similarity in artistic expression across cultures.”

In the preface to Huang Lihai’s collection, Zagajewski no longer speaks of anonymous, faceless “Chinese poems.” Instead, he begins by mobilizing an individual perspective:

Huang Lihai radiates with kindness, smiles joyfully—it is a smile of friendship, so convincing that it cannot be mistaken for a smile of an official or a star of popular culture who strives for popularity, or even for a transient smile of a passerby in the busy street.⁷³

He expresses his fascination with Huang’s work, praising his attentiveness, unique sense of observation, ability to balance tradition with modernity, and artistic honesty. The preface ends with a meaningful statement:

This kind of sensitivity to the surrounding reality is perhaps the most important thing: the poet looks at the world, listens to it, but never turns into a connoisseur of sophisticated observations. He remains one of us, our brother, someone who also sees suffering. He’s helpless, like

72 Zagajewski 2014, trans. J K.

73 Huang Lihai 2014: 5, trans. J K. Zagajewski’s preface spans pages 1 to 7.

us—what can he change in the cruel reality?—but he is a witness, he remains available for a judge.

... if any judge ever appears.⁷⁴

This is a symbolic gesture. It repeats the gesture of Miłosz in the 1940s when he translated the poetry of the first wave of Chinese modernism and was surprised by the resonance between the Chinese poets' interests and his own, as well as by the entire Polish poetry's "pursuit of reality" (*pogoń za rzeczywistością*), to cite his famous phrase. At the time, history had brutally separated the two national poetries' respective trajectories, on which I will elaborate in my discussion of Miłosz and Ai Qing in the next chapter. There, we will also see an attempt to stitch these trajectories together within the ideological framework that accompanied the first publications on Miłosz in the PRC in the early 1980s, creating an image of the Polish Nobel laureate as a socialist poet. This image was reinforced by another first-wave modernist author, one of Miłosz's most active mainland Chinese translators, Lu Yuan 绿原 (1922–2009) and his 1989 translation of the collection *Separate Notebooks* (拆散的笔记簿).

In 2014, a quarter of a century after the decomposition of the artificial ties of "brotherhood in socialism," the time is ripe, signals Zagajewski, to establish a new form of brotherhood as an "elective affinity," to use Goethe's term, which bridges cultural, geographical, and generational gaps, one that is based on mutual familiarity, trust, and respect on the one hand, and shared interests, goals, and concerns on the other. It is also a good moment for the two poetries to productively converse about past issues that they have had no opportunity to thus far, including their difficult quest for self-definition in the twentieth century, as well as about open projects, such as the pursuit of capital-S Singularity beyond the limits of human language and transcending our grammars of cognition and creation. The aim of the following six chapters is to provide them a stage where such conversations can take place and to record the comparative narrative that will emerge from their interactions.

Before our journey begins, allow me, by way of a little postscript, to share a reminiscence from the Chinese poetry scene after Zagajewski's death on March 21, 2021. The sad message that reached his audiences on the (appropriately enough) World Poetry Day echoed widely in China, generating a huge number of commemorative essays and poems that bear testimony to the development of the said "elective affinity," based on genuine mutual understanding and disinterested friendship. Among them was a moving elegy written by Wang Jiaxin, which, on the one hand, like "On the German-Polish Border," contains elements of Wang's general conception of Romanticism- and Holocaust-laced

74 Ibidem: 7, trans. J K.

Eastern Europeanness embodied by the intertextual swallow from Auschwitz, as in Zagajewski's work, but which, on the other hand, lets us hear clearly the author's own, somewhat shaky yet firmly resolute personal voice. The voice of a person struck by grief. In his narrative, the memories of Zagajewski, "our poet" (我们的诗人), are intertwined with the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic which united Chinese and European poets—represented here by the Macedonian author, Wang's longtime friend Nikola Madzirov, for whose medical treatment Wang helped to raise funds among fellow poets in Beijing—perhaps more strongly than any of the roughly analogous historical experiences discussed in this chapter, and with the threads from Wang's past and (imagined) future. All of these perspectives add up to a complex portrait of someone struggling to piece his world together after an existential earthquake. I invoke this poem as a homage to Zagajewski and a tribute to solidarity in solitude.

Elegy for Adam Zagajewski

1

I am so shocked by your death—
 as if I am immersed in my writing,
 as if I can still write for a decade or two,
 as if I can calmly complete my life,
 but someone, all of a sudden, took away
 my pen.

2

It is another sandy day in Beijing. A touch of fresh green
 of an early spring. The swallows' silent, shrill cries,
 coming out of your poetry.
 I walked by a dark, sparkling small river into the dark night.
 Have we got through another winter? Yes,
 but when I am walking, a kind of energy is also walking,
 through the ice and fire of this March, sorrow and shame
 are all burning on fire.

(You know, it is Madzirov
 who told us the news.
 Himself lying on a hospital bed for a long, long time,
 with an oxygen mask on.
 Is what you see even clearer now?)

His severely damaged lungs,
opened up again to his God
as a cry because of your death!)

3

Farewell, our poet.
I recall our encounter ten years ago,
when I was at the *Leipzig Book Fair*,
but could not visit your Kraków.
Now that you are dead, should I still go there?
Yes! Even if all that I see
are swallows of Auschwitz,
once making circles over your head.
At this moment, I already hear them call.

March 22–24, 2021

1. Madzirov: Nikola Madzirov (1973–), a leading Eastern European poet, born in a family of war refugees in Macedonia; in his early years, his poetry was recognized and recommended by Zagajewski.
2. The former site of the Auschwitz concentration camp was not far from Kraków. Zagajewski has a poem called “The Swallows of Auschwitz.”

Translated by ROBERT TSATURYAN

《悼扎加耶夫斯基》

1

对你的死我实在感到震惊——
仿佛我正埋头写，
仿佛我感到我还可以写十年、二十年，
仿佛我可以从容完成这一生，
但是突然间有人从我手里夺走了
我的笔。

2

又是风沙天。北京初春的
一抹新绿。从你诗中传来的

燕子无声的尖叫。
我走在一条深黑的波光粼粼的小河边。
我们又度过了一个寒冬吗？是，
但是我行走，那种力量也在行走，
这三月里的冰与火、悲伤和耻辱
都在焚烧。

（你知道吗，还是马兹洛夫
来信告诉我们的消息。
他也曾戴着氧气面罩
在病床上久久躺下。
你现在可以看得更清了吧——
他那严重受损的肺，
他那因为你的死而向他的上帝
再次呼喊般张开的肺！）

3

永别了，我们的诗人。
我想起了我们十年前的一次约见，
那时我在莱比锡书展，
但我无法赶到你的克拉科夫。
在你死后，我是否还要去呢？
会的！哪怕我见到的，
只是曾在你的上空来回飞旋的
奥斯维辛的燕子。
此刻我已听到了它们的呼唤。

2021, 3, 22-24

注：

- 1, 尼古拉·马兹洛夫 (Nikola Madzirov, 1973-), 东欧杰出诗人，生于马其顿一个战争难民家庭，早年曾受到扎加耶夫斯基的大力推荐。
- 2, 奥斯维辛集中营旧址距克拉科夫不远。扎加耶夫斯基曾写过一首《奥斯维辛的燕子》。⁷⁵

Old Masters and Young Martyrs

Two of the most common foundational gestures of artistic revolutions are the dethronement of the “Old Masters” and the canonization of new cult figures. Both played a role in Poland and China during what we identified in the previous chapter as the era of transformation, though there are notable differences in the ways in which they were performed and influenced the development of the respective national poetry discourses. One can observe generally that after 1989, Polish verse developed more *against* the Old Masters than *around* new icons; that is, the impulse of rebellion in Poland prevailed over the pursuit of new community-creating narratives. By contrast, in Chinese verse, positive references to new icons, especially the “Young Martyrs” (precisely, poet-suicides), had greater significance than negative references to compromised precursors. As anticipated in chapter 1, in order to complete the revolution, the Chinese avant-garde borrowed “adoptive fathers” from among foreign Old Masters, including Polish authors, to enthrone and dethrone. What these revolutions looked like and how the individual singularity of Old Masters and Young Martyrs was obscured by their universal significance in the enterprise of defining national poetries will be investigated in this chapter through comparative readings of the works of four protagonists: Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996), Rafał Wojaczek (1945–1971), and Haizi 海子 (1964–1989).

1 Unfinished Breakthroughs: A Bird's-Eye View

In China after the Cultural Revolution, the poetry scene witnessed the resurfacing of a large number of authors in their sixties or seventies who participated in the early twentieth-century poetry reform and subsequently engaged in communist revolution. Their unswerving loyalty to communist ideas, however, did not help them avoid persecution in the 1950s during the Campaign Against Hu Feng's Counterrevolutionary Clique (反胡风反革命集团运动) and the Anti-Rightist Movement (反右派运动). Some were silenced by the state, while others withdrew from artistic life as freedom of expression gradually diminished, signaling their rejection of the cultural policy of the Party. Among these doyens of poetry were Ai Qing, Niu Han 牛汉 (1923–2013), Lu Yuan 绿原 (1922–2009), and Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977). Together with several younger authors who debuted shortly after 1949 and whose voices were suppressed during the

Cultural Revolution, they constituted a group called Returners (归来者) or Returned Poets (归来诗人).¹ For all that New Poetry owed them, their position in the emerging poetry field of the late 1970s and early 1980s was not strong, nor were they perceived as strong authors (in the Bloomian sense). During the prewar period, their verse had struck readers as bold and uncompromising. In the following decades, however, it lost its impetus and largely remained faithful to a style that constituted a blend of revolutionary Romanticism and socialist realism, thus earning the label of orthodox poetry, one famous exception being Nie Gannu 聂绀弩 (1903–1986) who turned to classical forms instead. Since the late 1970s, their work has been supported by the government, which, after the change of the political guard, reevaluated the role of poets in the building of the socialist narrative. As the doyens' political power grew, their authority among younger authors, perhaps inevitably, shrank.

The tacitly elected leader of the orthodox poets, and the one most celebrated in political circles, was Ai Qing. Simultaneously, his untimely artistic postulates and unjustified charges against Obscure authors pronounced in a series of articles published in the 1980s betrayed his profound misunderstanding of the ongoing transformation and made him a rather easy target for the emerging poets. The coup d'état appeared to be a mere formality. Yet, although, as Zang Di 臧棣 reports, "in private Bei Dao's 北岛 'bestie' ('闺蜜') Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 and his friends spread the 'patricide' story,"² in reality, at the time, most of the leading Obscure poets did not engage in any open argument with Ai Qing, whom they, despite popular opinion, respected.³ Rather, it is the case that Ai Qing overthrew himself, and in a sense, compromised the entirety of orthodox poetry, stumbling over scattered pieces of his ossified poetics, to allude to a metaphor from his poem "Fish Fossil" (鱼化石). Following a period of intense participation in literary life, which included the privileges of being sponsored by the PRC government, he died in 1996 after a long disease and was virtually forgotten by younger generations of avant-garde authors, although his writing had, and still does have, a pride of place in school textbooks.

In the mid-1980s, the role of the precursors against whose influence emerging authors struggled fell on the Obscure poets, who had entered the poetry scene just a decade earlier. Unlike Ai Qing, his almost forty years younger adversary Bei Dao was seen as a charismatic artistic personality, and the Third Generation did not hesitate to call in the big guns against him. The desire to

1 Huang Jianfeng 2003.

2 Zang Di et al. 2011.

3 For a reexamination of the polemic between Ai Qing (and the Returners at large) and Obscure poets, see Wang Junhu 2017; He Tongbin 2013; Jiang and Li 2015; Li Runxia 2005.

outdo Bei Dao and break the dominance of the Obscure poets reverberated especially among those who later formed the Popular camp. But then, in 1989, before they shot their guns empty, the situation again turned 180 degrees, and Bei Dao disappeared from the Chinese poetry scene. Moreover, by the time, his writing style had evolved so significantly that the elevated mannerism of Obscure poetry, which Popular authors liked to mock, could barely be found in his verse any longer. Thus, in the 1990s, patricidal motivation gave way to fratricidal impulses, and the Popular and Intellectual factions focused on mutual altercations rather than on settling accounts with precursors.

But there is another side to this matter. Intellectual poets in fact evinced a strong yearning for great masters and they desperately tried to adopt fathers—and sometimes mothers—from abroad to form a full-fledged, if patchwork, poetic family, whereas their adversaries from the Popular camp took a somewhat sadistic pleasure in killing their adoptive parents. The most active parent-seeker was arguably Wang Jiaxin who has consistently tried to inscribe his work into different literary lineages. From the brief excerpt from Shen Haobo's 沈浩波 pamphlet in section 3 of chapter 1, the reader remembers Wang as a whipping boy who was regularly attacked by the Popular camp for his “pseudo-exilic” episode and his claimed spiritual brotherhood with famous representatives of world poetry. Among them were mostly (but not only) authors banished from their homeland, like Joseph Brodsky, or otherwise excluded from society, like Anna Akhmatova. In his rich oeuvre, one can find a large number of poem-homages and poem-dedications, for example, “Mr. Nabokov” (纳博科夫先生), “Paz in His Late Years” (晚年的帕斯), “For Lowell” (给洛厄尔), “A Late Dedication: To Emily Dickinson” (晚来的献诗: 给艾米莉·狄金森), and “Tranströmer” (特朗斯特罗默). There is also one “poetic fragment” (诗片段) titled “Exile: For Miłosz” (流亡: 致米沃什), and another “fragment” that borrows Miłosz's title “Temptation” (Pokusa / 诱惑). Three of Wang Jiaxin's poems invoke Miłosz's name: one of them is “Words” (词语), where the author reflects on Miłosz's doubt in the possibility of pinning down fleeting reality in words; the other two come from Wang's recent series of Covid-19 poems, namely from “Run, Rabbit” (跑吧, 兔子) and “Italy: Rewriting a Poem” (意大利, 一首诗的重写). In a conversation with John Crespi, recalling his “pilgrimages” to his many spiritual homelands, Wang says:

The more I live and the more I learn, the more I feel that all poets derive from one soul. If Yeats had been born in the late Tang Dynasty he would probably have been Li Shangyin 李商隐. If I'd been born in nineteenth-century New England and was a solitary woman, who knows but that I would have been another Emily Dickinson? If I didn't become her, well, then who would? The fact is I would want to become Emily Dickinson.

Now, when I tick off the names of these great poets, I don't mean to elevate myself. What I'm getting at is that even though our lives may be divided by language and culture, we're all on the way toward that "one soul." That's been my experience these past several years, especially when translating Paul Celan. [...] There are poets who keep faith with the knowledge of the soul. When that happens, they create their own family of the spirit.⁴

Shen Haobo, Yi Sha 伊沙, Yu Jian 于坚, Han Dong, and others from the Popular camp were, in their turn, very implacable and unceremonious, and often quite unjust, in cutting Wang's imagined family connections and brutally bringing him down to earth.

In Poland, the patricide—or, shall we say, parricide, given the (albeit limited) gender diversity among the Old Masters—proved a complex enterprise too. A crucial difference between Polish and Chinese poetry scenes was that the Chinese avant-garde rejected the precursors partly due to a profound disappointment with their artistic and ethical attitudes, whereas young Polish poets launched a revolt because they felt overwhelmed by the unassailable authority of the older generation. Among the authors born roughly in the same period as the Chinese Returners, there were a good dozen of accomplished and widely respected poets—including the so-called Great Four of Polish poetry: Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012), Tadeusz Różewicz (1921–2014), and Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998). Critics and scholars generally agree that while the Brulioners liberated themselves of the influence of three of the Great Four with relative ease—that is, Różewicz, Herbert, and Szymborska—Miłosz was a different matter. In her monograph *Critical (Dis)order: Studies in Contemporary Poetry Criticism in Poland (Krytyczne (nie)porządki: studia o współczesnej krytyce literackiej w Polsce, 2012)*, Dorota Kozicka distinguishes a number of "strategies of rejecting Miłosz" devised by the Brulion Generation, all of which ultimately proved inefficient.⁵ Miłosz remained a significant point of reference, be it positive or negative, for many poets and poetics of the 1990s, and wrestling with Miłosz became a crucial driving force in the process of defining Polish poetry anew.

Candidates for the role of new icon were quite obvious in both countries. In Poland, the legend of Rafał Wojaczek, one of the Polish "cursed poets," who died by his own hand in 1971, almost two decades later was still vivid and inspired many emerging authors. Due to the deepening split within the Brulion Generation and other factors concerning both the poetry and the private life

4 Wang and Crespi 2011: 80.

5 Kozicka 2012: 151–171.

of Wojacek, his canonization, however, has never been fully realized. The Chinese avant-garde had its saint, too. Haizi's suicide in the spring of 1989 was almost immediately transformed into a myth of poetic martyrdom. This myth initially appeared to have vast community-making potential. Ultimately, though, rather than uniting the poetry scene, it strengthened the mutual animosities between the Intellectual and Popular camps.

All in all, in both Poland and China the two foundational gestures of artistic revolution turned into long processes. The figures of the (not entirely) dethroned and the (not entirely) canonized functioned as points of reference in the self-definition of the two poetics in the late twentieth century rather than as clear ideals to follow unconditionally or anti-ideals to reject out of hand. In this chapter, I will examine the renegotiations of poetry discourse through (the reception of) the works of Czesław Miłosz and Ai Qing (section 2) and of Rafał Wojacek and Haizi (section 3). Miłosz's and Ai Qing's lives span almost a century of the difficult histories of their respective homelands. Their poetry bears the marks of the perturbations in the national literary discourses, providing thus not only a perspective on the poetry scene of the 1990s but also a promising angle for broader reflection on the longtime entanglements between poetry writing and historical experience. Wojacek's and Haizi's artistic careers, conversely, were short but intense, characterized by the almost instant processing of physical, spiritual, and intellectual personal experience into text through a series of unpredictable reactions carried out on the bodies of their half-real, half-fictitious lyrical "homunculuses," as Wojacek called the lyrical persona of his poems.

2 One Dawn, Two Evenings: Czesław Miłosz and Ai Qing

Ai Czing [Ai Qing]: Considered the most outstanding among the poets who emerged during the recent Sino-Japanese War. He comes from the south (Guangdong). Before the war, he studied painting in France. He lives in North China. A poet who evinces strong popular-patriotic tendencies. It was difficult for me to collect more comprehensive information about him.⁶

So wrote Czesław Miłosz in the 1940s in a brief introduction to his translations from modern Chinese poets, among whom Ai Qing was rendered most extensively. Miłosz included his three long poems: "Trumpeter" (吹号者 / Trębacz,

⁶ Miłosz 2005b: 190, trans. J K.

written in 1939), “He Died for the Second Time” (他死者第二次 / *Człowiek, który umarł drugi raz*, 1939), and “A Notice from the Dawn” (黎明的通知 / *Inwokacja do świtu*, 1942).

Although Czesław Miłosz did not know much of Ai Qing, he probably recognized in his poems a similar kind of sensibility and similar concerns to his own. At roughly around the same time, Miłosz was also working on translations of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (*Pieśni o sobie samym*) and “Dirge for Two Veterans” (*Pieśń dla poległych*), whose echoes can be heard in Ai Qing’s “Trumpeter.” The American poet was a great inspiration for Miłosz and Ai Qing alike as one of the first authors who aspired to become a “poet of the people,” a postulate crucial for both of them at the time.⁷ On top of that, in the same period of 1946–1950, Miłosz avidly read and translated many of the works of Pablo Neruda, who would become important to Ai Qing as well, especially in the 1950s: in 1954–1956, after his visit to Chile to celebrate Neruda’s birthday, Ai Qing wrote a long poem “On Cape Horn in Chile: For Pablo Neruda (在智利的海岬上—给巴勃罗·聂鲁达)” in which one can find allusions to poems translated by Miłosz in the 1940s. Neruda, too, visited China to meet “the Prince of Chinese Poets,” as he called Ai Qing, in 1949 and 1957. During the second of these trips, the Anti-Rightist Movement broke out and Ai Qing was denounced, so he could not see his guest off.⁸

Among Czesław Miłosz’s earlier translations from the 1930s, a central position is occupied by his uncle Oskar Miłosz, who lived in emigration and was a recognized French-language Symbolist author. Miłosz first visited his uncle in Paris in 1931. That same year, Ai Qing was in France, too, studying in Paris from 1929 to 1932.⁹ He was taking French classes from a Polish young woman, who, according to his son Ai Weiwei 艾未未, today a world-famous artist, was the first “member of the opposite sex,” with whom he “had a soul-to-soul exchange.”¹⁰ This coincidence, however, is far less important to Czesław Miłosz’s and Ai Qing’s artistic affinities than the fact that Oskar Miłosz was part of the same artistic circle as Guillaume Apollinaire,¹¹ another author of Polish descent. Apollinaire was an essential figure in Ai Qing’s early poetry. Czesław Miłosz, too, read him widely; Arent van Nieuwerkerken notes that Miłosz’s

7 On Whitmanian inspirations in Miłosz, see van Nieuwerkerken 2012a; Skwara 2004. For a discussion on Ai Qing’s connections to Whitman’s poetics, see Huang Guiyou 1997, 1998.

8 Wei Teng 2018: 176–179; Feinstein 2004: 31–313; Huang Guiyou 1997: 138–139.

9 For Ai Qing’s stay in France, see, e.g., Yang and Yang 1984, chapter 3; Xu Gang 1994, chapter 2; Cheng Guangwei 2015, chapter 3.

10 Ai Weiwei 2021: 33.

11 Miłosz 2001: 39.

reception of Symbolism was filtered through Apollinaire,¹² although, arguably, the influence of his uncle Oskar was stronger; suffice it to say that his better-known nephew devoted a large part of his Nobel lecture in 1980 to him.

It is during his stay in France that Ai Qing, then a promising painter, became interested in poetry. Besides Apollinaire, he read a lot of Arthur Rimbaud, the Flemish poet Emilé Verhaeren, and the Russians Sergei Yesenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Miłosz was obviously familiar with all of them, too, though only Mayakovsky's work had any demonstrable impact on his own writing in the 1920s and 1930s; he would later speak of this impact with shame as a blind juvenile fascination.¹³

After his return to China, Ai Qing engaged in the cultural activities of leftist artists in Shanghai. In July 1932, during one meeting in which they studied Esperanto, the police appeared and arrested five of them, including Ai Qing, for harboring radical thoughts.¹⁴ In prison, Ai Qing organized open protests and hunger strikes against the poor treatment of prisoners. In 1933, he wrote one of his most cosmopolitan poems, "Mirliton" (芦笛), dedicated to Apollinaire with explicit allusions to poems from *Alcool*. Mirliton in Ai Qing's work becomes a metonym for the poetry that made him a criminal in the eyes of the nationalist authorities. Recalling his years in Paris, the author identifies himself with Apollinaire, writing:

Prince Apollinaire
 you are not only a Pole, because
 in my eyes
 you are a story reverberating on Montmartre,
 tediously long,
 puzzling,
 a purple story spat out
 by Magritte's trembling mouth
 covered with faded rouge.

你不仅是个波兰人，
 因为你
 在我的眼里，
 真是一节流传在蒙马特的故事，
 那冗长的，

12 van Nieuwerkerken 2011: 39.

13 Miłosz 2001: 141.

14 Hung 1986: 22.

感人的，
由玛格丽特震颤的褪了脂粉的唇边
吐出的堇色的故事。¹⁵

Based on his reading interests and the above excerpt, the common opinion of Ai Qing as the greatest individualist among Chinese prewar modernists is probably true and he, similarly to Miłosz, did not seem exactly to be a propaganda writer. How is it then that the same literary impulses and inspirations that pushed Miłosz to pursue full-blooded poetry which bluntly and uncompromisingly penetrates various spheres of physical and metaphysical reality, in Ai Qing's writing somehow lost their impetus and finally died down?

Part of the answer lies in their specific life experiences, personalities, and worldviews shaped by specific social-political backgrounds, which we will examine in the following passages. Although one can identify in their respective biographies many astonishing tangential points, each of these tangential points in fact reveals more profound dissimilarities between the two poets. These personal differences make their poetics increasingly diverge and determine their radically different reception on their respective poetry scenes, as we will observe in the second part of this section. One crucial factor was their differing understanding of the relationship between individual artistic singularity and historical responsibility. To Miłosz, these two, although perceived as equally important, stood in a stark conflict that he struggled to overcome for more than seventy years of his life as a poet. This conflict both kept his large ego in check and guaranteed the rare dynamic of his poetry. To Ai Qing, individuality and responsibility were, from the beginning, near-synonymous notions: "I am not singular / I am a sum," these words from "Listen, There Is a Voice" (听, 有一个声音), discussed in this chapter, perhaps best describing his attitude. The identification of the self with the collective resulted in the expansion of the self on the one hand, and the withering of the existential source of his verse on the other.

2.1 *Individuality and Responsibility*

In the late 1940s, when Miłosz was translating Ai Qing, both poets were already recognized authors associated with communist governments and appreciated by state authorities. Miłosz was a cultural attaché in the Polish embassy in Paris, and Ai Qing, having joined the Chinese Communist Party, worked as a teacher at the North China United University launched by CCP. At the same time, both were regularly rebuked for their excessively individualistic attitudes. While Ai

¹⁵ Ai Qing 2018: 7–8, trans. J K.

Qing accepted this with humility, patiently submitting self-criticisms and correcting his standpoint, for Miłosz it was a source of growing frustration, which he was not able, and did not want, to contain.

Ai Qing's fascination with communist ideology dates back to his early youth and was arguably deeper than Miłosz's, perhaps because of the specific socio-moral landscape in which he was raised. The world of his youth was clearly divided between the two opposing forces of nationalism and communism, with little space for an individual to remain somewhere in-between or beyond their scope of action. Born in 1910 into a relatively well-to-do family,¹⁶ Ai Qing was introduced as early as in secondary school to the postulates of the 1919 May Fourth Movement and grew up absorbing the artistic and political ideas of the great reformers of culture. As a fourteen-year-old, he wrote an essay titled "Each Epoch Has Its Own Literature" (一个时代有一个时代的文学) in which he cited Lu Xun 鲁迅 and Hu Shi 胡适 arguing against the use of classical Chinese in writing. The teacher scolded him that his knowledge and understanding were partial and the words of the two reformers should not be taken as "golden laws and precious rules" (金科玉律), but Ai Qing did not take his comment to heart and crossed it out in red instead.¹⁷ It was also at secondary school that he became familiar with Marxist historical materialism, which fueled his enthusiasm for anti-imperialist and antifeudalist struggle. In 1927, after graduation, inspired by the march of the National Revolutionary Army intended to overthrow the dictatorship of Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 and unite China, he planned to enroll in the Huangpu Military Academy, but his father opposed. Thus, instead of a military career, Ai Qing chose an artistic path and joined the Xihu Academy of Fine Arts. Encouraged by one of his mentors, who recognized Ai Qing's talent and advised him to leave China to pursuit better education, he decided to try his luck in France.¹⁸

Ai Qing's foreign experience did not change his way of thinking, which was already largely shaped by his early readings and friendships; on the contrary, it reinforced his revolutionary zeal and stirred patriotic sentiments. From his later writings one can see that he tended to read Western literature in a revolutionary way, whereas Christianity, whose hierarchies underlie this literary tradition, appeared to him as a revolutionary religion, to which his 1933 poem "The Death of a Nazarian" (一个拿撒勒人的死) narrating Jesus's passion with the use of impressionistic techniques bears some evidence.¹⁹ In a

16 A lively account of Ai Qing's early life is found in Cheng Guangwei 2015, chapter 1.

17 Yang and Yang 1984: 25.

18 Hung 1986: 13–16.

19 Ai Qing 2018: 10.

commemorative essay, Yu Jian says of Ai Qing that, like many young intellectuals at the time, he followed Lu Xun's doctrine of "grabism" (拿来主义), which encouraged Chinese people to borrow what they found useful from other countries in order to advance the reform and development of their own homeland. Yet, unlike others, writes Yu, referring to the above-quoted prison poem,

[Ai Qing] did not take back his own Renault or coffee from Europe. He brought a mirliton, a sort of "homesickness."

Big cities don't have mirliton, big cities are dandies who can't hear mirliton. Grabism allowed Ai Qing to return to his homeland and learn it anew.²⁰

The Japanese invasion of China in 1931, followed by the Shanghai Incident in 1932, a subsequent treatise signed by the nationalist government in Shanghai, and Ai Qing's own imprisonment, further deepened his resentment of rightist ideologies and led him to pin his hopes entirely on communism. One personal event that took place during Ai Qing's imprisonment should be invoked here as a symbolic moment in the transformation of his identity marked simultaneously by his birth to poethood and his beginning as a new socialist man, to use the infamous propaganda concept. Ai Qing's proper name was Jiang Zhenghan 蒋正涵; he shared the family name with Jiang Jieshi (蒋介石, Chiang Kai-shek), the leader of the nationalists. The poet hated this surname to such an extent that he replaced the phonetic element 将 with 义, which resembles X, as if crossing out the old name, leaving only the radical 艹 ("grass") from the original character. "Qing" was reportedly added as a given name, because it sounded good with "Ai." The first work written under the pseudonym Ai Qing, and the first that earned him considerable critical acclaim, was "My Wet Nurse, Da Yanhe" (大堰河—我的保姆). The poem was devoted to his nanny, a simple woman who had brought him up as his parents were not willing to give sufficient time and attention to their son. The text was smuggled out by a lawyer who had visited Ai Qing in prison and it was subsequently published in the journal *Spring Light* (春光).

Released from prison in 1936, during the Sino-Japanese War that broke out the following year Ai Qing wrote a number of anti-Japanese poems, many with allusions to the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, and others that praised the heroic deeds of the Chinese army. Yet he also wrote many brighter symbolic works—featuring, for example, dialogues with the sun and the dawn—that testify to his persistent faith in the victory of the revolution. After several years of wandering,

²⁰ Yu Jian 2018, trans. J.K.

in 1942 he settled in Yan'an, the political and cultural center of Chinese communism at the time. He took part in the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts at which Mao Zedong announced his theses concerning the role of culture in a socialist state: special focus on the needs of the masses, following the aesthetics of Soviet socialist realism, fighting bourgeois mentality and tastes, active engagement in the goals of the revolution, loyalty to the political line of the Communist Party, and so forth.²¹ Ai Qing, supported by Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), tried to negotiate a more liberal policy and greater freedom for artists. Mao, who respected his opinions, even asked him for individual consultations. After their conversation, Ai Qing made some corrections to his proposal to make it fit better with Mao's program, but eventually his views were rejected and he found himself distrusted by the more radical members of the Writers' Association for questioning the official stand of the Party. After several years of teaching in Yan'an and rebuilding his reputation as a good communist, he was assigned to work at a newly established China United University in Kalgan and later to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing as the military representative.²²

Czesław Miłosz²³ was one year younger than Ai Qing. Born in 1911 into a Polish aristocratic family in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire, he grew up in a multicultural and multilingual environment. At home the family spoke Polish but read in Russian and French. Miłosz's happy childhood was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I in 1914, when his father, an engineer, was assigned to work for the Russian army. For four years, together with his mother and brother, Miłosz followed him to various remote places in Russia. After this dramatic period, the family settled in the native village of Miłosz's mother, which the poet later described in his semiautobiographical novel *The Issa Valley* (*Dolina Issy*, 1955), portraying it as a near-paradise. In 1920, the changing political circumstances forced them to relocate to Vilnius, a melting pot of different nationalities. The most numerous among them were Poles, who considered Vilnius their city. There, Miłosz attended high school and studied law at Stefan Batory University. As a student, he engaged in the academic literary community and started publishing his poems in the journal *Alma Mater Vilniensis*. Akin to Ai Qing, who after his return to China engaged in various intellectual and artistic initiatives with a penchant for socialism, in

21 Mao 1942.

22 The biographical information included in this and the previous paragraph comes from Hung 1984: 43–45.

23 Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information on Miłosz in the present chapter comes from Franaszek 2011. Interpretations of all invoked poems are mine.

1931, together with several friends, he coestablished a literary society named Żagary. The group was considered part of the Vilnius Avant-Garde School, characterized by leftist sympathies, antifascism, intellectualism, and catastrophism which stemmed from their common conviction of the unavoidable “Apocalypse.” Miłosz’s first poetry collection, *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy*, 1936), reflects these pessimistic moods.

The Apocalypse came, indeed, and brought the end of the world of his youth. During World War II, after a failed attempt to join the army—another resonance between his and Ai Qing’s biography—Miłosz worked at the University Library in Warsaw and actively participated in underground literary life. After the war, in 1945, he published his wartime poetry in the collection *Rescue* (*Ocalenie*).

If we juxtapose Miłosz’s and Ai Qing’s wartime and early postwar poetry, we will find many overlapping concerns and topics elaborated on with the use of similar motifs and master tropes. For example, Ai Qing’s “Notice from the Dawn,” translated by Miłosz into Polish, may be read together with his own “Gate of the Morning” (*Brama poranku*). Both poems are literary records of the authors’ metaphysical “anointment” to preach a new life to the people. Ai Qing’s “Trumpeter,” which tells of a trumpet player whose music seems to echo on the battlefield long after his heroic death, might be paired with Miłosz’s “City” (*Miasto*), where the central figure is a busker playing a violin on the ruins of Warsaw to “empty windows” (*puste okna*) and “stairs without home” (*schody bez domu*) in “the most beautiful among illusionary cities, / and the saddest among the real” (*najpiękniejsze z urojonych miast / I najsmutniejsze z prawdziwych*).²⁴ These two images can be interpreted as the poets’ reflection on their own roles as witnesses of truth and guards of justice.

But Miłosz had doubts. Raised in multicultural Lithuania, where both brutal conflicts and heroic acts of mutual support between different nationalities occurred on a daily basis, he was unable to see the world in black and white. Ai Qing had a clear view on who the enemy was and this negative feeling was something that determined his early choices perhaps to a greater extent than his positive feelings toward communists did; Miłosz saw guilt on both sides of the front: Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and everywhere in-between, himself included. In “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” (*Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto*), one of his most controversial poems, which has often been

24 Miłosz 2011: 163, trans. J.K.

interpreted as blaming the Poles for the Holocaust,²⁵ we see him struggling with irrational remorse, embodied as a mysterious guardian mole:

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who has sat much in the light of candles
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.

Translated by CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ and ROBERT HASS²⁶

Boję się, tak się boję strażnika-kreta.
Jego powieka obrzmiała jak u patriarchy,
Który siadywał dużo w blasku świateł
Czytając wielką księgę gatunku.

Cóż powiem mu, ja, Żyd Nowego Testamentu,
Czekający od dwóch tysięcy lat na powrót Jezusa?
Moje rozbite ciało wyda mnie jego spojrzeniu
I policzy mnie między pomocników śmierci:
Nieobrzezanych.²⁷

In “The Poor Poet” (Biedny poeta), in turn, he accuses himself of cynical hope:

Some take refuge in despair, which is sweet
Like strong tobacco, like a glass of vodka drunk in the hour of annihilation.
Others have the hope of fools, rosy as erotic dreams.

25 In 1987 Jan Błoński published an essay, “Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” (Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto), in which he revisited the problem of Polish antisemitism, extensively quoting from Miłosz’s “Campo di Fiori” and “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto.” Błoński’s piece is very balanced and nuanced, but it nevertheless provoked a heated discussion in Poland (Błoński 1987).

26 Miłosz 2005a: 63–64.

27 Miłosz 2011: 211–212.

Still others find peace in the idolatry of country,
Which can last for a long time,
Although little longer than the nineteenth century lasts.

But to me a cynical hope is given,
For since I opened my eyes I have seen only the glow of fires, massacres,
Only injustice, humiliation, and the laughable shame of braggarts.
To me is given the hope of revenge on others and on myself,
For I was he who knew
And took from it no profit for myself.

Translated by CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ AND ROBERT HASS²⁸

Jedni chronią się w rozpacz, która jest słodka
Jak mocny tytoń, jak szklanka wódki wypita w godzinie zatraty.
Inni mają nadzieję głupich, różową jak erotyczny sen.

Jeszcze inni znajdują spokój w bałwochwalstwie ojczyzny,
Które może trwać długo,
Chociaż niewiele dłużej, niż trwa jeszcze dziewiętnasty wiek.

Ale mnie dana jest nadzieja cyniczna,
Bo odkąd otworzyłem oczy, nie widziałem nic prócz łun i rzezi,
Prócz krzywdy, poniżenia i śmiesznej hańby pyszałków.
Dana mi jest nadzieja zemsty na innych i na sobie samym,
Gdyż byłem tym, który wiedział
I żadnej z tego dla siebie nie czerpał korzyści.²⁹

Someone who is so deeply entangled in internal conflicts and distrustful even of himself is conceivably not a good candidate to be a priest of ideology. Contrary to Ai Qing, Miłosz did not accept the arrangements of the Polish counterpart of the Yan'an Forum, that is the Polish Writers Association's Fourth Congress in Szczecin in 1949, when socialist realism became officially established as the new cultural policy in the country. In 1950, in response to its arrangements, he wrote a long article called "NO" (NIE), printed in 1951 in Giedroyć's *Culture* in Paris. In the text, he announced his severance of ties with the communist state even though this "meant a suicide as a writer" and explained the reasons behind his decision. Socialist realism, he claimed, is a self-evident lie. It requires

28 Miłosz 2005a: 59–60.

29 Miłosz 2011: 208–209.

authors to present a mundane reality as a near-paradise. To accept such a lie, a writer must either learn the art of self-cheating or be a true believer of the New Faith (Nowa Wiara) and acknowledge and justify the lie as a temporary means to a greater end, that is, the final victory of communism and the salvation of humankind. Miłosz could neither fanatically believe nor cheat himself. Calling himself a pagan, he concluded:

But the most unbearable is to think about all those people who, staying outside the territory of the empire of New Faith, still believe and still have hope. About writers who are convinced that they cannot dispel the illusions of the proletarians, about barefoot, illiterate paupers who know that they were wronged, and they yearn for the light from the East; about those who suffer in prisons for the light to come true. It seems that being a pagan, one has a greater responsibility than being a follower of the New Faith, who is discharged of the weight of reflection by the authority.³⁰

As the first step toward fulfilling this “pagan responsibility,” in 1951 Miłosz wrote *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł*, published in 1953). The book is a collection of nine mutually interconnected essays in which he tries to explain the mechanisms of the intellectual’s gradual submission to the New Faith after swallowing Murti-Bing Pills—a cure against independent thinking and a side effect of which is a split personality. Using the pseudonyms Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta, he portrays four Polish authors who display different reactions to Murti-Bing. The second of these accounts, “Beta: The Disappointed Lover,” which tells the story of Tadeusz Borowski (1922–1951), the only one of the four protagonists who really believed in the New Faith as an antidote against the evil he witnessed in concentration camps, is reminiscent of the case of Ai Qing. But, unlike Ai Qing, Borowski, a phenomenal talent, after several years of loyal service to the Communist Party, experienced a profound disenchantment. In 1951, following the example of his—and Ai Qing’s—great idol Mayakovsky, he took his own life.

It would not be fair to say that Ai Qing had no objections to the Party line, but he certainly did not find verse an appropriate medium to share his doubts with the world. He was convinced that poetry should be straightforward and unite the nation rather than divide it. It was only in 1956, when Mao Zedong launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign encouraging intellectuals to express their views on the government’s politics, that Ai Qing took what he believed to be a great opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with the situation of

³⁰ Miłosz 1951, trans. J.K.

writers. But then the wind changed again; his well-meant criticism was turned against him, making him a target of the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, and later the Cultural Revolution. For twenty-one years, Ai Qing and his family moved from place to place, mostly in the Xinjiang area, doing various menial jobs and suffering poverty, with Ai Qing banned from publishing his poetry.

Ai Qing had every reason to think that he was betrayed by the Communist Party. Yet, when the opportunity arose, in 1978, he returned on the poetry and political stage as red as in the 1950s, with a new poem, “Red Flag” (红旗), followed by a number of other publications, which helped him rise to prominence once again. He regained his Party membership, public acclaim, and popularity among poets from his generation. In 1979, he received the largest number of votes in the election of the Fourth National Committee of the Federation of Chinese Literary and Art Circles and was appointed a vice-chairman of the Association of Chinese Writers. He also began to travel abroad for conferences and seminars.³¹ Whether this was the return of an idealist who realized that the time was ripe to put his long-nurtured vision of a better world and better literature into practice, or, conversely, the return of a man who finally learned how to play the political game and wanted to reap the benefits from the Party’s sudden interest in him, is a question that perhaps only Ai Qing himself could answer. I will not pass judgment, but one thing is certain: he reentered the poetry scene with renewed energy and ambition to play first fiddle in literary life and was not prepared to share the stage with the new, younger poets.

Ai Qing’s return to the Chinese poetry scene roughly coincides with Miłosz’s return to the Polish one. The three decades between publishing “NO” in 1951 and being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980 appear to have been a successful and artistically fruitful period in Miłosz’s life, but it was certainly not an easy time for the poet. He published several poetry books—*Daylight* (*Światło dzienne*, 1953), *A Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki*, 1957), *King Popiel and Other Poems* (*Król Popiel i inne wiersze*, 1962), *Bobo’s Metamorphosis* (*Gucio zaczarowany*, 1965), *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969), and *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets* (*Gdzie słońce wschodzi i kędy zapada*, 1974)—and a number of essay collections, including philosophical, literary-critical, and autobiographical volumes. Nonetheless, in terms of individual recognition, winning the “small Nobel” (i.e., the Neustadt International Prize) in 1978 and the “big” (actual) Nobel Prize in 1980 were in fact his first really significant successes as an author that ensured him a broader readership.

31 Hung 1986: 74–77.

After his break with the communist government, Miłosz's books were banned in Poland, and the poet himself became an unwelcome guest in his homeland. He lived and wrote mostly in France and the US, and was published by Giedroyc in Paris. His works reached Polish audiences only by unofficial channels and were spread in "second circulation" as *tamizdat*. In the West, in turn, as Clare Cavanagh notes, he was recognized first and foremost as a translator of Polish verse which he collected in a 1965 anthology, *Polish Postwar Poetry*;³² with this book, he introduced the English-speaking world to authors such as Zbigniew Herbert, Adam Zagajewski, Anna Świrszczyńska (Anna Swir), Tadeusz Różewicz, Wisława Szymborska, and many others. Commenting on this anthology and its impact on American poetry, Mira Rosenthal speaks of "Miłosz's Polish School of Poetry in English Translation." Miłosz, she argues, laid the foundations of the international canon of Polish poetry. At the same time, his translational work contributed to the rethinking of American poetry, which Rosenthal frames in Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. She notes that Polish poetry became popular in America at a turning point in the history of American poetry; this is one of those cases, in Even-Zohar's conception, when translated literature assumes a higher position in a country's literary discourse than the country's own literature.

The role of the poet writing in Polish, then, was imperative for the preservation of the nation; the poet was seen as a key contributor to national language and consciousness. Miłosz's insistence on the importance of a poet's self-image in relation to society—and the very fact that he assumed such a relationship necessarily existed—aided American poets' revolt against the conformity of the 1950s and the poetry of internalization within the self. Polish poetry in particular and translated literature in general provided other models from which American poets could build a different self-image and realize the full implications of postwar social criticism.³³

From the perspective of the American audience, Miłosz was a witness who testified to the miseries of his country, which he, ironically, had not visited for years and was perceived as a traitor by the communist government and part of the opposition alike. But he was bearing his paradoxical testimony, with many doubts and inner struggles, forced to sacrifice individualist ambitions. Torn between the love for beauty and a feeling of responsibility, he was haunted by

32 Cavanagh 2009: 241.

33 Rosenthal 2011: 226.

his Manichean demons and by Daimonion who offered inspiration but asked for his soul in return, as in “Ars Poetica?” (1968), which contains his artistic credo:

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
and would let us understand each other without exposing
the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion,
though it's an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel.
It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from,
when so often they're put to shame by the disclosure of their frailty.

What reasonable man would like to be a city of demons,
who behave as if they were at home, speak in many tongues,
and who, not satisfied with stealing his lips or hand,
work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

[...]

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

Translated by CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ AND LILLIAN VALLEE³⁴

Zawsze tęskniłem do formy bardziej pojemnej,
która nie byłaby zanadto poezją ani zanadto prozą
i pozwoliłaby się porozumieć nie narażając nikogo,
autora ni czytelnika, na męki wyższego rzędu.

W samej istocie poezji jest coś nieprzystojnego:
powstaje z nas rzecz, o której nie wiedzieliśmy, że w nas jest,
więc mrugamy oczami, jakby wyskoczył z nas tygrys
i stał w świetle, ogonem bijąc się po bokach.

Dlatego słusznie się mówi, że dyktuje poezję dajmonion,
choć przesadza się utrzymując, że jest na pewno aniołem.
Trudno pojąć skąd się bierze ta duma poetów
jeżeli wstyd im nieraz, że widać ich słabość.

Jaki rozumny człowiek zechce być państwem demonów,
które rządzą się w nim jak u siebie, przemawiają mnóstwem języków,
a jakby nie dosyć im było skraść jego usta i rękę
próbują dla swojej wygody zmieniać jego los?

[...]

Ten pożytek z poezji, że nam przypomina
jak trudno jest pozostać tą samą osobą,
bo dom nasz jest otwarty, we drzwiach nie ma klucza
a niewidzialni goście wchodzą i wychodzą.

Co tutaj opowiadam, poezją, zgoda, nie jest.
Bo wiersze wolno pisać rzadko i niechętnie,
pod nieznośnym przymusem i tylko z nadzieją,
że dobre, nie złe duchy, mają w nas instrument.³⁵

It was only after he won the Nobel Prize in 1980 that Miłosz's work began to be revisited by foreign readers and approached with a greater attention to its artistic quality and philosophical depth. It was also then that it was officially introduced to a broader audience in Poland, since the Polish authorities could no longer pretend that Miłosz had disappeared. The first collection published in his homeland with the permission of the government was *The Hymn of a Pearl* (*Hymn o perle*, 1982)—a syncretic metaphysical reflection on human life

35 Miłosz 2011: 588–589.

composed of works inspired by, or being free adaptations of, various religious and philosophical writings from the Christian tradition and from Eastern contemplative verse. This was followed by the publication of his other, formerly banned books. Since then Miłosz's poetry, and Miłosz himself, even if "reluctantly" and "under unbearable duress," has played an ever-important role in the social-political life of his nation, becoming—along with figures such as Lech Wałęsa and John Paul II—one of the key pillars of Polish freedom. As with his erstwhile paradoxical witnesshood in the eyes of the West, this role too may strike one as a paradox, taking into account the character of Miłosz's poetry, in which works directly addressing social-political topics could be counted on one hand. It was, rather, the power and independence of his singular voice that proved to be the most powerful weapon against totalitarian narratives.

In 1987 and 1988, Ai Qing, too, was proposed for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The proposal to the Academy was undersigned mostly by authors representing the first wave of Chinese modernism, including Bing Xin 冰心 (1900–1999), Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905–1993), Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000), and Yuan Kejia 袁可嘉 (1921–2008). Written by Ai Qing's biographer Zhou Hongxing 周红兴, the letter opened as follows:

The life of the poet Ai Qing is intimately linked to the History of China, to his hopes for the Nation and to the future of Mankind. He has said that: *"Our personal life, with its joys and pains, must be in harmony with the lives of others and with the social movements which arise in China"*.

Like many other great poets, he mingles with the workers to try to catch their rhythm, remaining at all times at the centre of social movements. His suggestions and responses are always astute.

In all his wisdom, Ai Qing is himself a reflection of the profound transformations which have taken place during more than half a century of Chinese and world History.

The poet believes that poetry is an "arduous task", we could almost say "suffering". In the early thirties he declared that *"I suffered in my capacity as a poet and in my responsibility towards society"* but that *"even so, I was to continue"*.

His maxims for life (to be honest) and for work (a poet must speak the truth), as simple as they are sincere, accurately reflect his character.³⁶

One can speculate whether Ai Qing winning the Nobel Prize would have changed the history of China as Miłosz's Nobel helped change the history of

36 Instituto Cultural de Macau 1988: 33, quote-italics in the original.

Poland. Would the prize have strengthened the national political system or, on the contrary, weakened it, assuming that the Nobel Committee in its justification of the award would have probably underscored the antitotalitarian aspect of Ai Qing's writings and not his contribution to the spreading of socialism? Could it have prevented the Tiananmen massacre? Maybe instead of student leaders at Tiananmen Square, the reform movement would have centered around Ai Qing, to whom, as we learn for example from his series of essays *On Poetry* (诗论) from the 1980s and public speeches from the early 1990s,³⁷ the idea of democracy was not entirely strange? Perhaps, given that Ai Qing was respected by the Chinese authorities, he might have managed to achieve what he had failed to achieve in Yan'an in the 1940s, that is, to negotiate a greater artistic, and social, freedom? Probably not, if only because at the time he no longer had the energy and physical and mental strength to assume such a role. After 1990, he spent a large part of his time in hospitals; in addition to life-threatening ailments, his eyesight was deteriorating and he could no longer read and write.³⁸ But even if him winning the Nobel could indeed have had such a positive effect, does this actually mean that he should have won? Is being "linked to History," "suffering in [one's] capacity as a poet," and "in [one's] responsibility towards society" a sufficient criterion of artistic greatness?

2.2 *Ai Qing: Artistic Suicide by Sickle and Hammer?*

In his long essay "Who Fixed 'Master' Ai Qing" (谁修理了“大师”艾青), published in the collection *Criticizing Ten Poets* (十诗人批判书) edited by Yi Sha 伊沙 (b. 1966), the poet Xu Jiang 徐江 (b. 1967), founder and editor of the avant-garde journal *Sunflowers* (葵), recalls his visit to Ai Qing's home in 1989, together with Yi Sha and Zhong Dao 中岛:

It was in 1989. I and Yi Sha joined Harbin poet Zhong Dao, who wanted to visit Ai Qing in his mansion in Beijing Fengshou Hutong. At the time, I used to entirely abandon myself in twentieth-century foreign literature; little did I know of the history of modern [Chinese] poetry and I was not familiar with historical anecdotes. Unlike Yi Sha and others, I was not aware of Ai Qing's high position on Chinese literary scene. [...] Yi Sha has already included a detailed account of this visit in his essay "Calling on Ai Qing" (拜见艾青), so there's no point repeating everything. But I wish to add several small things that remained profoundly carved in my memory.

First, he spoke sluggishly, with a southern accent, his voice sounding kindly. With a grave seriousness, he asked whether Zhong Dao was Bei

37 Jiang and Li 2015.

38 On the last years of Ai Qing's life, see Cheng Guangwei 2015, chapter 9.

Dao; then he informed us that Bei Dao's real name is Zhao Zhenkai 赵振开 and that [in the past] he had been a frequent guest in Ai Qing's home, but after some time did not appear anymore. One could feel his sense of humor and inner delight. I had no idea that six years earlier the old man had engaged in some polemic with the Obscure poets. When I think of it now, I do realize that Ai Qing's confession that "I have never been in his (i.e., Bei Dao's) house" in fact expressed his deep solitude. Then, however, I did not have such an impression. I was only a little bit surprised that the established poet was not as impassioned as I imagined, and that poets, too, age!³⁹

This excerpt quite accurately reflects the attitude of a large part of the Third Generation and younger poets toward Ai Qing in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although his poetry, and the polemic mentioned by Xu Jiang, still generates huge amounts of academic papers and dissertations,⁴⁰ avant-garde authors, by and large, appear to have been rather indifferent to the work of this "master"—the word is consistently placed in scare quotes in Xu's essay—from the textbooks. This attitude would be perhaps best described as forgiving, lenient infantilization, similar to the patronizing style in which Ai Qing treated Obscure authors in his polemical essays from the early 1980s. In the introductory section of his piece, Xu cites the Sichuan poet Zhong Ming 钟鸣 (b. 1953) who put the thing more brutally: discussing Ai Qing's early work, he called him "an enthusiastic little bird not particularly gifted with intelligence" (有点智力不高的热情的小鸟).⁴¹ From the perspective of literary-historical prestige, this is even more humiliating for an old poet than being overthrown in some spectacular intergenerational coup d'état.

Unlike Yi Sha's laconically sarcastic piece "Calling on Ai Qing," included in a collection under a self-explanatory title *Desecrating Idols* (亵渎偶像, 1999), Xu Jiang's essay offers an elaborate analysis of Ai Qing's role in the development of Chinese New Poetry, albeit not without ironic suggestions either. Based on his prewar achievements, Xu reserves a place for Ai Qing among the four most important authors, along with Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), Ji Xian 纪弦 (1913–2013, a modernist poet who settled in Taiwan in 1948 and became

39 Xu Jiang 2001: 60, trans. J K.

40 For example, a search of the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database for papers published in 2019–2020 containing Ai Qing's name in the title reveals seven results: Ma Zhengfeng 2020; Wang Xinyuan 2019; Zhou and Bao 2019; Gao Yuanbao 2019; Jiang Xia 2019; Song Ninggang 2019; Ding Xiaoni 2019. Academic dissertations on Ai Qing include Zhang Jing 2018; Liu Lu 2017; Li Guodong 2016; Li Yan 2015; Yin Yanjia 2014; Zhang Feifei 2014; Liang Dongyan 2013; Chen Xuan 2013; Li Ren 2011.

41 Xu Jiang 2001: 58, trans. J K.

a founding father of the Taiwan poetry scene), and Bei Dao. Subsequently, he goes on to reflect on the reasons for what he perceives as Ai Qing's artistic decline in his middle-age and late poetry and, based on this, tries to answer a more general question, namely why Chinese poetry has never birthed a world-class great master:

From a series of outstanding works to the mediocrity of senile poetry—who, in the past century, managed to revise our contemporary literary “masters,” their early brilliance, their invigorating, high-spirited writing? Who, or what, fixed the master of our national poetry, Ai Qing, from under whose pen masterpieces followed one after another? Who, or what, remolded him into a language actor who spends most of his time indulging in hymn-like “lyric poetry” and neither-fish-nor-fowl “narrative poetry”?

I believe these problems remain valid today. Not only because they belong in the domain of literature, but also because the contemporary poetry scene can draw important conclusions and warnings from them.⁴²

Xu Jiang ascribes Ai Qing's failure to his artistic naivety and lack of solid literary education, resulting in his misunderstanding of poetic craft. His poetry was “innocent, simple, unrestrained,”⁴³ which explains, among other things, a large number of “disgusting poems” (臭诗)⁴⁴ in his oeuvre, expressing pure, unprocessed hate. The “master” had a “great passion for poetry, but lacked respect and self-restraint,” claims Xu. To demonstrate this, he quotes several statements from Ai Qing's critical writings, laying bare what he describes as their “idealized color and kindergarten level” (理想化色彩和幼稚园水平).

In “On Poetry” (诗论) from the 1930s:

The meaning of the poet's actions rests in turning people's longings and desires into language. [...] Poetry should not only teach people how to feel, but also how to think.

In “To Launch a Street Poetry Movement” (开展街头诗运动) from the 1940s:

Send poets to the streets for poetry to turn into a daily need of every member of the society. If the masses don't need poetry, poetry has no future.

42 Ibidem: 59, trans. J K.

43 Ibidem: 69, trans. J K.

44 Ibidem: 63–71, trans. J K.

Finally, two excerpts from “Starting from Obscure Poetry” (从朦胧诗谈起), written in 1981:

In this world, there exist obscure things, there are many matters that we cannot see clearly, and many other that are difficult to understand. This is how Obscure poetry emerged.

[Obscure poets] are on a path of success, but they should be modest and careful, they should never be carried away by the flattering of those who speak of the “rising” (崛起论者) and bury themselves in writing poetry that no one understands. If you shoot blindly, a stray bullet may hurt someone.⁴⁵

It is self-evident that Ai Qing’s arguments against the Obscure poets miss the point if only because Obscure poetry did not emerge as a response to obscure, incomprehensible things in the world but was named so by critics who claimed it incomprehensible, and this label stuck to Bei Dao and others. Still, there is one problem with Xu’s assessment of Ai Qing as a naive idealist who simply could not catch up with the times. During the Cultural Revolution, Ai Qing and Bei Dao were friends despite the generation gap between them. Bei Dao for some time even lent a room to Ai Qing,⁴⁶ and Ai Qing’s wife recalled Bei Dao’s visits to their home when the two poets would constructively discuss literature and other matters. The “master” appreciated the “disciple’s” intelligence and depth of thinking, and the “disciple” would show his works to the “master” and avidly listen to his opinions.⁴⁷ Moreover, it is via Ai Qing that Bei Dao became acquainted with, for example, Shu Ting 舒婷 (b. 1952), another key figure of the Obscure school, whereas Ai Qing’s son, Ai Weiwei, took part in the production of *Today*; the journal launched by the Obscure poets was illustrated with his drawings.⁴⁸ Why, then, several years after the Cultural Revolution, with Ai Qing having managed to rebuild his reputation in literary and political circles, did he choose to challenge his young friends in public rather than continue the exchange of ideas and opinions in private, offering them well-intentioned comments? Why did he not use his privileges to protect his fellow poets?

45 All quotes from Xu Jiang 2001: 72–81, trans. J. K. Full text of “Starting from Obscure Poetry” is found in Ai Qing 1981.

46 Li Runxia 2005.

47 Cheng Guangwei 1999: 517–518.

48 Li Runxia 2005.

Ai Qing's argumentation from 1980, when he first criticized Bei Dao in the essay "Discussing Poetry with Young Poets" (与青年诗人谈诗) published in *Poetry Magazine* (诗刊), was based on literary-philosophical grounds. In the following three years, however, it evolved into a purely political criticism, which put the young authors in a particularly difficult position during the so-called "Eradicating Spiritual Pollution" (清除精神污染) campaign in 1983. It is all the more difficult to believe in Ai Qing's poetological motivations that, as Li Runxia 李润霞 reminds us, in 1981 the "master" praised Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950) for his "highly compressed poems" (高度压缩的诗歌), a technique he could not bear in Obscure verse. Li also cites the poet Cai Qijiao 蔡其矫 mentioning that after 1979, when Ai Qing could again enjoy various honors and privileges, he turned into an official who indulged in celebrating his power; Cai recalls that he had done a similar thing before, unfairly criticizing the work of He Qifang 何其芳 (1912–1977) in the late 1930s and putting him thus in political trouble.⁴⁹ On the other hand, one should not forget that in 1957 Ai Qing showed his solidarity with Ding Ling, which made him an object of attacks during the Anti-Rightist Movement.

Needless to say, there are voices, also among the Third Generation, that defend Ai Qing. One example is Zang Di 臧棣 (b. 1964), who is famous for his criticism of Bei Dao, and who finds an ally in Ai Qing. He basically agrees with Ai Qing's negative assessment of Obscure poetry, even if it was formulated in a clumsy way. In his view, Ai Qing in the 1940s was much better a poet than Bei Dao, and he had reasons to despise Bei Dao's work as the "leftovers of Symbolism that he himself had abandoned in the 1930s."⁵⁰ But Zang Di, too, admits that from the ethical point of view, to hold his tongue, especially in 1983, at the threshold of the government campaign, might have been a better choice than to attack younger poets. On the other hand, for similar reasons he suggests that it would be better if now, as Ai Qing has long since passed away, Bei Dao did not raise this issue again. Commenting on an interview in which Bei Dao, after three decades, recalled the "Obscure Poetry Debate" in the media, Zang Di notes:

Ai Qing passed away, and in general he has had no further impact on Bei Dao's poetic career. Therefore, if Bei Dao had a broad mind, or, if he had a brain at all, he wouldn't turn to the Chinese media, which he despises to the marrow of his bones, in order to raise this issue. What for? Squaring accounts after the autumn harvest (秋后算帐)? If this thing really had been like a heavy weight on his heart for many years that he could no

49 Ibidem.

50 Zang Di et al. 2011, trans. J K.

longer bear it, he could have written of it in detail in a recollecting essay. Then, he could have published it in the press, had he wished to do so. But mentioning it as if in passing, in a simple binary logic, given Bei Dao's current identity and position, was really unnecessary.⁵¹

At any rate, it is not unlikely, as Wang Junhu 王俊虎 argues, that it is the former friendship, although betrayed by Ai Qing, that prevented many Obscure poets from engaging in the polemic with him and leaving his charges unanswered in the 1980s. Wang also connects this reaction with “local culture” (地域文化). Beijingers, he claims, have great respect for older generations and are in general rather “steady and tolerant” (稳重与包容), and thus only unwillingly enter conflicts. This, in his view, may also help explain why the majority of those who reacted emotionally to Ai Qing's utterances were poets from the Guizhou-based “branch” of Obscure poetry (Guizhou people being supposedly more straightforward and emotional) that was centered around the unofficial journal *The Rising Generation* (崛起的一代). These included Huang Xiang 黄翔, Ya Mo 哑默, Fang Hua 方华, and Deng Wei 邓维.⁵² Their leader, Huang, in “To Ai Qing, the Leading Authority of China's Poetry Scene” (致中国诗坛泰斗—艾青) called Ai Qing a “historical remnant” (陈迹): “Old man, you are doddering, it's time to retire together with your glory and your epoch, don't insert yourself among us.”⁵³ Li Runxia speculates that Ai Qing's increasingly aggressive attacks on the Beijing-based Obscure poets might have been partly caused by his misinterpretation of the attitudes of the Guizhou-based authors, who—as he wrongly assumed—had been set on him by Bei Dao after the publication of Ai Qing's first critical paper in 1980. Perhaps the Guizhou authors saw the debate as a good opportunity to draw attention to their own work, which was largely overshadowed by the Beijing pioneers of the Obscure movement. On the other hand, some of them had also been disappointed with Ai Qing personally, in particular Fang Hua. Fang had written privately to Ai Qing and declared his admiration for his poems. Ai Qing later quoted the letter in an introduction to one of his collections without asking for Fang's permission and then inexplicably cut all ties with him.⁵⁴

All in all, however, the main reason for the gradual fading of Ai Qing's literary influence was arguably his poetry itself, which had lost its resonance and appeal with the younger generation of poets. The “we” that is so prominently foregrounded in his work had been crushed by a “historical steam-roller,” to

51 Ibidem.

52 Wang Junhu 2017: 81.

53 Quoted in Jiang and Li 2015: 167, trans. J. K.

54 Li Runxia 2005.

use Miłosz's phrase in his introduction to *Postwar Polish Poetry*,⁵⁵ and a new community needed to be built from the scattered individual "I"-s trying to work toward a better future. This is what Obscure poetry attempted to achieve, whether one considers the attempt artistically successful or not.

Ai Qing must have been aware of his image in the eyes of the young avant-garde poets. In his collection *The Song of Return* (归来的歌), there are many poems characterized by elevated rhetoric, such as "Ode to Light" (光的赞歌), which preaches communist enlightenment, or "Ancient Roman Colosseum" (罗马的大斗技场), Ai Qing's crusade against slavery in the contemporary world in which one can hear echoes of "The Internationale." One that arguably best characterizes his understanding of the role of the poet is "Listen, There Is a Voice." Its narrator, Zhang Zhixin 张志新 (1930–1975), a dissident executed during the Cultural Revolution and today worshiped as a heroine and revolutionary martyr, says:

I am not singular
 I am a sum
 all those slandered by you [plural]
 support me

I am we, and we are countless
 I am an embodiment of the countless
 I am one of the millions
 My name is Zhang Zhixin

[...]

The people are millions of mirrors
 and each of the mirrors follows in your footsteps
 reflecting your every movement
 reflecting your evil souls

[...]

People are millions of cameras
 and each of the cameras looks at you
 Judas's mouths
 jackal hearts

55 Miłosz 1983b: xi.

我不是一个单数
 我是一个总和
 所有被你们诬陷的
 都在拥护我

我是我们，我们是无数
 我是无数的化身
 我是千千万万的一员
 我叫张志新

[...]

人民是千千万万面镜子
 每面镜子都追踪者你们
 照见你们丑恶的灵魂

[...]

人民是千千万万个摄像机
 每个镜头都对准你们—
 犹太的嘴脸
 豺狼的心⁵⁶

This poem may invoke associations with Miłosz's "Ars Poetica?," where myriads of "invisible guests come and go at will," haunting the poet. However, whereas in Miłosz's poem the multiple voices constantly question one another, negotiating the identity of the individual who becomes a democratic "city of demons," in Ai Qing's poem they form two clear factions instead: "we" and "you" (plural). "We," albeit counted in millions, constitutes one homogenous mass body. Likewise, "you" is just a hostile anonymous mass of evil souls. His city of demons is populous, too, but it is not polyphonic like Miłosz's. The poet acts as its meritocratic leader, who wants to engage the specters in what he considers to be a just war.

Alongside the many pompous declarations in Ai Qing's post—Cultural Revolution output, there is also, however, one work in which the reader might sense a bitter self-directed irony. I am thinking of probably the best known of Ai Qing's late poems, "Fish Fossil," where he likely alludes to the love poem with the same title written by Bian Zhilin in 1936. In Bian's work, a woman says

56 Ai Qing 2018: 273, trans. J K.

to a man that they will be together until they turn into fish fossils. Her words may be interpreted in two ways: either as a promise of eternal love more powerful than death or, conversely, as a disenchanting reflection that a time will come when the two will be emptied of feelings and their hearts will harden. Ai Qing's poem, written forty years later, is less ambiguous and does not allow for an optimistic, romantic reading. The I-speaker's monologue addressed to the fossilized fish body is commonly interpreted as a metaphor for the historical experience of the Returners:

Fish Fossil

Moving so lively,
with such vigorous energy,
you used to leap in the foam
and swim in the sea.

Unfortunately, a volcano erupted
or perhaps the earth shook
taking away your freedom
and burying you in the mud.

After millions of years
a geological team
discovered you in rock layers
still looking alive.

But now you are silent,
without a single sigh.
Scales and fins are untouched
but cannot make you move.

In your motionlessness,
with no reaction to the world,
you cannot see the water or the sky,
you cannot hear the waves.

Staring at this fossil,
even a fool learns a lesson:
without movement
there is no life.

To live is to struggle
and advance in the struggle.
Until death arrives,
We should use our energy to the end.

《鱼化石》

动作多么活泼，
精力多么旺盛，
在浪花里跳跃，
在大海里浮沉；

不幸遇到火山爆发，
也可能是地震，
你失去了自由，
被埋进了灰尘；

过了多少亿年，
地质勘探队员，
在岩层里发现你，
依然栩栩如生。

但你是沉默的，
连叹息也没有，
鳞和鳍都完整，
却不能动弹；

你绝对的静止，
对外界毫无反应，
看不见天和水，
听不见浪花的声音。

凝视着一片化石，
傻瓜也得到教训：
离开了运动，
就没有生命。

活着就要斗争，
在斗争中前进，

当死亡没有来临，
把能量发挥干净。⁵⁷

Ai Qing was keeping his body and mind in motion, as much as he could, to prove to others and to himself that he was not a fossil. Quantitatively, he was astonishingly productive. But to what extent quantity translated into quality is another thing. The fact that Ai Qing's postwar poetry apparently did not stand the test of time—and if it is not entirely dead yet, this is largely because it remains connected to the respirators of educational institutions—speaks for itself. Besides, it did not stand the test of space either and did not gain much acclaim outside China. Let me invoke here a short but quite representative anonymous review of the *Selected Poems* of Ai Qing (1982) in Chen Eoyang, Peng Wenlan, and Marilyn Chin's translation which appeared in *Choice* in 1983:

Ai Qing (b. 1910) is now the virtual poet laureate of China. Symposia are held on his work, his opinions are solicited by the leading (government-regulated) literary journals, and he is sent on official visits abroad. Unfortunately, these honors have more to do with China's political situation than they do with Ai Qing's merits as a writer; his reputation is embarrassingly overinflated. These poems—59 of them, with Chinese texts provided—are flat, plodding, lacking in authentic passion but replete with stale clichés. The poet's identification with “China” is glib and facile, lacking the sense of profound, hard-earned rootedness established as the 20th-century standard by poets as Neruda (Chile) and Ritsos (Greece). The inadequate sense of place, apparent also in his generalized poems on Chicago, New York, and Iowa, undermines any attempt to convey China as a reality and not an abstraction. In “A Poem Dedicated to a Village” (pp. 120–4), the poet is clearly in conflict between nostalgia for the organic wholeness of traditional life and intellectual commitment to ideology. His own lack of awareness of this conflict renders the poem dishonest. The translations are adequate, but routine as English poetry.⁵⁸

The reviewer aptly pins down Ai Qing's intriguing inability—or unwillingness—to acknowledge inner contradictions in things, and in himself, as if the only existing conflict in the world was the historical-ideological conflict

57 Ai Qing 2018: 232–233, trans. J K.

58 Association of College and Research Libraries 1983. In 2021, after the final submission of the manuscript of this book, a collection of Ai Qing's poetry in Robet Dorsett's translation and with a foreword written by Ai Weiwei was published by Crown. It is, however, too early to discuss its critical reception yet.

between the allies and the enemies of the communist revolution. This characteristic of his work is particularly striking when one juxtaposes his late poetry with Miłosz's, which, since the 1940s, gradually evolved toward the opposite extreme.

Dissatisfaction with Ai Qing and other potential candidates from his generation to fulfill the role of Old Masters prompted Chinese poets, in particular Intellectuals, to seek authorities and (role) models to follow among foreign poets, especially from countries with a modern historical experience analogous (to a greater or lesser extent) with China, among them the Slavic nations. Miłosz enjoyed the greatest popularity, and I shall explore his role in the development of Chinese verse later in this chapter.

That said, in the second and third decade of the twenty-first century, there has been an unexpected increase in interest in Ai Qing among avant-garde poets. However, this "return of the dead," to use Harold Bloom's formula, has little to do with Bloomian revisionist *apophrades*,⁵⁹ that is, the reinjection of the precursor's poetry into the work of a younger poet or the next generation. It should be seen in terms of a certain politics of (poetic) identity rather than as an artistic occurrence in the strictest sense. Several factors arguably contributed to this phenomenon. One was the hundredth anniversary of Chinese New Poetry, celebrated in 2016, which inspired the national poetry scene to numerous recapitulations and reevaluations of the century-long legacy, and to the revival of its forgotten founding fathers in order to build the narrative of its glorious and magnificent tradition.

Among the many literary events, 2016 witnessed the first edition of the Ai Qing Poetry Festival (艾青诗歌节), held in his native Jinhua (金华). Its participants in 2016 and the following years included dozens of established poets and critics such as Wang Jiaxin, Ouyang Jianghe, Jidi Majia 吉狄马加, Xie Mian 谢冕, Xie Youshun 谢有顺, Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, Geng Zhanchun 耿占春, and others. During the first installment of the festival, Ouyang, who in the 1970s was the main herald of the upcoming "patricide," spoke of Ai Qing as a "great poet" (大诗人), with his own singular perspective on the world and the universe. Ouyang also discussed briefly, and rather inconclusively, the relationship between Ai Qing and his own generation:

Our generation didn't learn much from Ai Qing in terms of specific writing methods, but the spirit of his poetry, his poetic logic and imagination, his poetic soul, his love for the Sun, for the soil, his bursting energy deeply nourished us. [...] As long as Chinese soil exists, Ai Qing's lines such as these two: "Why there are tears in my eyes / Because I deeply love

59 On *apophrades*, see Bloom 1997: 139–156.

this soil” will always materialize themselves on this soil and Ai Qing will always appear among us, and through tears will look at us with his sun-like eyes.⁶⁰

Ouyang apparently seeks some form of self-identification with the “great poet” but, being unable to point out concrete evidence of their mutual affinity, he avails himself of empty clichés about spiritual nourishment and patriotic sentimentality.

Recalling the same festival, Wang Jiaxin wrote a poem titled “In Da Yanhe’s Homeland” (在大堰河的故乡), perhaps the only example of a strictly poetic dialogue between a mainstream Third Generation poet and Ai Qing, alluding to the famous “My Wet Nurse, Da Yanhe” written in prison in 1932. Wang’s reflection, however, goes no deeper than Ouyang’s and is essentially inscribed in the same conventions. Wang emphatically describes the festival itself and the emotions he felt when rereading the poem in Jinhua, only to suddenly turn to the Romantic-heroic theme of the author’s imprisonment in the final six lines:

During the dinner between one sip of alcohol and another they told me
that they would invite me to the next year’s festival as well
but I am not able to write out even a single line
I feel ashamed thinking of my encounter with the people of Jinhua
Suddenly I realize that the best place for a poet
is at the iron-barred window
in a darkening snowy afternoon

频频举杯的晚宴上，他们告诉我
明年的诗歌节还要请我来
可是，我连一行诗也写不出
我至今愧对金华人民
我终于觉悟到一个诗人最好的位置
也许就是那个带铁栏的窗口
在一个落雪的变暗的下午⁶¹

Another reason for Ai Qing’s increased popularity in the 2010s, hinted at by Ouyang, might be the rise in patriotic (read: nationalist) sentiments in China under Xi Jinping, which to a degree started to permeate the poetry scene in

60 China Writer 2016, trans. J K.

61 Wang Jiaxin 2016, trans. J K.

general, becoming another factor—along with “common enemies” such as AI poetry—uniting Intellectual and Popular poets. Yu Jian’s piece on Ai Qing, and his own recent poetry in which the word “homeland” (祖国) returns with unprecedented frequency, bears some evidence of this. Twenty years ago, Popular authors would have probably pitilessly ridiculed “In Da Yanhe’s Homeland” as “pseudo-prison” poetry just as they had criticized Wang’s “pseudo-exilic” writing, but today their own idioms often do not differ significantly from his. This resonance is particularly visible in poems that convey some patriotic message. And, conversely, Wang’s and Ouyang’s poetics start to gravitate toward the Popular stand in that they attach greater importance to indigenous factors and local masters. This is certainly not to suggest any active compliance of the poets with the totalitarian regime, but just to draw attention to the sensitivity of poetic matter to the surrounding environment of public discourse. We will observe a roughly similar phenomenon with regard to the recent reinjection of Miłosz’s poetry in Poland, which, too, has its own unique social-political background.

2.3 *Miłosz: Seeing Blindspots*

In 1950, Miłosz, the “poor Christian” and “poor poet,” accused himself of insincerity and cynical hope. Half a century later, in an eponymous poem from the collection *This (To)*, published in 2000, one can see still fresh scars and bruises after this longtime inner struggle, in which he tried to grasp the core of his conflicted personality.

This

If I could at last tell you what is in me,
if I could shout: people! I have lied by pretending it was not there,
It was there, day and night.

Only thus was I able to describe your inflammable cities,
Brief loves, games disintegrating into dust,
earrings, a strap falling lightly from a shoulder,
scenes in bedrooms and on battlefields.

Writing has been for me a protective strategy
Of erasing traces. No one likes
A man who reaches for the forbidden.

I asked help of rivers in which I used to swim, lakes
With a footbridge over the rushes, a valley

Where an echo of singing had twilight for its companion.
 And I confess my ecstatic praise of being
 Might just have been exercises in the high style.
 Underneath was this, which I do not attempt to name.

This. Which is like the thoughts of a homeless man walking in an alien
 city in freezing weather.

And like the moment when a tracked-down Jew glimpses the heavy hel-
 mets of the German police approaching.

The moment when the crown prince goes for the first time down to the
 city and sees the truth of the world: misery, sickness, age, and death.

Or the immobile face of someone who has just understood that he's been
 abandoned forever.

Or the irrevocable verdict of the doctor.

This. Which signifies knocking against a stone wall and knowing that the
 wall will not yield to any imploration.

Translated by CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ and ROBERT HASS⁶²

To

Żebym wreszcie mógł powiedzieć, co siedzi we mnie.
 Wykrzyknąć: ludzie, okłamywałem was
 Mówiąc, że tego we mnie nie ma,
 Kiedy TO jest tam ciągle, we dnie i w nocy.
 Chociaż właśnie dzięki temu
 Umiałem opisywać wasze łatwopalne miasta,
 Wasze krótkie miłości i zabawy rozpadające się w próchno,
 Kolczyki, lustra, zsuwające się ramiączko,
 Sceny w sypialniach i na pobojuwiskach.

Pisanie było dla mnie ochronną strategią
 Zacierania śladów. Bo nie może podobać się ludziom
 Ten, kto sięga po zabronione.

62 Miłosz 2005a: 663–664.

Przywołuję na pomoc rzeki, w których pływałem, jeziora
 Z kładką między sitowiem, dolinę,
 W której echu pieśni wtórzy wieczorne światło,
 I wyznaję, że moje ekstatyczne pochwały istnienia
 Mogły być tylko ćwiczeniami wysokiego stylu,
 A pod spodem było TO, czego nie podejmuję się nazwać.

TO jest podobne do myśli bezdomnego,
 kiedy idzie po mroźnym, obcym mieście.

I podobne do chwili, kiedy osaczony Żyd
 widzi zbliżające się ciężkie kaski niemieckich żandarmów.

TO jest jak kiedy syn króla wybiera się na miasto
 i widzi świat prawdziwy: nędzę, chorobę, starzenie się i śmierć.

TO może też być porównane do nieruchomej twarzy kogoś,
 kto pojął, że został opuszczony na zawsze.

Albo do słów lekarza o nie dającym się odwrócić wyroku.

Ponieważ TO oznacza natknięcie się na kamienny mur,
 i zrozumienie, że ten mur nie ustąpi żadnym naszym błaganom.⁶³

“This”—one may supplement Miłosz’s long list of comparisons in a more scientific jargon—is like a blind spot in the eye, which itself has no photoreceptors but all nerves intersect in it, and the diverse external impulses received by them are sent to the “processor” (“thus was I able to describe ...”). Normally, one pays no attention to one’s blind spot, because the human brain tends to “fill in” or ignore what’s missing from the image, but there exist simple visual experiments that enable one to detect it by provoking small misperceptions; for example, by closing one eye when looking at a picture of a dot and a plus sign and shifting your distance from the picture, at some point you will stop seeing one of the objects.⁶⁴ For many years Miłosz regularly tortured himself with such hyperintrospective self-experiments, painstakingly trying to explore the source of his ability to describe things, suspecting that his body may be inhabited by some demonic forces that ask for his soul in exchange for literary

63 Miłosz 2011: 1139–1141.

64 For a description of this and other experiments, see, e.g., <https://lasikofnv.com/try-these-3-fun-tests-to-find-your-visual-blind-spot/> (accessed December 22, 2020).

talent (as in “Ars Poetica?”). This is one of the many paradoxes of Miłosz: he found nothing particularly perplexing in the perspective of communicating with metaphysical beings, but it took him a lifetime to accept a most natural, normal, and human element of his mental construction.

Some will find Miłosz’s paradoxes irritating, while others will consider them fascinating. Suspending the value judgment, one thing may be said with certainty: it is largely this paradoxical nature of his writing that made Miłosz so difficult to overthrow. It seems that any argument, be it against or in favor of Miłosz, somehow misses the target, and immediately a counterargument can be found within his own oeuvre. *Miłosz Like the World* (*Miłosz jak świat*) reads the title of Jan Błoński’s 1998 book on Miłosz’s poetry, repeated almost like a mantra among Polish critics, but not without reason. It is easy to reject one aspect of his work or another, one poem or another, one statement or another, but systematically rejecting Miłosz as a whole requires profound and nuanced argumentation, which only few of the “children and grandchildren of Miłosz” attempted. Most limited themselves to playful provocations, trying his patience, or, in some cases, trying to attract his attention.

Miłosz’s poetry returned to Poland in the 1980s, but the poet himself settled in Krakow only in 1993. By now more than eighty years old, he was still at the peak of his creative powers, polemical acumen, and curiosity. Many of his utterances published in Poland in the 1990s betray his disappointment with new Polish poetry and occasionally exhibit the condescending attitude of someone who has seen the big wide world and considers Polish literature too provincial with its “new developments” with which he is already all too familiar. One of the most famous anecdotes of the early 1990s concerns Miłosz’s first encounter with Marcin Świetlicki (b. 1961) when the old poet was briefly visiting Krakow before moving there for good. Świetlicki was invited to participate in a special issue of the underground spoken journal *NaGłos* (*ALoud*); Miłosz never took part in this initiative, so his friends decided to organize one session for him, although the journal had already switched to a traditional paper publication by that time. Świetlicki, then thirty-one years old and the emerging star of the Polish poetry scene, performed with his newly created hard rock group, shouting out his poems. Most of the audience, comprised of members of the Krakow cultural elite, reportedly left disgusted before the end of this peculiar performance. Among those who stayed were Miłosz and Szyborska. Miłosz was unimpressed and his only reaction was, as Świetlicki recalls: “I have seen this in America.”⁶⁵ Jacek Podsiadło commented on this with his specific double-, or actually triple-edge irony which captures the complex relationships between Miłosz, Świetlicki, and “the rest” of the Polish poets: “And because of

65 Świetlicki and Książek 2017: Kindle location (hereafter KL) 2540–2553.

this Świetlicki, Miłosz now has no interest in Polish young poetry, and all young poets would really want him to have such interest.”⁶⁶

Another anecdote recalled by Świetlicki in interviews is the telephone conversation he had with Miłosz when he worked for *Catholic Weekly* (*Tygodnik Powszechny*). The poetic account of this conversation is found in “Talking” (*Rozmawianie*) from Świetlicki’s collection *Open Until Further Notice* (2001):

Talking

(at the end of the century)

In the editorial office of the *Catholic Weekly* the telephone rang.
Brrring. Brrring.

I’m always tempted by an evil force in the wrong moment
and I always find myself in the wrong place.

Brrring. Brrring. I picked up. “Catholic Weekly,”
said I. On the other end of the line Czesław
Miłosz started firmly in Czesław Miłosz’s voice.

“Czesław Miłosz is speaking,” said he and asked: “Who am I speaking
with?”

“Marcin Świetlicki,” I replied, truthfully, in the voice of
Marcin Świetlicki. “May I speak to someone else then,”
said Czesław Miłosz.

Rozmawianie

(na koniec wieku)

W redakcji “Tygodnika Powszechnego” odezwał się telefon.
Trrr. Trrr.

W redakcji “Tygodnika Powszechnego” odezwał się telefon.
Zawsze mnie lichy kusi w niewłaściwym momencie
i zawsze jestem w niewłaściwym miejscu.

Trrr. Trrr. Podniosłem słuchawkę.—“Tygodnik Powszechny”—
powiedziałem. W słuchawce odezwał się Czesław
Miłosz zdecydowanie głosem Czesława Miłosza.

—Tu Czesław Miłosz—powiedział.—Z kim mówię?—zapytał.

—Marcin Świetlicki—odpowiedziałem, zgodnie z prawdą, głosem
Marcina Świetlickiego.—To ja poproszę z kim innym—
powiedział Czesław Miłosz.⁶⁷

66 Quoted in Kozicka 2012: 164, trans. J K.

67 Świetlicki 2001: 39, trans. J K.

Among Miłosz's most contested texts was the essay "Against Incomprehensible Poetry" (*Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej*) written in 1990, nine years after Ai Qing's pamphlet "Starting from Obscure Poetry" (从朦胧诗谈起). Like Ai Qing, Miłosz, too, was very critical of the individualist attitudes of modern and postmodern poets and their growing isolation from the common people. The discussion around incomprehensibility that was initiated by this essay continued throughout the 1990s in the margins of the mainstream polemic between the Barbarians and the Classicists and gained momentum in the early 2000s, to which I will return in chapter 6 as a context for Andrzej Sosnowski's writing. Miłosz's opinion on the Brulioners was voiced, in turn, in another provocative piece, "Tasks for a Critic" (*Zadania dla krytyka*) from 1998, where he claimed that Polish literature is derivative and not Polish enough. A similar charge is often heard in the context of Chinese literature, to recall the discussion on Chineseness provoked by Stephen Owen's piece on Bei Dao, "What Is World Poetry," where the scholar accuses Bei Dao of intentionally reducing the ethnic background of his verse and writing easily translatable poetry.⁶⁸ His doubts were shared by many native-Chinese commentators, who found the leading Chinese poet insufficiently "representative" of the national poetry and too cosmopolitan.⁶⁹ Miłosz, likewise, complained in particular about the lack of a specifically Polish historical "subtext" in the writings of the Brulion Generation:

To what extent does the literature of the People's Republic display the subtext of the struggle for independence? In 1980–1989 it was certainly present. But in earlier periods one could also observe it, although perhaps in a more disguised form, or as a meditation on history, which is a great advantage of the "Polish School" of poetry. Today, the young generation's shift away from ideology and history can be interpreted as an attempt to get rid of the subtext.

Shall Polish literature exist when specific Polish problems disappear from it and only human problems, the same everywhere, remain? Maybe it should not [exist], but it is written in the Polish language and the language carries the entire past of the human community. The poetry of the "Polish School" was worth translating into English because its language conveyed the difficult past and current historical experience, which was processed into distance and irony, not excluding the "light" Szyborska.

68 Owen 1990.

69 Reconstruction and critical assessment of the debate is found in Yeh 2008.

A perfectly westernized poetry won't be worth translating, because there's no point exporting the samovar to Tula or coal to Newcastle.⁷⁰

Quite aside from the problematic imperative of national-ness, it is difficult to say what prompted Miłosz to formulate such an opinion of the Polish poetry of the 1990s. His comments demonstrate that he overlooked or underestimated one of most important concerns of the Brulioners, that is, coming to terms with their Polishness and defining it anew for themselves, even if, to Miłosz, they took to this task in a naive and childishly rebellious way. In a sense, their poetry is even more difficult to read without knowing the Polish subtext than, say, the poetry of Polish Romanticism or the Polish People's Republic in 1945–1989, because it seeks to revisit the national history throughout, dealing directly with its deeply hidden enchantments, resentments, and myths that shape the collective consciousness. Given Miłosz's own past struggles with his national identity and his only very hesitantly assumed role of spokesperson of the Polish people, one might have expected that his analysis would be more nuanced. Especially since he, too, during his stay abroad, was accused many times of being an insufficiently Polish poet.

Overall, however, the Old Master was supportive and did a lot to promote young authors, if only by writing favorable reviews of, or introductions to, their works. This usually meant an immediate increase in readership, as was the case with the novels of Tomek Tryzna (b. 1948) and Manuela Gretkowska (b. 1964) and the poetry of Jacek Dehnel (b. 1980). Dehnel, known as “the last poet anointed by Miłosz,” recalling Miłosz's favor, speaks of the “duty of generosity” that the poet laureate never shrunk from:

I'm speaking of this, because I was nobody. A student living in the sticks, with no name, coming in off the street, a string of letters on the other end of the email which I sent to the address of his [Miłosz's] secretary that I received from the Writers' Association. Miłosz was already ninety-something and read—I didn't know it then—with great difficulty. He could barely see anything, he had each text zoomed in on the screen first and only thus, in a monstrous font, could he make his way through the words. He could have ignored people like me. Would anybody have blamed him? He could have politely thanked for the letter, he could have not replied at all, or he could have kept sending a general refusal email to everybody through his secretary. But he, who had so many more important things to do, to whom not much time was left, who might have

70 Miłosz 2011, trans. J.K.

instead returned for example to one of his favorite books—he simply wanted to do this. For nobody, for an unknown student. [...]

Suffice it to read Miłosz carefully, yet to understand that his behavior had a greater and deeper motive: the responsibility of the author, the poetic duty, which can't be cancelled and from which one can't retire. This imperative of generousness, reflecting the generousness of the world itself, is one of the greatest virtues of Miłosz, which all of us should practice in our field, be it the literary field or otherwise.⁷¹

In 1991, Miłosz founded a prize for emerging authors, among whose laureates in 2000 was Podsiadło,⁷² one of the former “anti-Miłosz-ers” from the *Brulion* magazine. This confirms that the old poet was, as Dehnel notes, above their attacks, treating them as a natural part of every “generational change” in literary history.⁷³ Podsiadło's decision to accept the prize put him in a difficult position among the ex-Brulioners who accused him of betraying countercultural ideals, but—as Kozicka notes—the young poet had sent clear signals of his reconciliation with Miłosz in 1998, so the accusation of selling out ideals for prizes is groundless. In a conversation with Maciej Cichy, Podsiadło confessed that, as a student, he had avidly read Miłosz and Barańczak, and that Miłosz was to him “someone like a father—even if a distant one—a sort of impersonal force which made demands that must be met.”⁷⁴

To give some idea of the style and mood of the Brulioners' youthful provocations targeted at their “distant father,” I invoke two representative oft-quoted examples. In 1990, Krzysztof Jaworski published a poem titled “Annoying Pleasures” (*Drażniące przyjemności*) in which he claims that Miłosz is among those who hamper the progress of Polish poetry.

Annoying Pleasures

We've done so much for that poor poetry already
and lethally Brodsky turned back the clock. The Blacks
are hurting her, too. And Czesław.
Take me for the stars or the moon,
I sang, just this once take me for a man
crushed by a Coke machine;

71 Dehnel 2013: 149–150, trans. J K.

72 Pierzchała and Kuc 2004.

73 Dehnel 2013: 149.

74 Quoted in Kozicka 2012: 163, trans. J K.

this life is so crushing.
 Snow fell at night and covered everything.
 That's how it is down here, one just has to be
 on top of the other. Otherwise—no progress.
 Oh, when will this madness cease, asks
 the one furthest in front unmoved.

Translated by TADEUSZ PIÓRO

Drażniące przyjemności

Tyle już zrobiliśmy dla tej biednej poezji,
 a Brodski cofnął ją fatalnie. Murzyni też
 wyrządzają jej krzywdę. I Czesław.
 Pomył mnie z gwiazdami, albo z księżycem,
 śpiewałem, chociaż raz pomył mnie z
 mężczyzną, którego przygniótł automat do coca-coli;

to życie jest takie przygniatające.
 W nocy spadł śnieg i przykrył wszystko.
 Tak tu już jest, że jedno musi być
 na drugim. Inaczej nic nie ruszy do przodu.
 O, kiedyż skończy się to szaleństwo? pyta
 on, ten najbardziej do przodu, nieporuszony.⁷⁵

Jaś Kapela, in his turn, in “Poetry Art in Its Own Juice” (Sztuka poetycka w sosie własnym, 2005), dedicated “to miłosz szymborska herbert zagajewski and the rest” and published online at the then tremendously popular poetry platform Nieszufłada.pl (Nondrawer.pl), announced:

several centuries back I would have been an inquisitor
 today well I became a poet
 I believe someone must have principles
 so what can I do I just have them
 and will soon enlighten you

parę wieków temu byłbym inkwizytorem
 dzisiaj cóż zostałem poetą
 wierzę że ktoś musi mieć zasady

75 Mengham, Pióro, and Szymor 2003: 76–77.

więc co robić mam je ja
i zaraz was oświecę⁷⁶

There were of course authors in whose texts references to Miłosz were positive, though anything but epigonic or uncritical, from the very beginning. Among them Piotr Śliwiński lists, for example, Dariusz Sośnicki (b. 1969), Tadeusz Dąbrowski (b. 1979), and Tomasz Różycki (b. 1970).⁷⁷

By and large, Brulion and post-Brulion authors, after the period of adolescent rebellion, today tend to admit Miłosz's crucial role and position in Polish literature. When in 2011 the critics Jerzy Borowczyk and Michał Larek published an anthology of Polish poetry, *To Say It Differently* (*Powiedzieć to inaczej*), and left Miłosz out, Krzysztof Siwczyk, who earlier had written a very critical essay about Miłosz, said during that year's Miłosz Festival that, having seen this anthology, he wished to take back his critical words, because thinking about Polish literature without Miłosz is impossible.⁷⁸ Podsiadło turned from being one of the fiercest critics of Miłosz to one of his most zealous advocates, and even Świetlicki apparently took it down a notch, increasingly exhibiting sympathy toward, and even solidarity with, Miłosz. In 2001, approaching his fortieth birthday, he confessed that he felt a growing distance from young poets and a shrinking one from Miłosz. A decade later, in 2011, acknowledging the hundredth anniversary of Miłosz's birth, Świetlicki, turning fifty, jokingly called himself "half-Miłosz."⁷⁹ Karol Maliszewski, after Miłosz's death in 2004, wrote that although he never considered himself a follower of Miłosz's poetry, he acknowledges that Miłosz was a great figure. He even felt somewhat lonely, he confesses, because, together with Miłosz, a certain form of social legitimization of poetry had exhausted itself too, and he suddenly realized that no one needs his work as a poet and poetry critic.⁸⁰

The most consistent and intellectually sophisticated criticism of Miłosz's work has come from the environment of the journal *World Literature* (*Literatura na Świecie*); that is, the poets who introduced American postmodern poetry to Polish audiences, especially Piotr Sommer. Among many indictments, Sommer points out Miłosz's weaknesses as a translator, in particular his habit of availing himself of relay translation and "creating his own poets" (in Miłosz's words) in the Polish language rather than trying to show the

76 Kapela 2005, trans. J.K.

77 Śliwiński 2007: 120–123.

78 Wydawnictwo EMG 2011.

79 Kozicka 2012: 164–165.

80 Ibidem: 160.

specificity of their individual idioms.⁸¹ Indeed, Miłosz's own diction is so characteristic that it easily imposes itself on the source text. For example, Miłosz's *Ai Qing* and Miłosz's Whitman sound almost the same, and almost the same as Miłosz's Miłosz. Simultaneously, Miłosz's translations of Polish poetry into English seem to be virtually free of this problem, conceivably partly because they were fine-tuned by native speakers of English, and partly because in the foreign language, despite his wonderful grasp of English, Miłosz experienced an estrangement from himself, and his decisions were less autocratic. In "My Faithful Mother Tongue" (*Moja wierna mowa*), he describes his life outside the realm of Polish language as a lesson in humility:

But without you, who am I?
 Only a scholar in a distant country,
 a success, without fears and humiliations.
 Yes, who am I without you?
 Just a philosopher, like everyone else.

I understand, this is meant as my education:
 the glory of individuality is taken away,
 Fortune spreads a red carpet
 before the sinner in a morality play
 while on the linen backdrop a magic lantern throws
 images of human and divine torture.

Faithful mother tongue,
 perhaps after all it's I who must try to save you.
 So I will continue to set before you little bowls of colors
 bright and pure if possible,
 for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty.

Translated by CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ and ROBERT PINSKY⁸²

Ale bez ciebie kim jestem.
 Tylko szkolarzem gdzieś w odległym kraju,
 a *success*, bez lęku i poniżeń.
 No tak, kim jestem bez ciebie.
 Filozofem takim jak każdy.

81 Ibidem: 168.

82 Miłosz 2005a: 245–246.

Rozumiem, to ma być moje wychowanie:
 gloria indywidualności odjęta,
 Grzesznikowi z moralitetu
 czerwony dywan podściela Wielki Chwał,
 a w tym samym czasie latarnia magiczna
 rzuca na płótno obrazy ludzkiej i boskiej udręki.

Moja wierna mowo,
 może to jednak ja muszę ciebie ratować.
 Więc będę dalej stawiać przed tobą miseczki z kolorami
 jasnymi i czystymi, jeżeli to możliwe,
 bo w nieszczęściu potrzebny jakiś ład czy piękno.⁸³

In this poem, the two crucial questions of individuality and responsibility echo once again, framed in the reflection on language. The mother tongue endows one with “the glory of individuality,” but it requires lifetime loyalty in return. Frequent outings into foreign languages allowed Miłosz to filter his self through different grammars and thus experience its frailty and fallibility. Like in “Poor Christian,” “Poor Poet,” and “This,” he, “the sinner in a morality play,” its only actor and director at once, misses no opportunity to entertain himself with masochistic “divine torture,” questioning himself more radically than anyone else could do, and taking thus the wind out of the sails of his potential critics.

Like Ai Qing’s, Miłosz’s name increasingly returns in the political context, which is quite directly connected to the rise of nationalism. However, contrary to the Chinese poet, Miłosz is cited as a new patron saint of opposition against the current conservative rightist government. Its leaders and supporters never hid their resentment toward him, consistently overlooking the poet’s numerous open declarations of his attachment to conservative values and nurturing the narrative of his anti-Polishness instead. Even in August 2004, after Miłosz’s death, his opponents did not hide their antipathy and openly protested against the idea of burying his body in the Crypt of Merit in Krakow’s Na Skałce church, claiming that he was not patriotic and not Catholic enough to rest there, among the greatest of Poland. Were it not for the personal intervention of Pope John Paul II, Miłosz likely would not have been granted this honor.⁸⁴ In 2017, there was a credible threat that Miłosz would disappear from school textbooks after

83 Miłosz 2011: 594–595.

84 For a comprehensive account and critical interpretation of the controversy around Miłosz’s funeral and interment, see Czapliński 2009: 253–264.

a reform planned by the ruling Law and Justice party.⁸⁵ Leftist intellectuals, conversely, turning a blind eye to Miłosz's metaphysical penchant and Catholic faith, diligently reconstruct his "left profile." In 2011, *Political Critique* (*Krytyka Polityczna*), a leading leftist social-political periodical, released an edited volume titled *Miłosz: A Companion of Political Critique* (*Miłosz. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*). In the book, we can find, for instance, a short piece by Jaś Kapela, who twenty years earlier volunteered to enlighten Miłosz, and now enlightens others through, and about, Miłosz. From his humorously provocative essay, we learn for example that Miłosz was queer and advocated for the legalization of drugs.⁸⁶ Elsewhere, in a conversation with Miłosz's biographer Andrzej Franaszek, Sławomir Sierakowski, a cofounder of *Political Critique*, explains the importance of Miłosz in a more constructive way:

My impression is that Miłosz didn't manage to avoid the role of *poeta vates* [*wieszcz*]. This role is perhaps necessary too, but it is productive only in very low spiritual registers. It raises people's spirits, but otherwise it is rather bemusing. [...] The absence of Miłosz as an incisive and radical critic of capitalist culture in Poland is striking. [...]

Leftness would be too narrow a notion in this case. And if by "leftness" one understands the set of dominant Polish associations linked to this term, I would prefer to keep Miłosz clear of this. Miłosz soared very high. He was a critic of civilization. I would want to understand leftism in this manner. [...]

What I find more disturbing [than Miłosz's Christianity] is that I live in a near-pagan country, which moreover is considered as one of the most religious places. We have more or less as much of the Christian logos and ethos in Poland as preserved by the readers of the *Catholic Weekly*. And if I find something problematic, it is rather that we have too little of it, and not too much. And because every leftism is built on the Christian matrix, perhaps we should even hope first for the Christianization of Poland to finally enable enlightenment?⁸⁷

To take a broader perspective, it may be observed that the current political situation in Poland, which has deeply divided the nation as a whole, has had the opposite effect on Polish culture. It has notably united many authors representing different generations and aesthetic preferences against the government's

85 See, e.g., Sierakowski 2017; Jankowski 2017.

86 Kapela 2011: 113–117.

87 Sierakowski and Franaszek 2011: 9–12, trans. J. K.

cultural policy and in defense of diversity and freedom of artistic expression. Miłosz, a poet of doubts and contradictions, who yearned for transcendence yet remained so deeply, intensely, and fallibly human, has one more battle to fight, for the intellectual and spiritual independence of his “children and grandchildren,” but even more so for the very right of seeking, of asking, and of not knowing, among those, on both sides of the political divide and beyond, who claim that they possess the Truth.

2.4 *Adoptive Fathers: Miłosz in China*⁸⁸

In a survey concerning foreign influences in the work of Chinese poets conducted in 2012 by US-based poet and translator Ming Di 明迪, eight out of the ten authors who responded to the questions listed Miłosz as one of the most important sources of their own poetics and/or Chinese contemporary poetry in general.⁸⁹ Other frequently raised names included, for example, Joseph Brodsky, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Paul Celan, and Seamus Heaney. Among the respondents were authors associated with the Intellectual camp or the younger inheritors of that tradition: Zhang Shuguang 张曙光 (b. 1956), Sun Wenbo 孙文波 (b. 1956), Song Lin 宋琳 (b. 1959), Zang Di, Ya Shi 哑石 (b. 1966, an exception among them, usually not associated with any particular faction), Jiang Tao 姜涛 (b. 1970), Jiang Hao 蒋浩 (b. 1971), Hu Xudong 胡续冬 (1974–2021), and Jiang Li 江离 (b. 1978). In the introductory chapter of this book, I also mentioned Li Hao’s 李浩 (b. 1984) interest in Miłosz. Countless renditions of Miłosz’s poetry, displaying rather uneven levels of translatorial skill, circulate in China; there is also no dearth of critical and comparative papers and academic dissertations with Miłosz’s name in the title. One example is Wang Jiaxin’s essay on Polish poetry, “The ‘Witness of Poetry’ and ‘Mysticism for Beginners’: From Miłosz to Zagajewski” (“诗的见证”与“神秘学入门”——从米沃什到扎加耶夫斯基), which is included in two of his books of literary criticism: *Translation as Recognition* (翻译的辨认, 2017) and *The Masters Who Taught My Soul to Sing* (教我灵魂歌唱的大师, 2017). In the paper, he discusses different translations of Miłosz, Szymborska, and Zagajewski into Chinese, the complex connections between historical experience and poetry writing in Poland, and the influence of the Polish poetry of testimony on Chinese authors. Wang’s PhD student, the Post-70 poet Lian Hansheng 连晗生, defended an impressive dissertation, over 450 pages long, *Between “Witness” and “Delight”: Miłosz, Brodsky, and Heaney and Contemporary Chinese Poetry*

88 This section builds on Krenz 2019b and the argument is subsequently elaborated on in Krenz 2021a.

89 Ming Di 2016.

(在“见证”与“愉悦”之间:米沃什、布罗茨基和希尼与中国当代诗歌, 2016), demonstrating how deeply the poetics of Intellectual authors was shaped by the work of the three poets enumerated in the title. Lian further extends the notion of poetic witnesshood derived from their verse on more recent literary phenomena such as earthquake poetry (地震诗歌) and migrant worker poetry (打工诗歌).⁹⁰ Wang's Covid-19 verses, cited earlier in this chapter, might be taken as another example supporting his theses.

Arguably, this pattern of reception was predetermined by the earliest translations of Miłosz into Chinese, which were made after his Nobel Prize in 1980. Xiong Hui 熊辉 and Lu Beibei 卢贝贝 demonstrate that the misreading (误读) of Miłosz among general audiences in the 1980s and 1990s as a political poet was an effect of a specific politics of publication. According to them, the first mention of Miłosz in mainland Chinese official literary discourse appeared in a brief review of the English-language edition of *Native Realm* (*Rodzinna Europa*) in the journal *Reading* (读书) in 1982 undersigned with the pseudonym Jingren 涇人. The author summarized Miłosz's autobiographical book as an account of the process of the poet's maturing to active engagement in politics, with politics meaning probably the brief socialist episode in his life.⁹¹ Li Yanan 李怡楠, however, records that a handful of poems appeared earlier, in 1980, in *World Literature* (世界文学) translated by Yi Lijun 伊丽君, who, in turn, had learned of Miłosz as early as in 1974 from unofficial publications.⁹² In any event, Jingren's image of Miłosz proved convincing to Chinese audiences and was perpetuated by Lu Yuan 绿原 (1922–2009). Lu, himself a recognized poet of the orthodox tradition, in the preface to his 1989 translation of Miłosz's collection of wartime and early postwar poetry, *Separate Notebooks* (拆散的笔记簿), introduced the Polish author as a Romantic-revolutionary poet who fights with words in defense of the oppressed people. In Miłosz's work, according to the translator, there is no place for metaphysics and individuality.⁹³ The entire text sounds like a continuation of the crusade against Obscure poetry, as if Lu wanted to make sure that the Chinese Miłosz found himself on the right side of the fence.

Xiong and Lu make a case that without this political framing of Miłosz's Nobel Prize as an achievement of socialist culture, his reception in China would not have been possible at all. As the first book that changed this pattern,

90 Wang Jiixin 2017a, 2017b; Lian 2016. Other examples of essays and papers devoted to Miłosz include Zhang Shuguang 2008; Sun Wenbo 2010; Zhang Hao 2012; Xi Chuan 2014.

91 Xiong and Lu 2020: 22.

92 Li Yanan 2015: 99.

93 *Ibidem*: 21.

they point to the autobiographical collection of prose *A Year of the Hunter* (*Rok myśliwego*), translated into Chinese in 1995, or precisely, a thumbnail of the publisher, in which the book's description from the *New York Times* is invoked. The author of the Chinese text claims: "Those who considered Miłosz a political poet will be surprised, because the Miłosz whom they will see [in the book] has been swaying between the two poles for years. He served both the Communist Party and the Western world, and the main role in his life was played by nationalism and patriotism."⁹⁴ This is still a questionable portrayal, but it at least acknowledges part of Miłosz's ambiguousness. It is only after 2000 that more numerous translations of the nonpolitical, metaphysical Miłosz started to appear in China.

Xiong and Lu's study is written from the perspective of official reception of Miłosz and says little or nothing about his influence on unofficial poetry circles, where authors were much more aware of, and willing to embrace, the diversity of Miłosz's work, if only because many of them read him in English, or in Du Guoqing's 杜国清 renditions published in Taiwan. Mistakes in the paper betray the poor orientation of the scholars in the nonorthodox discourse, for example, when they rebaptize Zhang Shuguang 张曙光 as Huang Shuguang 黄曙光 or call the woman scholar Cui Weiping 崔卫平 "Mr. Cui Weiping" (崔卫平先生). Nevertheless, their argument offers an interesting angle, one that allows us to appreciate the efforts of Intellectual authors who reclaimed Miłosz as an objector against and not supporter of communism, even if this actually reinforced the Romanticized social-political paradigm as a near-exclusive reception paradigm in approaching his poetry, simply reorienting its vector from pro- to antisystemic.

The images of Polish verse and of Poland itself that emerge from many of the Chinese Intellectual poets' dialogues with Miłosz are roughly convergent, with slight shifts in emphasis among different authors, and Wang's formula that "Polish coffee as Polish poetry / always half cup of bitter grounds" from "On the German-Polish Border" aptly summarizes them. Needless to say, they contain many worthwhile insights and their value cannot be discredited. Altogether, however, they make up quite a coherent, if complex, messianic-martyrological spatiotemporal matrix on which Chinese traumas are mapped.

This matrix is gradually destabilized in the works of younger poets or those who remained outside the dichotomous mainstream discourse of the 1990s. In their writings, dialogues with Miłosz—or, more precisely, with the Chinese Miłosz, since they know his work via translations and essays authored mainly by Third Generation poets and critics sympathizing with the Intellectual

94 Quoted in Xiong and Lu 2020: 22, trans. J K.

tradition—constitute an opportunity to settle accounts with the dominant vision of poetry that was promoted especially by Beijing-based poet-academics who enjoyed the broad access to renowned publishers, institutional support, and social authority that usually comes with a university position. This difficulty younger poets experienced in renegotiating the definition of poetry by reevaluating its adoptive fathers, exemplified by Miłosz, led to the emergence of complex, multilayered intertextual patterns in their verses.

One particularly perplexing example is Lei Pingyang's 雷平阳 (b. 1966) textual encounter with Miłosz in the "Poems from Poland" (波兰诗篇) series of nine poems,⁹⁵ which documents his visit to Poland in 2011 on the occasion of a poetry festival in Warsaw. The poems sketch a landscape of Poland that is fundamentally different to the one we find in Wang Jiaxin's "On the German-Polish Border." During his stay in Żelazowa Wola, Chopin's birthplace, Lei, in a far more radical manner than Wang, tackles the Romantic construct of art as a mystical force which animates a nation and unmasks its hidden dangers. In "Chopin's Home, Rain" (肖邦故居，遇雨), we read:

From the sky, or from the chestnut tree, so many
tears fell. This metaphor means that
the storm and the heavy clouds are Chopin's piano
I have long seen through this sort of imagery
it is too dangerous, makes human blood boil
at the same time bringing them at the edge of the death. Under the Polish
sky
Chopin is the Holy Spirit
second to God alone, which makes people always confuse heaven,
earth, and hell.

从天空或栗子树上。掉下来
这么多的泪水。这种比喻意味着
风暴和乌云就是肖邦的钢琴
我已经看透了类似想像的意图
它们具有太多的危险性，令人热血沸腾
但又与死神为邻。在波兰的天空中

95 The series was originally published in *People's Literature* (人民文学) in 2012. All translations of these poems are my own and are based on Lei's *Lessons of Landscape* (山水课) (Lei 2015: 218–227), with the exception of the poem "To Miłosz" (致米沃什), which was not included in Lei's selection and is quoted based on the version reprinted in the journal *Poetry Selections* (诗选刊) (Lei 2012).

人们将肖邦当成了仅次于上帝
的圣灵,这同样让人总是混淆天堂
人间和地狱。

In “Silence” (寂静), the second poem in the series, preceded only by a poetic account of Lei’s encounter with the translator of Chinese literature Hu Peifang 胡佩方, the author speaks of himself as “a poet, late for the torment” (作为诗人, 苦难的迟到者). This sentence describes his impressions after a walk along Polish streets, but it also perfectly captures his status in China’s poetry scene. As one of the poets born in the second half of the 1960s, who sometimes refer to themselves as the Middle Generation (中间代), Lei “came late” to catastrophes like the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, whose most dramatic period he may only hazily remember from his early childhood, missing thus the generational experiences of Bei Dao’s or Wang Jiaxin’s coevals. For many years, the Middle Generation were writing in the shadow of a history that was not entirely theirs, a tragedy in which they did not consciously participate; this phenomenon is known in the European context as postmemory. Being fed with it through the poetry of other authors, they know better than their older fellow poets what it means to live someone else’s drama and become “carried away by someone else’s death,” in Lei’s phrase; they are much more cautious and carefully detach their own narratives from external matrices, albeit with great difficulty at times, because they feel intimidated by the omnipresent ghosts of (someone else’s) past. Such a confrontation is described in the last poem of Lei’s series, “Writing a Letter to Dead Poles” (给死去的波兰人写信):

In the same way, for the Word to become flesh,
for the Man to become God, there had to be a mincer’s
sound on the square at dawn, flesh blood
mistaken for dirty rainwater, bone pieces and lime
mixed into one. And no one could
extract one’s soul from this sludge. It is not
so different from us. When carried away by
someone else’s death, the only thing we can still
discuss is the disappearing of time, solitude, and faith
The day of my departure, I spent the whole evening
standing at the window, and felt clearly that one self of mine
carved the bones in my body into a cross
swearing I will live in the future and I too will turn into a sculpture
I refused. I can no longer bear any death blow dealt by any form for any
reason

I can't allow death to watch me from out of hiding, I'd rather
quickly leave Poland, and write a letter to the dead Poles from a distance
of one country

同样，道成于肉身
人被奉为神灵，也曾有一台绞肉机
提前轰响于黎明的广场，鲜血
被认为污浊的雨水，骨粉和石灰
被混拌在一块儿，谁也不准
从里面提炼灵魂。它和我们
并没有太多的区别，当自己也被
别人的死亡彻底带走了，唯一还能
谈论的只剩下时间的消失、孤独和信仰
离开的那天，整整一个晚上
我站在窗前，准确地感到，有一个我
将体内的骨头雕成了十字架
发誓要活在未来，也称为塑像
我拒绝了。我已经再不能承受
任何形式的任何理由的致命一击
让死神提前躲在一旁监视自己，我愿
迅速离开波兰，隔着一个国家
给死去的波兰人写信

Between “Silence” and “Letter” stretches the landscape of Lei’s Poland: a thannatic land, populated by a people obsessed with the cult of their own victimhood. Along its streets, from cathedral to cathedral, altar to altar, statue to statute, people and ghosts walk hand in hand—equally alive, or rather, equally dead. The responsibility for this miserable state of affairs should be divided, suggests the author, between the Nazis and artists. The former inflicted suffering for six years, and the latter sustained it for another several decades. This accusation is addressed specifically to Miłosz in a short poem dedicated to him:

To Miłosz

I have always admired Czesław Miłosz
not because of his poems
but based on the mere fact that for all his life
he managed to keep himself out of this country
while the poems he wrote were the country’s shards
In this country, they still plant potatoes in wounds

does it hurt? He made this country
 hurt forever, hurt for the entire world to see
 a bit like the saint on the cross
 several nails can crucify
 faith, and hang it until the end of time

《致米沃什》

我一直敬佩切斯拉夫·米沃什
 不是因为他的诗篇 仅仅基于他一生都把自己
 放在这个国家的外面
 写出的诗稿, 却是这个国家的碎片
 这个国家, 至今还在伤口里种土豆
 疼吗? 他让这个国家
 永远疼着, 疼给整个世界看
 有点像十字架上挂着的圣人
 几颗钉子, 就能将信仰
 钉死, 永远挂起来

The text is a bitter criticism disguised as irony spiced with black humor. Crudely recapitulating, Lei's Miłosz is a cold-blooded sadist who trades Romantic martyrology and paints the history of Poland as a rustic-style Stations of the Cross, exhibiting it in international literary galleries and accumulating symbolic capital which eventually won him the Nobel Prize. Or, perhaps worse, he is a modern Pilate who "crucifies faith," washes his hands, and withdraws. So interpreted, the poem might be taken as challenging a certain model of poethood and poetic witnesshood as fake because it is not legitimized by the witness's "withness," meaning his participation in the situation and communion with the people he describes. Lei's own strong attachment to his native Yunnan suggests that it is exactly the exilic poetics represented by Miłosz, which was so enthusiastically embraced by the Intellectual camp, that Lei finds particularly difficult to accept in the Polish author. But things are apparently more complex than that and if we look at the rest of the series and recall the earlier poems of Lei, "To Miłosz" turns out to be anything but clear-cut.

This apparent escape into sarcasm is infrequent in Lei's writing. It appears to be a manifestation of helplessness, an act of artistic capitulation. Lei, too, does not know how to handle the open wound in which potatoes are planted. Try to close it or allow it to fester and nourish the soil which, however tormented, still has to somehow feed its people? In the poem that precedes "To Miłosz," titled "By the Street in Warsaw" (华沙街边), one can see his hesitation:

By the Street in Warsaw

“The Poles are still struggling in a nightmare, the sweat drops of dying
 haven’t frozen till now, still boiling on their skin.”
 On the Warsaw sidewalks, I would find many
 supporters for this view: “the bullet drilled into
 the flesh, it smarts, itches,
 haven’t yet reached the heart.” Everything is happening now
 and no one knows where the border of the nightmare runs
 while I, true to life, rub salt in the wound. Those who agree,
 all white-haired, whenever an opportunity arises, over a beer,
 recall fondly the socialist system. “The bullet pierced the heart,
 flying toward the outside of the body.” To move the young generation,
 I take a shovel and cut in half an imaginary pigeon
 on the square. Frightened out of their wits, people cross themselves. “The
 bullet flew away
 but the death remained!” At the beginning I wanted to describe
 the death of the soul as well, but I refrained myself,
 in their eyes, I’m worse than the Nazis
 The Nazis made them die once
 and I make them die again before resurrection
 They all want to live, and not time and again
 die from the never-ending hate

《华沙街边》

“波兰人还在噩梦里挣扎，死去时
 身上的汗水还没有结冰，热气腾腾。”
 —对此观点，在华沙街边
 我可以找到众多的支持者：“子弹射入
 骨肉，烫烫的，痒痒的
 还没有抵达心脏。”一切正在发生
 谁都不知道，噩梦的边界在哪里
 我绘声绘色，往伤口上撒盐。同意的人
 个个银发，一有机会，就在酒后
 怀念社会主义。“子弹穿越了心脏
 正往身体外面飞。”为了打动年轻一代
 我用铁钉，钉穿了广场上的
 一只想像中的鸽子，人们大惊失色
 在胸前画十字。“子弹飞走了

死亡留了下来！”原本我还想描述
 灵魂之死，但还是忍住了
 在他们眼中，我比纳粹还残忍
 纳粹让他们死了一次
 我让他们在复活前，又死了一次
 他们都想好好地活着，不想因为仇恨
 永无休止地，一次接一次地死下去

“By the Street” is reminiscent of Lei Pingyang’s best-known poem, “The Process of Killing a Dog” (杀狗的过程), which describes in detail a fifty-five-minute five-stage procedure of a dog being slaughtered for a food market. Lei more explicitly alludes to this scene in another text from “Poems from Poland,” namely “Laughter” (笑声), where he recalls his night in a hotel room, and how he was spooked at 3:00 a.m. by a woman’s scream. As he tries to settle, a sentence from “yesterday’s conversation” (昨天的对话) reverberates in his mind: “The pain and sorrow caused by war / can be accurately captured / in the process of killing a dog” (一场战争带来的 / 疼痛与悲怆, 在杀死一条狗的过程中 / 也能准确地体现). Incidentally, it is not unlikely that “The Process of Killing a Dog” was inspired by another Polish Old Master Tadeusz Różewicz’s reportages from Asia from the 1950s, which contain an account of a lamb being slaughtered in Mongolia that Lei discusses in “Sleeplessness” (失眠症, 2010), and perhaps additionally by Różewicz’s poem “Whiteness” (Biel), which records the imaginary process of slaughtering an Easter lamb. In “Sleeplessness,” Lei addresses Różewicz with the following allegation:

We hate this Pole, he shouldn’t have
 spoken in the Polish language about the intertextuality between tragedy
 and comedy
 he shouldn’t have emphasized in his poems the commonness
 and mundaneness of the end of the world

我们都讨厌这个波兰人，他不该
 用波兰语，说出悲剧与喜剧的互文性
 不该用一首诗歌，强化末日的
 日常性和普及率。⁹⁶

Further on in the poem, it becomes clear that by “he shouldn’t have,” Lei emphasizes the much-needed, sobering discomfort that Różewicz’s works cause in

96 Lei 2015: 151–152, trans. J.K.

the (Chinese) reader. Having arrived in Poland, in the streets of Warsaw he sets out to reciprocate Różewicz's heart-piercing favor, sacrificing a pigeon to wake Poles up from what he perceives as their nightmarish dream they masochistically celebrate over beer. But, unlike Różewicz, whose performative grotesque-laced poetics of the flesh will be discussed in the next chapter, he is not determined enough to carry his tragicomic plan to the end. He accepts, if uneagerly, like Miłosz in "Ars Poetica?," the transitional mode of existence on the border between life and death and agrees to pay a price for the uncompleted task: being haunted by the souls he decided to save from under the shovel.

In truth, Lei Pingyang's work is, in many ways, closer to Czesław Miłosz's than the work of the Intellectual poets. Lei's concrete imagery, his sensuality, his powerful, unmistakable idiom, and his dense, sludge-colored nostalgia, which is present in "Writing a Letter," so different from the elusive "snow-colored nostalgia" experienced by Wang Jiaxin on the German-Polish border, his critical acumen, sharp sense of observation, attention to detail, courage to leave the door of his poems open a crack for unexpected guests who "come and go at will," his readiness for tough spiritual struggle, and his constant radical introspection are all qualities he shares with Miłosz, although perhaps not necessarily with the Miłosz whom he read (of) in the Chinese language.

The intuition of an affinity between Lei and Miłosz had started to take shape in my mind when I first wrote about Lei's "Poems from Poland" in 2018–2019. It was a positive surprise to subsequently see it confirmed and substantiated in an essay titled "Who Is Lei Pingyang" (谁是雷平阳) published in the fourth issue of *Dianchi* (滇池) in 2020, authored by a poet, critic, and a friend of Lei, Huo Junming 霍俊明. Huo cites Miłosz several times throughout the essay as a context that sheds light on various aspects of Lei's work; the most original of these propositions and one that resonates with my own reflections on "Poems from Poland" is what the author identifies as the "poetics of shame" (羞耻的诗学). The feeling of shame comes from an excessive self-awareness and self-questioning, which we observed in Miłosz's "This," "A Poor Poet," or "Ars Poetica?," where he casts doubt on his own integrity and social usefulness, and expresses his yearning to be a "normal" person who never writes, rather than a "city of demons." Lei Pingyang like Miłosz, argues Huo, "looks at the world like a witness and records crime scenes," but, more importantly,

from dreamlike fables concerning individual people, human nature, reality, time, space, and history, he compiled a poetics of shamefulness. Shamefulness comes first and foremost from the direct confrontation with oneself, and in the second place from one's estrangement or

even incompatibility with the external environment, the masses, and the epoch.⁹⁷

To support his view, Huo invokes excerpts from Lei's autobiographical texts, including several passages from a beautiful essay titled "In the Wencheng Mountains" (在文成山中). In this nostalgic piece, after elaborating on the personal reasons that prevent him from leaving his hometown in the mountains of Yunnan, the poet confesses:

I know, such reasons would suit people living six hundred years ago. Today, I can speak of them only at night, in a lonely place, without lights, or when people cover their ears, and the night absorbs their surprised sights and melts into dream. If I were to speak of it in front of an audience in a hall, on the phone, or in front of the camera, I would be considered a liar or a heir of a long-overthrown dynasty. It is so painful, as if a strange power was trying to deprive me of the freedom of expression. And I surrender to it, thinking hesitantly that articulating these reasons would be a shame. A human is sick, does Heaven know? And yet, I'm talking of it all the time. The voice comes out of the lungs, travels through the throat, and finally, with a vibration of the tongue, is released and soars toward the world.⁹⁸

The question "A human is sick, does Heaven know?" (人有病，天知否?) comes from Mao Zedong's poem "To the Tune of *He Xinlang*: Bidding Farewell to a Friend" (贺新郎—别友), written as he abandoned his first wife and two small children to join the revolution in 1923. The line, however, was added exactly fifty years after the poem was completed, and only saw the light of day after Mao's death. Scholars argue about the meaning, trying to establish what sickness the author might have been describing. Was it the moral or spiritual disease of humankind or perhaps some personal ailment? Perhaps a mental disorder he could not speak of because it was considered taboo? At any rate, Lei clearly invokes Mao's words in a very personal sense, referring to his own situation, perhaps, indeed, suspecting a sort of mental disorder in himself. This possible disorder, however, has nothing to do with the robust Romantic madness that some authors spectacularly stage in their works and resembles instead a stigmatizing, ungraspable Miłoszean "This," which one would prefer to keep for oneself.

97 Huo Junming 2020a: 128, trans. J K.

98 Quoted in Huo Junming 2020a: 128, trans. J K.

In the country where the cult of poetry and poethood assumed a rare scale, as Michelle Yeh observed in 1996,⁹⁹ Huo's praise for Lei's poetics of shame is a hugely unconventional step. It offers an alternative image of a "strong poet" (as he calls Lei Pingyang) who does not consider himself a noble victim of the "historical steam-roller" nor has ambitions to drive it; instead, he possesses courage to face his own weakness, helplessness, and ridiculousness, but still without losing hope for the ultimate success of the task he feels he should fulfill.

In the recent decade, interest in Miłosz's poetry and biography has also grown among the former Popular poets and their continuators as they keep discovering different aspects of his oeuvre. One example is Yi Sha's translation of Miłosz's "Gift" (Dar), a short poem which has already a good dozen Chinese renditions, each displaying specific features of the poetic idiom of the translator. Yi Sha's Miłosz, juxtaposed, for instance, with Xi Chuan's elegant, smooth interpretation, sounds like a poet of quotidian life par excellence, with no metaphysical aspirations.¹⁰⁰ More broadly, Yi Sha's project of "retranslating the classics," of which "Gift" is a part, along with ninety-nine other famous poems included in his anthology "When You Are Old" (当你老了, 2014), might be considered an attempt at prying great masters from the hands of the Intellectuals and breaking their monopoly on the import of foreign masterpieces.¹⁰¹ Duo Yu 朵渔 (b. 1973), once a member of the Lower Body (下半身) troupe, in his turn, wrote a long biographical essay titled "Miłosz: Spanning the Twentieth Century" (米沃什: 穿越 20 世纪) dated 2009, in which he emphasizes the poet's strong connections to his native country and the cities of his youth, especially Vilnius; in the final part of the text, he de-exilicizes Miłosz's work and brings it closer to readers who, like Lei Pingyang, value the poetics of presence more than the poetics of absence.¹⁰²

This new trend in the reception of Miłosz in China testifies to three things. First, the unusual capacity of Miłosz's worldlike oeuvre. Second, the maturing of the Chinese poetry scene: the authors' departure from the dichotomous perception of literary phenomena as belonging to one faction or the other and perceiving them instead as common goods to share and negotiate. Third, the crucial role of the Old Masters in the gradual shaping of a poetry discourse and not just as symbolic figures to be overthrown in order to announce spectacularly one's own appearance on the stage. For many poets, the absence of an

99 Yeh 1996.

100 Different translations of the poem are gathered at Douban.com, see <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/18665201/> (accessed December 22, 2020).

101 See also a discussion of the translations of Paul Celan's "Deathfugue" by Wang Jiixin, Bei Dao, and Yi Sha in Krenz 2019a.

102 Duo Yu 2011.

Old Master is one of the hardest gaps to fill. Conceivably, the greater dynamic in China of the myth of the Young Martyr than in Poland might partly be a consequence of the comparative lack of distinct Old Master personas in the Chinese national poetic imagination. Specifically, the cult of Haizi and other poet-suicides may stem from the increased efforts of Chinese authors and critics to compensate for the weakness of the indigenous narrative of precursoryship by strengthening other identity-creating narratives, for which there was sufficient material at hand, in order to build a tradition.

3 Crossing the Ocean: Rafał Wojaczek and Haizi

Rafał Wojaczek and Haizi enjoy legendary status in Polish and Chinese poetry respectively. Their works, lives, and especially their deaths, played an important part in the redefinition of the national poetry scenes in each country. As with the case of Miłosz and Ai Qing, the two Young Martyrs' biographies display many commonalities, even if their lives only partly overlap chronologically. In 1964, the year Haizi was born, Wojaczek, a nineteen-year-old student, wrote the first of his poems to be published. Yet this one-generation gap between them largely contributed to their similar reading preferences, and thus to notable convergences in their poetics.

The tightening political isolation of China since the mid-1950s meant a delay in the reception of many trends from world culture. In terms of participation in global literary discourse, when Haizi started writing in the early 1980s—that is, several years after Mao's death—China found itself in a place roughly analogous to that of Poland in the early 1960s—that is, several years after Stalin's death—when Wojaczek made his early literary attempts. The cultural fever caused by political thaws opened the way, for example, to Western European existentialism, among the most unwelcomed literary-philosophical developments to take place in socialist countries due to its obvious incompatibility with a communist utopian vision of the world. When censorship temporarily relaxed—at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s in Poland and the 1970s and 1980s in China—existentialism became tremendously popular in both countries, which we will also observe in chapter 3 in the discussion on avant-garde theater.

Wojaczek's and Haizi's shared literary and philosophical fascinations included Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Rimbaud, and Franz Kafka, to mention only the names explicitly invoked in their poetry. Naturally, there were also differences; for example, Wojaczek built on the Polish Romantic tradition and was interested in the French existentialists (Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre),

whereas Haizi favored the German Romantics and existentialists (Friedrich Hölderlin, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Martin Heidegger) and admired Ludwig Wittgenstein. Also, as with Miłosz and Ai Qing, the ways in which they processed their shared inspirations diverged. Both, however, might be understood as specific cases of an erotics of literature, in a sense that loosely draws on Susan Sontag's notion of the "erotics of art" coined in her essay "Against Interpretation" from 1964.¹⁰³ Wojaczek's intertextual erotics, based on a conviction that "poets should be used" expressed in the poem "Request" (Prośba),¹⁰⁴ borders on sadomasochism; he uses the words of others to rub salt in his (lyrical personas') psychological wounds. Haizi's aristocratic delicacy of feelings, on the other hand, makes him count himself among the Princes of Poetry (诗歌王子). The authors' different sensibilities are also reflected in the different ways they bring the erotic element from their personal lives into poetry. Wojaczek shamelessly (ab)uses women to write poems with blood on a white sheet, to invoke his untitled poem analyzed later in this section; Haizi shamefully records his unrequited love for "four sisters" (四姐妹) whose traces are seen in various poems. In both cases, however, Eros is always closely followed by Thanatos, making the Young Martyrs' poetry a site of the archetypal showdown between the unbridled force of life and the death drive. Wojaczek's and Haizi's oeuvres can be viewed as bold projects whose authors persistently, if sometimes awkwardly, try to sculpt their words in the primary matter from which the world is made. Like Nietzsche, their common inspiration, they establish strategic covenants at turns with Dionysius and Apollo to subdue Eros and Thanatos and to make them comply with the laws of aesthetic existence as the "maidservant on the right" and the "maidservant on the left," in Haizi's words.

I shall reemphasize that I have no intention of *comparing* Wojaczek and Haizi, in the sense of seeking consistent overlaps in their lives and/or works and drawing universal conclusions from the observed convergences and divergences. As with the two Old Masters, all resonances between the biographies of the Young Martyrs, their similar reading interests, and even their seemingly analogous reception patterns, at a deeper level reveal a fundamental dissimilarity in similarity in terms of the poets' own existential attitudes and the attitudes of their audiences alike. The astonishing points of contact that I will identify are important to me inasmuch as they constitute material for *comparaison*—that is, inasmuch as they generate an accident of meaning within my readerly horizon that may subsequently be directed into a constructive comparative narrative. This narrative can be summarized as a twentieth-century existential

103 Sontag 1966: 17, 23.

104 Wojaczek 2005: 148, trans. J K.

myth of Eros and Thanatos, which the two authors painstakingly try to harmonize with the aesthetic myth of Dionysius and Apollo. Needless to say, alongside poems that fit this narrative, both authors have penned a number of poems that do not. Wojacek wrote many texts that may pass as purely pornographic. Haizi produced plenty of verses that display the profound influence of Maospeak. But, again, this study does not aim to offer full literary-historical coverage of their oeuvres but enable a conversation between texts on specific topics.

One more caveat. Although I will ask the compared poems to converse on death, this should not be understood as an attempt to engage in the epistemologically pointless and ethically questionable discussion of whether Wojacek and Haizi killed themselves *for* poetry, or (*because*) *of* poetry, the result of overly passionate reading and/or writing, as their legends have it. If I were to reduce the complex relationship between poetry and death to one connective, it would be to surmise that they killed themselves *in spite of* poetry, meaning that the textual experience, intense and diverse as it was, failed to fill their sense of an existential void or canalize their desires or ambitions or alleviate the despair or disease that welled up inside them. Looking only at the texts, I tend to think that their writing, while it speaks passionately of death, could hardly be taken teleologically as writing-*toward*-death. Quite the contrary, the poets' suicides actually took place in the most vivid moments in the evolution of their respective literary universes, when fascinating perspectives were beginning to open up in their poetry that could have pushed their writing on to new tracks. Still, these are not issues that may be responsibly addressed relying solely on literary research. Perhaps they should not be addressed at all.

3.1 *Reconnaissance: Lives and Afterlives*

Although, chronologically, Rafał Wojacek belongs to the New Wave Generation, represented by Adam Zagajewski, among others, one could hardly find any points of contact between the New Wave ethos and aesthetics on the one hand, and Wojacek's provocative, eroticism-laced writing on the other. Still, the New Wave authors considered him an ally in their crusade against the mendacity of Polish public discourse. Unlike the New Wave poets, Wojacek was not interested in politics. However, in a letter to his mentor, the established language poet Tymoteusz Karpowicz (1921–2005), he indeed suggests that his intimate idiom is a form of resistance, for “[w]hen one sets maximal goals, even a banal erotic poem becomes a political slogan, and it is more effective than all those banners beautifully written in large, stylized letters.”¹⁰⁵ It is likely that it

¹⁰⁵ Wojacek 2019: 88, trans. J.K.

was Zagajewski who in 1971 wrote a famous obituary of Wojaczek, “coeval with People’s Poland,” “one of the most outstanding poets of the younger, and not just the younger, generation,” published in the Krakow-based magazine *Literary Life* (*Życie Literackie*) and signed “A. Z.” In it the author claims that “[d]eath was in his poetry. Now we know that it also lived in him. [...] Disappointed longing or hope, a concentrated search for value which ended in defeat (not an artistic one) underlie the brutality and bitterness of his poetry.”¹⁰⁶ A similar statement appears in 1974 in Zagajewski and Kornhauser’s manifesto-book *The Unrepresented World*.¹⁰⁷ Idealized and ideologized, it is quite representative of the early reception of Wojaczek’s work.

Rafał Wojaczek¹⁰⁸ was born in the small city of Mikołów, the second of the three sons of Edward Wojaczek, a high school teacher, and Elżbieta Sobecka, a translator and editor. He was a talented and curious child, endowed with an exceptional memory, which allowed him to recite long passages from his favorite books, including Thomas Mann’s monumental *Doctor Faustus*. Due to frequent conflicts with teachers, after the second year of high school in Katowice, he moved to Kędzierzyn, following his father (who had separated from Rafał’s mother) to continue his education there. It was at this time that he made the first of his numerous suicide attempts; so numerous that in the following years his friends stopped taking them seriously and accepted his suicidal tendencies as part of his perverse social self-aggrandizement.

In 1963, Wojaczek enrolled at the Department of Polish Language and Literature at Jagiellonian University in Krakow but did not manage to complete the first semester having failed an examination in Latin. He planned to start his studies anew by choosing another major, but during the obligatory health examination, he was diagnosed with psychosis, which ruled out the pursuit of university education. In 1964, he moved to Wrocław and worked at the Municipal Department of Sanitation as a dustcart driver but soon quit to devote himself to reading, writing, heavy drinking, and brawling. He was supported by his parents who regularly sent him money and food, and he, in return, sent home clothes to wash. In 1965, to verify the diagnosis of his mental condition, he spent several weeks in a mental health clinic in Wrocław where he became acquainted with a nurse named Anna Kowalska. They married the following year. The marriage technically lasted two years, but in practice it

106 Quoted in Reuel Wilson’s translation in Wilson 1987: 143.

107 Zagajewski and Kornhauser 1974: 307.

108 Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information on Wojaczek in this chapter is based on Kolbus 1986; Cudak 2004, 2013; Kierc 2007; Koper Sławomir 2014; Wojaczek 2019, introduction by Stanisław Bereś.

ended after the wedding night. Wojacek abandoned his pregnant wife and never saw his daughter Dagmara. Alimony was paid secretly by his mother, who felt responsible for the granddaughter and so wanted anxiously to protect her son from all unpleasant situations, including the divorce case in court and personal contact with the abandoned wife. When Wojacek left Anna, he told his friends with seeming pride that she had killed herself because of him.

The same year, he debuted in the journal *Poetry* (*Poezja*), which gained him immediate recognition. Wojacek's poems were accompanied by an enthusiastic recommendation written by Karpowicz. It was also Karpowicz who first called him a "Polish *poète maudit*" and connected his poetry to the legacy of Arthur Rimbaud. Many critics, including Jan Błoński and Artur Sandauer, shared Karpowicz's view. Other literary successes and social excesses followed in the ensuing years, nourishing the Rimbaudian legend, which culminated with Wojacek's suicidal death by drug overdose on May 11, 1971. In his room a note was found with a list of the medications he had taken written on in the margins of an article about the suicide of Tadeusz Borowski ("Beta" from Miłosz's *Captive Mind*, see section 2 of this chapter above) torn out from *Creation* (*Twórczość*) journal. Wojacek authored around 200 poems collected in two poetry books *Season* (*Sezon*, 1969) and *Another Tale* (*Inna bajka*, 1970) published in his lifetime and two others released a year after his death in 1971: *Who Was Not* (*Którego nie było*) and *Unfinished Crusade* (*Nie skończona krucjata*). He also wrote hundreds of pages of short stories and essayistic notes, which have been discovered and published in subsequent years.

Reading Wojacek's letters to family, friends, and girlfriends published in 2019,¹⁰⁹ and various interviews and recollective essays of those who knew him,¹¹⁰ one gets an inconsistent, self-contradictory image. Stanisław Bereś concludes that everybody has a Wojacek they have "worked out" for themselves.¹¹¹ His father remembers him as an oversensitive boy, his brother as an intelligent and cunning poseur, and his girlfriends as a capricious and cruel child in the body of an adult man, who tortured them psychologically with constant threats of suicide and never hid that women were important to him only as a source of artistic energy and inspiration. In general, most friends and critics agree that he consciously and consistently constructed his legend of the cursed poet and that poetry always took first place in his life; he hardly ever talked about anything else. The most intriguing of these recollections are those of his close friend and editor, Bogusław Kierc, himself a poet, who claims that Wojacek

109 Wojacek 2019.

110 See, e.g., Cudak and Melecki 2001.

111 Bereś and Kłodyńska 2008.

drank only blackcurrant juice and never reached for alcohol in his presence. Kierc significantly contributed to the spreading of the myth of Wojaczek as a great continuator of Romantic tradition and a true hero who—in the words of Baudelaire—always “plays alone” and assumes a lonely expedition into “the Alps of Light.”¹¹² It is also Kierc who published the first edition of Wojaczek’s collected works in 1976, with an introduction by Karpowicz.

For around twenty years after his death, Wojaczek’s legend lived mostly in the memories and rituals of his most fanatic readers. They would gather on All Saints’ Day on November 1 around his grave in the Saint Laurent cemetery in Wrocław for a party, leaving behind piles of broken alcohol bottles, cigarette butts, and syringes. Starting from the early 2000s, on Wojaczek’s birthday on May 11, a more official and well-behaved commemorative event takes place there as well, focused on poetry, and accompanied by the controlled consumption of vodka as a symbolic ritual. Except for one anthology of literary-critical studies, *The Stuntmen of Literature* (*Kaskaderzy literatury*, 1986) edited by Edward Kolbus, which incited an intense but short-lived discussion among general and professional audiences, Wojaczek’s work attracted only moderate interest among scholars and critics. The discourse around his legacy gained momentum in the 1990s, but solid text-based discussion still remained overshadowed by the legend. In 1993, *Legendary and Tragic: Essays on Polish Cursed Poets* (*Legendarni i tragiczni. Eseje o polskich poetach przeklętych*), based on the same concept as Kolbus’s edited volume, was published by Jan Marx. The same year, the first of the three currently available biographies of Wojaczek appeared, *Rafał Wojaczek Who Was* (*Rafał Wojaczek, który był*). Its author, the journalist Maciej Szczawiński, explicitly eschews textual analysis, preferring instead to explore the “myth” of the Polish poet.

The other two biographies followed several years later. In 1999, the first part of Stanisław Srokowski’s *Wojaczek the Scandalist* (*Skandalista Wojaczek*) came out subtitled *Legends, Provocations, Life* and 2006 saw the publication of a sequel subtitled *Poetry, Girls, Love*, both written in a style that resembles Szczawiński’s work and building on the legend of “the cursed poet.” Bogusław Kierc’s *Rafał Wojaczek: The Real Life of a Hero* (*Rafał Wojaczek. Prawdziwe życie bohatera*) from 2007, in turn, displays sentimental and martyrological overtones. In addition, Romuald Cudak and Maciej Melecki marked the thirtieth anniversary of the poet’s death with a collection of essays and interviews in *That Who Is: Rafał Wojaczek in the Eyes of Friends, Critics, and Scholars* (*Który jest. Rafał Wojaczek w oczach przyjaciół krewnych i znajomych*, 2001), and on the fortieth anniversary a similar book appeared edited by Stanisław Bereś and

112 Wojaczek 2005: 371.

Katarzyna Batorowicz-Wołowicz titled *Multiple Wojaczek: Memories, Accounts, Testimonies* (*Wojaczek wielokrotnie. Wspomnienia, relacje, świadectwa*). In 2014, Sławomir Koper included a chapter on Wojaczek in his book *The Scandalists of the People's Republic of Poland* (*Skandaliści PRL*). Finally, 2019 witnessed the publication of Wojaczek's letters to his parents, friends, girlfriends, publishers, and various institutions, including schools and courts, entitled *Love Letters and Not* (*Listy miłosne i nie*) with a balanced and incisive, almost hundred-page long introduction by Bereś. To date, the only exception among book-length single-author publications focused primarily on poetry and less so on biography is Romuald Cudak's study *Other Tales* (*Inne bajki*) from 2004.

A more constructive discussion of Wojaczek's poems unfolded outside the commercialized book market, in literary and academic journals and edited volumes. Among the first scholars to take a critical look at Wojaczek's artistic legacy and the phenomenon of his popularity were Jacek Łukasiewicz with a paper titled "Rafał Wojaczek's Lyric Poetry" (*Liryka Rafała Wojaczka*, 1991) and Tomasz Kunz with "I Who Was Not: Transformations of Subjectivity in Lyric Poetry of Rafał Wojaczek" (*"Ja," którego nie było: transformacje podmiotowości w liryce Rafała Wojaczka*, 1994) and "A Contention Around Rafał Wojaczek" (*Spór o Wojaczka*, 1996). Although Kunz has recently verified his observations and proposed a new interpretation of the interplay between life and writing in Wojaczek's oeuvre,¹¹³ these three papers may be considered foundational texts of academic "Wojaczekology" and still remain crucial points of reference. They also defined three main fields of interest of the "discipline": autobiographism in poetry and relationships between life and writing; the construction and transformations of poetic subjectivity; mechanisms of mythicization and development of artistic legends.¹¹⁴ Other extensively researched topics include, for instance, Wojaczek's somatopoetics and intertextuality in his work, especially his fascination with Romanticism, and transformations of traditional genre forms.¹¹⁵

The lore of a *poète maudit* is strengthened by the element of secrecy and a detective narrative of sorts that has developed not only around the poet's biography (e.g., attempts at posthumously diagnosing Wojaczek's mental disease or establishing the reasons for his suicide) but also around his manuscripts. In 2017 Grzegorz Pertek published a thoroughly researched paper,

113 Kunz 2019, chapter 4.

114 See, e.g., Chwin 1995; Łukaszyk-Piekara 2000; Jaworski 2014; Koper 2015; Szumański 2015; Kunz 1999; Pertek 2011, 2014, 2017; Chwieduk 2014; Kędzióra 2015; Staśko 2015; Misun 2015.

115 See, e.g., Filipowicz 2004; Niewiadomski 2007; Urbaniak 2007; Jarzyna 2008; Czerwiński 2010; Guty 2016.

“An Unending Errata: The ‘Twisted’ Poems of Rafał Wojaczek” (Nieskończona errata. “Zwichnięte” wiersze Rafała Wojaczka), in which he reconstructs the difficult passage of Wojaczek’s poems from his notebooks to published anthologies. In 1999, Maciej Melecki compiled a collection titled *The Rest of Blood* (*Reszta krwi*) comprised of poems that were not included in the volume from 1976 edited by Kierc, largely due to censorship. In 2005, a new volume of *Collected Poems* was published as a merger of the 1976 and 1999 books; its three reeditions appeared in 2006, 2007, and 2008. In 2011, Kierc produced one more edition, adding a poem that, as he put it, had “somehow stuck” to other papers and thus had been overlooked by him earlier. Just one year later, in 2014, on his initiative *Poems and Prose 1964–1971* (*Wiersze i proza 1964–1971*) saw the light of day, because in 2010 the editor discovered unknown pages of *Sanatory* (*Sanatorium*), short poetic prose pieces included in the 1976 collection. This book was complemented with a facsimile edition of Wojaczek’s notebook. The “unending errata” is all the more intriguing since, as Pertek says, Wojaczek’s manuscripts are collected in the archives of the Ossolineum Library in Wrocław, so the only thing they require is thorough editorial work, not archeological research.¹¹⁶

In 2016, Maciej Melecki and Konrad Wojtyła, after additional research at the Ossolineum, published a 224-page supplement to *Wojaczekology Not These Times: Unknown Works* (*Nie te czasy. Utwory nieznanne*), again announcing new findings, including what they believed to be his last poem, and several controversial short stories about abortion. The book is also unique in that, unlike the former anthologies, which were released by big publishers and sold out almost immediately by the thousands, *Not These Times* was published without commercial intent by the small Mikołów Institute established in Wojaczek’s hometown. It is the first book to have received the blessing of the poet’s daughter. She holds the copyright to his writings and had previously shared it with great reluctance owing to her complex emotional attitude toward her father. This time, during the launch event, she signed copies for readers on behalf of Wojaczek.¹¹⁷ This is a valuable but not flawless edition if only because, as Pertek points out, it contains many editorial slippages (e.g., the merging of two poems into one or the self-evident mistakes in deciphering Wojaczek’s handwriting).¹¹⁸ Wojtyła and Melecki speculate about the necessity of produc-

116 For a detailed account of the controversy around Wojaczek’s manuscripts, see Pertek 2017.

117 The circumstances surrounding the publication of *Not These Times* are discussed in the conversation between Melecki and Wojtyła at the Municipal Library in Szczecin, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tf0hk7mhXSQ> (accessed December 22, 2020).

118 Pertek 2017.

ing one more edition of the complete works of Wojacek to include both the previously known body of work and the newly discovered materials. They also consider the idea of including Wojacek in the series of classics published by the National Library (Biblioteka Narodowa), which consists of high-quality editions of the most important works of Polish literature with critical commentaries by leading specialists in the relevant field of research. Inclusion in the series is considered the mark of official “canonization” of an author.

An important moment in Wojacek’s afterlife in culture was the 1999 movie *Wojacek* directed by Lech Majewski with a screenplay authored by Melecki telling the story of the last period of the poet’s life. Wojacek was played by Krzysztof Siwczyk, a twenty-two-year-old poet who had gained critical acclaim for his debut collection *Wild Children* (*Dziki dzieci*, 1995), at which we will have a closer look in chapter 5. In an interview for the Arsenal Institut für Film und Videokunst, Siwczyk expressed an attitude toward Wojacek shared by many authors born in the 1960s and 1970s: Wojacek was someone who fueled their interest in poetry but remained in the unattainable sphere of myth that sets the horizon of their own writing without explicitly merging with it.

κ.s.: My first attempts at poetry coincided with my reading of Wojacek’s poems. Of course I tried to imitate him, clumsy and naive as I was. I notoriously tried to rework his poem “For Saint’s Day” into many different versions. The poem shocked me so deeply that for a long time I couldn’t write anything that wasn’t an imitation of the poem. Only later did I understand [*sic*] that everyone must find his own style. I don’t think I’ve managed that yet, but I’m trying.

[...]

κ.s.: In my case any attempt to follow his example always failed after about two days with my mother telling me to calm down. No, that cannot be repeated. Myths should be left alone and should not be rendered banal by repetition.¹¹⁹

The film proved very successful and was well received domestically and abroad, with enthusiastic reviews, for example, in the *New York Times*, where Wojacek, “played by Krzys[z]tof Siwczyk, who looks a little like a soulful, Slavic Kurt Cobain” was described as “a charming, maddening poète maudit whose every waking moment is a rebellion against the world around him.”¹²⁰ In general, however, Wojacek is not a well-known figure in the English-speaking

119 Arsenal 2020: 3–4.

120 Scott 2001.

world. The only three academic publications in English I can identify are Bogdan Czaykowski's paper, "The Poetry of Brutality: Andrzej Bursa and Rafał Wojaczek" (1976), Reuel Wilson's "Rafał Wojaczek: Genius of Despair" (1987), and Gwido Zlatkes's "I, Kafka': Jews in the Poetry of Rafał Wojaczek" (undated). But he was extensively translated into German—one collection, *In Mortal Danger: Selected Poems (In tödlicher Not: Ausgewählte Gedichte, 2000)*, was included in a series on European cursed poets published by Rimbaud Verlag.

Wojaczek's work also continues to inspire musicians. For many years, his poems were sung by a group called Fonetyka (Phonetics) and achieved considerable popularity. Wojaczek's verse was also performed by Zmicer Vaicushkevich (Зьміцер Вайцюшкевіч), known as "the king of the Belarusian underground."¹²¹ The adaptation that is most interesting from the perspective of the present study is an album from 2018 titled *Julia and Those Unpleasant (Julia i Nieprzyjemni)* where Wojaczek's texts are interpreted by Julia Kamińska and Marcin Świetlicki. Świetlicki wrote about the album on his Facebook profile:

Why his poems? Because performing them comes naturally to me. I would struggle with other authors. Julia Kamińska is a stage animal, she would be able to sing even Czesław Miłosz. Michał Wandzilak would manage to compose music even to Adam Zagajewski's poems. But I'm not that talented and I only do what I feel. Something that has my rhythm, that I accept fully.¹²²

Świetlicki's comment builds on the commonly assumed antithetic relationship between Miłosz (and Zagajewski as his inheritor, or epigone, as some say) and Wojaczek as sitting at opposite poles on the spectrum of poetic sensibility between which Polish poetry since the 1980s has been stretched. In the 1990s, the decade of poetic extremisms, the two poles were considered to be mutually hostile. Later, however, Polish authors gradually learned to reconcile these two distinct perspectives on poetic ethos and style. Poets such as Świetlicki, Podsiadło, Jaworski, Kapela, and Siwczyk positioned themselves in the 1990s closer to Wojaczek than to Miłosz, but since then have drifted toward the center, becoming "half-Miłoszs," to recall Świetlicki's playful self-definition, or even "near-Miłoszs," as one might say of Podsiadło when observing the evolution of his poetics toward a more conservative stance.

¹²¹ Ars Cameralis 2017.

¹²² Quoted in Silesius 2017.



Whereas Wojaczek's legend is built on scandal and secret, Haizi's is constructed by means of sentiment and sediment. This last notion is inspired by Rui Kunze's monograph on Haizi, *Struggle and Symbiosis: The Canonization of the Poet Haizi and Cultural Discourses in Contemporary China* (2012), which draws on Edmund Husserl's concept of sedimentation, that is, a process in which later meanings cover up earlier meanings of a sign/text, dissociating it from its primary sense.¹²³ Haizi's oeuvre absorbs new narratives that are inscribed into it by individual and institutional readers to serve their particular goals. This sedimental layering contrasts sharply with the endless "uncovering" of facts and manuscripts and digging into archives that sustains the mythicized narrative of Wojaczek in Poland.

Unlike Wojaczek, Haizi is already an internationally recognized and discussed poet. Kunze's monograph, and four years previous, Maghiel van Crevel's chapter on Haizi in his *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (2008), deal exhaustively with Haizi's life and afterlife. Besides, two book-length studies on Haizi's poetry in a religious context are available in English: Si Li's *The Poetic Development of the Chinese Poet Haizi (1964–1989): A Case Study of Changing Aesthetic Sensibilities in Modern China* (2016) and Xiaoli Yang's *A Dialogue between Haizi's Poetry and the Gospel of Luke* (2018). The above studies do justice not only to Haizi's biography, and thanatography, as van Crevel has it, but also to his poetry. In the next section, I will supplement these with a comparative reading of Haizi's and Wojaczek's works.

Haizi was born in 1964 into a poor peasant family in Anhui province.¹²⁴ Like Wojaczek, he was a brilliant child with an unbelievable memory, although certainly better behaved. Three years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1979, when Haizi was fifteen, he passed the entry examination and was admitted by Beijing University, where he studied law, and four years later started to work as a lecturer at the Chinese University of Political Science and Law. Unlike Wojaczek, he was shy and withdrawn. Rather than spending his and his parents' money on drinking and girls as Wojaczek had done, he supported his family in the countryside. His love affairs, reflected in poems, were not the stories of a Casanova-like figure with a penchant for sadism but of an oversensitive Romeo and reportedly all ended with rejection and disappointment. He turned to poetry during his university years, devoting most of his time to reading and writing. In June 1983, he compiled his first poetry chapbook, *A Little Station*

123 Kunze 2012: 24.

124 Biographical information on Haizi in this section is based on van Crevel 2008; Liu Chun 2010; Kunze 2012.

(小站). The collection of eighteen poems printed in twenty copies brought him some recognition and acclaim among fellow students, including the emerging poets Luo Yihe 骆一禾 (1961–1989) and Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) who would become very close to Haizi. Luo and Xi Chuan would later play a crucial role in the canonization of Haizi, similar to Kierc and Karpowicz with Wojacek. Although Haizi was particularly sensitive to criticism—some commentators even cite the unfavorable reception of his poetry as a possible reason for his suicide—his talent did not go unnoticed. He was published in leading underground poetry journals such as *Modern Poetry Materials for Internal Exchange* (现代诗内部交流资料) and *Contemporary Chinese Experimental Poetry* (中国当代实验诗歌), and was awarded several prizes in poetry competitions.

On March 26, 1989, two days after his twenty-fifth birthday, Haizi threw himself under a freight train near Shanhaiguan (山海关), a place known as “The First Pass Under the Heaven” where the Great Wall meets the sea. In his backpack four books were found: *The Old and New Testament* (新旧约全书), Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (瓦尔登湖), Thor Heyerdahl’s *Kontiki* (孤筏重洋), and the *Selected Stories of Joseph Conrad* (康拉德小说选). He was also carrying a short letter in which he assured that his death had nothing to do with anybody else and in which he entrusted his work—over 200 lyric poems, an unfinished epic poem titled *The Sun*, and several essays and diary entries—to his friend and the editor of the journal *October* (十月) Luo Yihe. The quantitatively similar output of Wojacek and Haizi at almost the same age—at the time of his death on May 11, 1971, Wojacek had been half a year older than Haizi was when he took his own life eighteen years later—testifies to a similarly impressive productivity.

After Haizi’s death, Luo Yihe and Xi Chuan worked together toward the publication of Haizi’s oeuvre. But the suicide of their friend was to be the beginning of a series of dramatic events that subsequently fed back into Haizi’s legend, adding new meanings to his work and dissociating former ones. In April, just three weeks after Haizi’s death, the student protests at Tiananmen broke out. Luo actively participated, joining a hunger strike, but on May 31 he died from a cerebral hemorrhage, which—according to some—may have been caused by exhaustion from his work on Haizi’s poetry or—according to others—by medical complications after the strike. Five days later, the students’ movement was brutally crushed by the government. If, in Liu Chun’s 刘春 words, the “1986 Great Exhibition of Modernist Poetry” and “Haizi’s Lying Down on the Railroad” (海子卧轨) “foreshadowed the end of one era and the beginning of a new one,”¹²⁵ the Tiananmen massacre sealed this transition with blood.

125 Liu Chun 2010: 73, trans. J K.

Eighteen days before his death, on May 13, Luo managed to complete what was intended as a commemorative essay on Haizi but which ultimately became an introduction to a posthumous collection of the work of both Luo and Haizi. The text begins with the following passage which connects Haizi to Mickiewicz and Byron, bringing thus to mind Lu Xun's 鲁迅 "On the Power of Mara Poetry" (摩罗诗力说) discussed in chapter 1, one of the earliest encounters between Polish and Chinese verse:

My only motivation for writing this essay is the importance of Haizi's poetry. In nineteenth-century Paris, discussing Slavic literature, Mickiewicz mentioned the inspiration that Eastern European poetry drew from Byron: "He was the first to have shown us that one shall not only write but also live as one writes." This formula equally aptly describes the connection between Haizi's poetry and Haizi himself. Haizi's importance rests in [the fact] that Haizi is not an incident but a tragedy.¹²⁶

Xi Chuan wrote his own introduction nine months later, in February 1990. Its first sentence is now one of the most frequently cited statements in literary-critical commentary on Haizi: "The death of the poet Haizi will become one of the myths of our times."¹²⁷ This might be read as something of a prophecy, but, conceivably, it functioned rather as a manifesto, as it was Xi Chuan himself who chiefly contributed to the dissemination of the myth he prophesized. He later tried to walk this narrative back, seeing its detrimental effect on the reception of Haizi's poetry. In 1994, he completed another piece, titled "Postscript to Death" (死亡后记),¹²⁸ where he carried out an analysis of the possible reasons for his friend's death and sought to quit speculations, de-Romanticize, and demetaphysicize the figure of the poet-suicide—but it was already too late to stop the mythification process.

Among poets, the life and work of Haizi soon became one of the flashpoints in the escalating conflict between the gradually emerging camps of Intellectual poets, who tended to acknowledge Haizi's heroic self-immolation, and Popular poets, who rejected it altogether. Haizi was, for instance, one of the implied protagonists of Yi Sha's controversial poem "Starve the Poets" (饿死诗人). Critical remarks were also voiced by Yu Jian, while Han Dong was one of the first to attempt to interpret the poet's suicide as something different than martyrdom, namely an "actionist experiment." One of the most provocative essays,

126 Luo Yihe 1989, trans. J K.

127 Xi Chuan 1990, trans. J K.

128 Xi Chuan 1994.

by Qin Bazi 秦巴子, was included in *Criticizing Ten Poets* along with Xu Jiang's essay on Ai Qing discussed in the previous section and Li Si's 李思 piece on Cui Jian 崔健, the father of Chinese rock music, to be discussed in chapter 3.

These voices, however, were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the huge body of hagiography: countless essays and papers, and a good dozen book-length publications, including collected volumes of literary criticism, tendentious biographies, and monographs, most of which are characterized in a great detail by Kunze.¹²⁹ Earlier on, I quoted Świetlicki on Wojacek; here, let me quote Cui, who will be compared with Świetlicki in the next chapter, on Haizi. His utterance may be taken as representative of Chinese artists who sought some kind of self-identification with Haizi on emotional and/or spiritual level but not necessarily on the level of aesthetic experience and practice:

Q: What do you feel about [Haizi's] poems?

A: First of all, I have much stronger feelings about Haizi as a person than about his poetry. I tend to think more about him than about his works. So, in my opinion, this person was a pure human, and he must have been very courageous; he considered ideals and spiritual life as something greater than [physical] existence. I haven't achieved this level as yet. I can hear that despair of people who realize the decline of ideals in music. I like listening to such music, and I like making such music as well. But I think a better solution is to free up the depressive feelings in the cathartic experience and integrate them into my own way of life rather than manifesting them through death.¹³⁰

Beyond the poetry scene, Haizi's poetry took on a life of its own, its uses and abuses ranging from recitals followed by ritual suicides at Haizi's grave through to advertisements of real estate companies selling houses "facing the sea, when the spring flowers blossom" (面朝大海, 春暖花开), quoting the title of Haizi's most famous work. This last poem enjoys great popularity among musicians too; it has several song adaptations, including by recognized artists such as Hu Pan 胡畔, Xiong Rulin 熊汝霖, Dongzi 冬子, Sun Jiamin 孙嘉敏, and Jiang Shan 蒋山. In 2009, a twenty-minute film was made, titled *Looking for Haizi* (寻找海子) directed by Zhao Shasha 赵傻傻, which documents not so much the search for Haizi but rather for the exact location of his suicide, a search that eventually failed. Three years later, the poet Zhang Hou 张后 directed and produced a forty-five-minute biographical film, *The Legend of Haizi* (海子传说). The same

129 Kunze 2012, see chapter 1.

130 Cui Jian 2016, trans. J.K.

year, 2012, a music drama titled *Arriving at a Place That Is Deeper Than Love* (走进比爱情更深邃的地方) focusing on Haizi's relationships with women, including his mother and (platonically) loved girls, directed by Shan Shan 珊珊 and consulted on by Xi Chuan, was performed in Beijing Donggongying Theater (东宫影剧院) to commemorate the twenty-third anniversary of the poet's death. In 1989, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary, students at Nanjing University made the theatrical play *Child* (孩子), described by its creators as "a story of a child from Wheat Village conquering the Sun" (麦村少年占领太阳的故事).¹³¹

Lastly, Haizi's poetry was gradually appropriated by the Communist Party to promote the official line of cultural policy and shape people's sensibility from the early years of their lives through the inclusion of a number of decontextualized poems in the school curriculum, as Kunze insightfully observes, tracing the evolution of Haizi's image into that of a "poet-hero similar to a genius, socialist poet":

His early poems about retrieving Chinese history among common people in the rural areas and his "modern epic" writing endorse readily the discourse of cultural nationalism. His integration of foreign literary works into his own writing demonstrates his knowledge and creative power. His status of an unofficial, experimental poet and his powerful writing style that are even enhanced by his unusual death win him the sympathy and respect from different generations of readers, particularly those who received education in the 1980s (as nostalgia) and the younger generations (as a rediscovered legend). In a word, the success of making a canon poet out of Haizi problematizes, to a large extent, the acclaimed autonomy, subversiveness, and the spirit of experiment of the Third Generation poetry in particular, and avant-garde art in post-Mao China in general.¹³²

Compared to Haizi, Wojacek proved definitely less useful in the making of political narratives because of the ostentatiously antididactic nature of his work, although it is not unlikely that, sooner or later, it will be drawn into political discussions as well. Some portents have already appeared. In 2019, during a meeting of the Municipal Committee of Wojacek's hometown of Mikołów, a local representative of the Law and Justice party reportedly raised objections to the city's efforts at promoting its best poet as disseminating

¹³¹ Douban 2019.

¹³² Kunze 2012: 71.

immoral attitudes.¹³³ Since 1989, Polish audiences have witnessed many political-ideological wars concerning literary canons, so one more would not come as a surprise.

3.2 *Con-versation: Eros, Thanatos, and Homunculus*

Wang Jiaxin once claimed that if Yeats had been born in China during the Tang dynasty, he would have been Li Shangyin 李商隱, and Wang himself, had he been born in New England during the nineteenth century, might have been Emily Dickinson.¹³⁴ I do not dare speculate whether Wojacek would have been Haizi if he had been born in China in the era of transformation, or whether Haizi would have been Wojacek if he had been born in Poland shortly after the end of World War II. Still, it is very likely that if Haizi had known Wojacek's work, he would have been interested in it, perhaps placing the Polish poet somewhere among those whom he referred to as the Princes of Poetry (诗歌王子) and believed to be different incarnations of the Prince of the Sun:

I cherish especially those Princes who have not become Kings. They represent the tragic fate of humankind. Fate exists. Whether you admit its existence or not. [...] Like in tragedies, the most talented Princes often die first. The Princes whom I admire form a long lineage: Shelley, Yesenin, Hölderlin, Poe, Malraux, Rimbaud, Celan, Dylan [Thomas], Schiller, even Pushkin. Malraux and Rimbaud represent genius, Shelley—the purity of the character. [...] Different bodies, different appearances, different writing styles, but that's all—in fact, all of them are the same Prince, the Prince of Poetry, the Prince of the Sun. I have no doubt about it. Their tragic resistance and lyricism themselves are the most magnificent poems of humankind. And their tragic existence is poems' poem. Their beautiful destruction is a symbol of humanity.¹³⁵

According to Haizi, the Princes lived and wrote within the domain of the Female element, of the Mother. Wojacek would seem a good fit, then, since his work featured a fascination with femininity and frequent gender transgressions, and he believed in the “femaleness” of poetry in general, as we learn, for instance, from one of his earliest poems, “Can a Poem Not Be a Woman?” (Czy wiersz może nie być kobietą):

¹³³ am 2019.

¹³⁴ Wang and Crespi 2011: 80, see also chapter 2.

¹³⁵ Haizi 1987, trans. J.K.

Can a Poem Not Be a Woman?

How many pages still left not blotted with hungry blood!
Yet one that became itself by eating me,

a poem written in the morning, nourished at night,
can it not be a woman?

Czy wiersz może nie być kobietą

Ileż to jeszcze stronic nie zmazanych krwią głodną!
Lecz ten, co stał się, mnie jedząc,

Wiersz rankiem napisany, nakarmiony nocą,
Czyż może nie być kobietą?¹³⁶

At some point, Haizi's interest shifted from Princes to Kings (王): Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare, as embodiments of the Male creatorly power, so eventually he would have probably abandoned *Wojaczek* to pursue his higher goals and ambitions, culminating in the several-hundred-pages long unfinished epic *The Sun* (太阳).

Obviously, this form of intertextual interaction was technically impossible, because there were no translations of *Wojaczek* in Chinese in the 1980s. The only Polish books in Haizi's private collection were Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, Henryk Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*), and the selected writings of the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski.¹³⁷ One may invoke the poem "Poet Yesenin" (诗人叶赛宁), where Haizi speaks of his spiritual family in the following way:

I am a Chinese poet
a son of rice
a daughter of camellia
I am also a European poet
my son is called Italy
my daughter's name is Poland.

我是中国诗人
稻谷的儿子

¹³⁶ *Wojaczek* 2005: 53, trans. J.K.

¹³⁷ The list of books from Haizi's collection is included as a supplement in Jin 2009: 284–340.

茶花的女儿
 也是欧罗巴诗人
 儿子叫意大利
 女儿叫波兰¹³⁸

The choice of Poland is justified by the semantic and phonetic qualities of the Chinese word *Bolan*, “Poland” (波兰, lit. “wave” + “orchid,” “orchid of waves” or “wavering orchids”), which make it a nice name for a girl. A tempting hypothesis would be that Haizi associated Poland with Rimbaud, whose surname is written in Chinese with the use of the same two characters in the inverted order, *Lanbo* (兰波), but Haizi’s other texts suggest that he was familiar with a different, earlier rendition of the poet’s name: *Hanbo* 韩波.

Whether Wojaczek would have been interested in Haizi’s poetry had he known it is more questionable, particularly when one takes into account his racist tendencies; in the poem “How I Dream Now” (Jak ja teraz śnię), he characterizes a Chinese man as having a “tiny dick [which] dangles on him” (jemu zwisa taki mały kutasik).¹³⁹ It is even difficult to say how much he might have known about China, for—as Bereś notes—“reading these letters [by Wojaczek], one gets an impression that their author has never heard about the Cultural Revolution in China, about the six-day war, about the invasion of Vietnam, about the beating of students at Warsaw University by militia, about the Prague Spring, and even about the moon landing,”¹⁴⁰ or indeed anything else that happened in his lifetime which was not directly connected to his poetry.

But speculations aside, let’s turn to the texts. Their real-time con-versation is far more productive than the imaginary conversations between the authors.

•••

I shall begin by two texts that drew my attention in 2012 when I was working on my master’s thesis, in which I first attempted to juxtapose Wojaczek’s and Haizi’s writings. The poems are Wojaczek’s “Coast” (Wybrzeże) and Haizi’s “Clasps a White Tiger and Crosses the Ocean” (抱着白虎走过海洋), the latter being discussed extensively in van Crevel’s monograph, where I first encountered it.

138 Haizi 2008: 118, trans. J K.

139 Wojaczek 2005: 327, trans. J K.

140 Wojaczek 2019: 46–47, trans. J K.

Rafał Wojaczek
Coast

The invisible prisoners of the rose
 dream, mother swims to them
 through the ocean, when the rose passes,
 she will give a sign to start frolics. They dream

Mother lies on the beach
 boiling lovage in her entrails
 trackeresses, daughters of blood
 emerge from her hair

They dream. Mother runs through the grass
 they lash the fetlocks, a pageant follows her

 stops, spits

1966

Wybrzeże

Niewidzialni śnią więźniowie
 róży, matka do nich przez ocean
 płynie, gdy minie róża
 da znak do godów. Śnią

Matka leży na plaży
 lubczyk w trzewiach gotuje
 tropicielki, córki krwi
 wychodzą z jej włosów

Śnią. Matka biegnie przez trawy
 biją po pęcicach, za nią korowód

 staje, sfluwa

1966¹⁴¹

141 Ibidem: 49, trans. J K.

Haizi

Clasps a White Tiger and Crosses the Ocean

Mother leaning toward magnificence
clasps a white tiger and crosses the ocean

On the land are five chambers
a sickbed lies down in her hometown

Mother leaning toward her hometown
clasps a white tiger and crosses the ocean

The sons coming out in spite of their sickness
open the door and gaze at the sun of blood

Mother leaning toward the sun
clasps a white tiger and crosses the ocean

The maidservant on the left is life
the maidservant on the right is death

Mother leaning toward death
clasps a white tiger and crosses the ocean

1986

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL

《抱着白虎走过海洋》

倾向于宏伟的母亲
抱着白虎走过海洋

陆地上有堂屋五间
一只病床卧于故乡

倾向于故乡的母亲
抱着白虎走过海洋

扶病而出的儿子们
开门望见了血太阳

倾向于太阳的母亲
抱着白虎走过海洋

左边的侍女是生命
右边的侍女是死亡

倾向于死亡的母亲
抱着白虎走过海洋

1986¹⁴²

Wojaczek was twenty-one when he wrote “Coast,” Haizi twenty-two when he wrote “Clasps a White Tiger”; both authors were undergoing an intense transformation in their idioms toward a distinct and more consistent poetics. The two poems are built around images and notions that are quite typical of their authors, such as mother (W & H), blood (W), death (W & H), rose (W), and homeland (H). Nonetheless, they could hardly be considered as representative of Wojaczek’s and Haizi’s respective oeuvres. I would venture to say that, in some respects, at first glance, Haizi’s “Clasps a White Tiger” might even be taken as more representative of Wojaczek’s oeuvre, who was much concerned with beauty and symmetrical form, than of Haizi’s. Wojaczek’s “Coast,” in turn, has something in common with Haizi’s early lyric poems, many of which convey ciphered micronarratives. “Coast” seems a little bit too mild compared with Wojaczek’s other poems, with a dotted line perhaps suggesting self-censorship, a textual counterpart of the bleeping out of swear words in the movies; such unspectacular, peaceful endings (“stops, spits”) are rare in his oeuvre. “Clasps a White Tiger,” juxtaposed with Haizi’s earlier verses dedicated to his mother—for example, a series of landscape poems titled “For the Mother” (给母亲)—conversely, strikes one as quite avant-garde. Yet, standing out from their respective source contexts, these two poems display some astonishing mutual resemblances, which perhaps suggests some common external source beyond their entanglements with the authors’ individual poetics and biographies.

The cryptic mother-and-ocean thread which connects the two texts leads to Rimbaud, namely to his early long poem “Sun and Flesh” (Soleil et chair). The work, initially titled “Credo in Unam” (I Believe in One), an allusion to the Apostles’ Creed, overturns the Christian order of the world and revives the gods of polytheist mythologies: Cybele, Venus/Aphrodite, Eros, and Sun/Zeus.

142 van Crevel 2008: 126.

The second half of Part III, which follows the birth of Aphrodite from the sea foam in Part II, proceeds as follows:

If man is born so soon, if life is so brief,
 Whence does he come? Does he sink into the deep Ocean
 Of Germs, of Foetuses, of Embryos, to the bottom
 Of the huge Crucible where Mother Nature
 Will revive him, a living creature,
 To love in the rose, and to grow in the wheat? ...

We cannot know!—We are weighted down
 Under a cloak of ignorance and narrow chimeras!
 Apes of men, fallen from our mothers' wombs
 Our pale reason hides the infinite from us!
 We try to see:—and Doubt punishes us!
 Doubt, gloomy bird, strikes us with its wing ...
 And the horizon rushes off in an eternal flight! ...

.....

The great sky is open! the mysteries are dead
 Before erect Man crossing his strong arms
 In the vast splendor of rich nature!
 He sings ... and the wood sings, and the river murmurs
 A song full of joy which rises toward daylight! ...
 —It is Redemption! it is love! it is love! ...

Translated by WALLACE FOWLIE

Si l'homme naît si tôt, si la vie est si brève,
 D'où vient-il? Sombre-t-il dans l'Océan profond
 Des Germes, des Fœtus, des Embryons, au fond
 De l'immense Creuset d'où la Mère-Nature
 Le ressuscitera, vivante créature,
 Pour aimer dans la rose, et croître dans les blés? ...

Nous ne pouvons savoir!—Nous sommes accablés
 D'un manteau d'ignorance et d'étroites chimères!
 Singes d'hommes tombés de la vulve des mères,
 Notre pâle raison nous cache l'infini!
 Nous voulons regarder:—le Doute nous punit!

Le doute, morne oiseau, nous frappe de son aile ...
—Et l'horizon s'enfuit d'une fuite éternelle!

.....
Le grand ciel est ouvert! les mystères sont morts
Devant l'Homme, debout, qui croise ses bras forts
Dans l'immense splendeur de la riche nature!
Il chante ... et le bois chante, et le fleuve murmure
Un chant plein de bonheur qui monte vers le jour! ...
—C'est la Rédemption! c'est l'amour! c'est l'amour! ...)

.....¹⁴³

Tracing literary-historical affinities is always fraught with uncertainty and here, too, one cannot exclude the possibility of pure coincidence. Still, even if this is the case, it is arguably a happy one that can be consciously processed into a consistent narrative; the accident of meaning that results from the collision of Rimbaud's text with "Coast" and "Clasps a White Tiger" both clarifies and complicates the texture of Wojacek's and Haizi's poems and helps play out their polyvalent artistic potential. It also constitutes a promising point of departure for the con-versation between other works in their respective oeuvres.

The resonance with "Sun and Flesh" is more conspicuous in Wojacek's "Coast," the most suggestive example being the dotted line, a puzzling reproduction of Rimbaud's silence. But why cite someone else's silence? Does Wojacek lack his own? Or, perhaps, this silence in its essence is not a silence at all but rather what Rimbaud calls "the voice of thought" which suddenly brings the ecstatic parade of the lustful mother to halt and makes her "stop, spit"?

If one identifies the mother in "Coast" with Nature who resuscitates a human drowned in the ocean of Germs, Foetuses, and Embryos in Rimbaud's work, then Wojacek's poem may be read as a metaphorical representation of birth. Labor is the moment in which Mother Nature rescues a child from the narrow and dark space of the womb of their human mother in which the baby is imprisoned, to welcome them with a Dionysian feast of life. Wojacek uses the word *gody*, which I translate as "frolics"—a choice intended to retain a trace of its ambiguous meaning in Polish: (1) a happy celebration, feast; (2) mating period. When the mother runs through the grass, her "fetlocks" are visible, which leads to a direct association with the Satyrs from Dionysus's pageant.

The rose, which appears in both Rimbaud ("to love in the rose") and Wojacek ("prisoners of the rose"), symbolizes Aphrodite and, obviously, love

143 Rimbaud 2005: 18–19.

and sexuality. Yet, the sexuality associated with the rose in the Wojacek's text is not exactly the robust Dionysian sexuality. It refers rather to a culturally legitimized and restricted relationship between one man and one woman, typical of harmonious, restrained Apollonian art. In Wojacek's poetry, argues Anita Jarzyna,¹⁴⁴ roses often convey references to Cyprian Kamil Norwid, one of the "Four Bards" of Polish Romanticism, who harnessed the Romantic element in ascetic classical beauty. From "Never Open the Window" (*Nigdy nie otwierać okna*), for example, we learn that Wojacek carefully tends his roses.

Never Open the Window

Remember
 never
 open the window
 inside four walls
 wind doesn't blow
 take care of the head
 and of the rose
 and take again and again
 directly from the bourgeoisie source
 and don't think of your
 renewing stigma
 you ...

Don't write letters to yourself
 what a nonsense
 to write letters to the dead

Nigdy nie otwierać okna

Pamiętaj
 nigdy
 nie otwieraj okna
 w czterech ścianach
 wiatr nie wieje
 dbaj o głowę
 i o różę
 i zaczerpuj wciąż na nowo

144 Jarzyna 2008.

wprost ze źródła mieszczańskiego
 nie myśl o tym
 że ci się odnawia stygmat
 ty ...

Nie pisz listów do siebie
 kto to widział
 pisać listy do zmarłych¹⁴⁵

In Rimbaud, “redemption” is to be found not in religious purity but in the primordial “vast splendor of abundant Nature.” Wojaczek, however, does not entirely trust this vision. Before the final words of “Coast,” we find the dotted line: something happens that makes him stop the galloping Mother Nature. She cannot continue her triumphant race, held back by the Apollonian gesture of the author’s hand—it firmly grasps the aesthetic universe which started to uncontrollably sink into anarchy.

Struggles with the living flesh-and-blood matter that wants to explode aesthetic forms are a recurring metapoetic motif in Wojaczek’s first collection *Season*—a title that alludes to Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell* (*Une Saison en Enfer*)—and ultimately negate singular interpretations or clear conclusions. In the collection’s final poem, “The Poet Had to Be Executed” (Trzeba było rozstrzelać poetę), he makes the following confession:

The Poet Had to Be Executed

Sometimes I look at the Earth but I see the planet no more
 What good is that the word Earth exists and that I also remember other
 words

Even if these were all
 Words I remember
 I know the language of poemat is different.

Poemat is a person, it seems so to me sometimes
 Looks like he is a Negro but I’m not sure: black or white
 So the red-and-white wand
 that quivers under my belly
 Leads him cautiously in my footsteps.

145 Wojaczek 2005: 16, trans. J.K.

Sometimes I wish I could hide myself but there's not the tiniest fissure

Nor is there a cloud. Perhaps there's no Negro either
 Poemat is someone else too
 And if it's a lizard
 or a bishop, it's still my fault.

1967

Trzeba było rozstrzelać poetę

Patrzę czasem na Ziemię lecz już nie widzę planety
 Cóż, że jest słowo Ziemia, że inne także pamiętam
 Choćby to były wszystkie
 Słowa, które pamiętam
 Wiem, że inny jest język poematu.

Poemat jest osobą, tak mi się czasem wydaje
 Zdaje się, jest Murzynem choć nie wiem: czarnym czy białym
 Więc drgająca pod brzuchem
 Białoczerwona różdżka
 Pilnie prowadzi go za moim śladem.

Czasem chciałbym się schować lecz nawet najmniejszej szpary

Nie ma ani obłoku. Lecz nie ma także Murzyna
 Poemat jest kimś innym
 Ale jeśli jaszczurką
 Jest lub biskupem, też jest moja wina.

1967¹⁴⁶

The word *poemat* is usually translated into English as “long poem,” but this does not convey the specific cultural implications it carries in Polish poetry discourse, and for this reason I retained the original form. Conventionally, *poemat* is defined not as much by its length as by its theme (usually existentially fraught), narrativity, and often by an elevated or reflexive style; it is a genre associated primarily with Polish Romanticism, the period in which the most

146 Ibidem: 50, trans. J K.

magnificent poemats were written. Wojaczek provocatively fills the canonical form with content that is characterized by a mixture of obscenity, national sentiment, and racism. The colors of the Polish national flag (red and white) are associated with a penis. The “patriotic” penis leads the way and the “other”—poemat a.k.a. Negro—follows it, fueled by Dionysian sexual desire. But again, in the last stanza, the procession suddenly stops, hampered by intellectual reflection and an irrational pang of aesthetic guilt. The Apollonian conscience whispers a remorse: “it’s still my fault.”

The author’s wrestles with textual matter impact the condition of the lyrical subject, whom the poet treats like a laboratory specimen. In “An Attempt at a New World” (*Próba nowego świata*), from Wojaczek’s second collection *Another Tale*, this amorphous material eventually takes its final shape: a homunculus.

Worms are

Angels and the unfinished bottle is
A vial, in which one homunculus crawls
That is He

Preserved for educational purposes
A bastard I once knew quite well
Rafał Wojaczek.

Robaki są

Aniołami zaś butelka nie dopita
Fiolką, w której homunculus jeden pływa
To znaczy On

Przechowany na użytek dydaktyczny
Czyli dobrze kiedyś znany mi skurwysyn
Rafał Wojaczek¹⁴⁷

In the poems in the *Season* collection, however, the would-be homunculus is still a lump of raw matter, torn asunder by contradictory impulses from textual and extratextual reality. Wojaczek performs his experiments on it aimed at writing a poem that “is like body” (“Love Poem” [Erotyk]).¹⁴⁸ The opening

147 Ibidem: 172–173, trans. J K.

148 Ibidem: 14.

poem “Season” (Sezon) begins with Wojaczek’s signature phrase: “There is a handrail / but no stairs / There is I / but me is not” (Jest poręcz / ale nie ma schodów / Jest ja / ale mnie nie ma) and continues in the third-person singular: “I loves wetly / on a square, without an umbrella” (ja kocha mokro / na placu, bez parasola).¹⁴⁹ In the untitled poem beginning “People go to bed ...” (Ludzie kładą się spać ...), the speaker first proudly proclaims himself Prince of Aquitania to subsequently “climb a tree / in my best suit” (wspinam się na drzewo / w moim najlepszym wyjściowym ubraniu) in order to peep at a naked female neighbor, announce that “the plague invalidated axiological judgments / as another French guy said, also mad” (dżuma zniósła sądy wartościujące powiada / inny Francuz też szalony), and spectacularly fall from the tree.¹⁵⁰ Yet another poem is titled “I: Kafka” (Ja: Kafka). After identifying himself with the Czech author, the lyrical subject observes that “My heart / overgrew me / I am all inside / a root // White grass leaves / grow out of my / lips” (Przerosło mnie / serce / cały jestem wewnątrz / korzeń // Białe trawki / wyrastają mi / z warg).¹⁵¹ Similar examples of failed transformations can be enumerated.

“Coast” and “A Poet Had to Be Executed” may be taken as signaling the beginning of the process of consolidation of the textual “I,” which culminates in the collection *Another Tale*. There, we witness Wojaczek’s attempt at creating a poetic model of aesthetic existence and an aesthetic universe located beyond axiology. In “In a Dead Need” (W śmiertelnej potrzebie) from 1969, “I” will even claim independence, announcing that it is the lyrical homunculus who has the primary existence and has “invented Wojaczek” (wymyśliłem Wojaczka), the author, and not the other way around.¹⁵² In “Coast,” Wojaczek for the first time subdues the Rimbaudian unbridled madness and the French poet’s imaginative “alchemy of the word” and shifts to the calculated logic of Nietzsche’s “gay science” (die fröhliche Wissenschaft), which he interprets in an extreme way. One of the most shocking examples of his gay-scientific experiments is an untitled poem from *Unfinished Crusade*, written from the perspective of his partner, probably Teresa Ziomber, whom he considered his most efficient (this adjective arguably best describes his approach to women) muse. Among his girlfriends, Ziomber was probably the most aware of her role in Wojaczek’s life. She recalls that she often reproached him for treating her instrumentally

149 Ibidem: 5, trans. J K.

150 Ibidem: 10, trans. J K.

151 Ibidem: 19, trans. J K.

152 Ibidem: 280.

as mere material to be processed into poetry.¹⁵³ The below poem reconstructs this questionable procedure:

I am still a woman You force me to be her
 Not by threats You are stronger than me
 By your weakness which stimulates the pulse of my
 Femininity which wants to freeze

And I actually don't know what these words mean
 Woman and femininity They mean something for You
 I'm tired with writing the poemat
 With my regularly raped body

I want to be a poet To write with a pen
 On a normal sheet of paper And not on a bedsheet
 Once a week satisfy physiological needs
 For better writing

Jeszcze jestem kobietą Wciąż zmuszasz bym nią była
 Nie groźbami Ty jesteś ode mnie silniejszy
 Słabością która wzrusza chcący już zamarznąć
 Puls mojej kobiecości

A ja właściwie nie wiem co znaczą te słowa
 Kobieta i kobiecość Znaczą coś dla Ciebie
 Ja już jestem zmęczona pisaniem poematu
 Ciągłe gwałconym ciałem

Ja już chcę być poetką Pisać długopisem
 Na zwykłej kartce Nie na karcie prześcieradła
 Raz na tydzień załatwiać potrzebę cielesną
 Dla lepszego pisania¹⁵⁴

Wojaczek is cynical and acutely, not to say psychopathically, conscious of his artistic steps. He is clearly aware that there is no authenticity in literature, and he has never had any ambitions to achieve it. Among his letters, one can find an official correspondence with a public attorney in charge of his criminal

153 Wojaczek 2019: 51, introduction by Stanisław Beres.

154 Wojaczek 2005: 153, trans. J.K.

case in which he was sued for breaking a glass on the head of Ludwik Gułaj-Korzeniowski. Explaining his behavior, Wojaczek wrote: “the kind of work I am doing allows me and even forces me to create legends about myself and different versions of ...”¹⁵⁵ At the same time, he seems to be increasingly addicted to his own performance, exploring new ways to boost his adrenaline when Eros can no longer stimulate him. Teasing Thanatos is one of them. In his later poems, the lyrical homunculus he claims to have grown in his laboratory acts as a “stuntman.” I borrow the word from Kolbus’ *Stuntmen of Literature*, but I hold that it should be applied not to Wojaczek himself but to the lyrical persona in his poems, who replaces the author in enacting dangerous acts, including a spectacular leap *through* death, which we will replay here in slow motion together with a similar attempt by the hero of Haizi’s work. Prior to this, however, let’s examine the Chinese poet’s adventures with Eros, starting from “Clasps a White Tiger and Crosses the Ocean.”

Read with the same intertextual key as “Coast”—Rimbaud’s “Sun and Flesh”—“Clasps a White Tiger” might be rendered as a story of Mother Nature following in the footsteps of her human child to rescue it from the various troubles it puts itself in. The interpretation of the mother as Nature might be additionally substantiated by a reference to Haizi’s poem “Nature” (大自然), likely written in 1986 as well, where Nature is described as

a beautiful and strong woman
 little blue fish are her water jugs
 and the clothes she took off
 She loves you with flesh
 loves you eternally in folk songs
 [...]
 she still loves you from afar

美丽结实的女子
 蓝色小鱼是她的水罐
 也是好脱下的服装
 她会用肉体爱你
 在民歌中久久地爱你
 [...]
 她仍在远处爱着你。¹⁵⁶

155 Wojaczek 2019: 48–50, trans. J K.

156 Haizi 2008: 38, trans. J K.

These lines resonate with the final lines of the aforementioned excerpt from “Sun and Flesh.” We do not know the identity of the child, but we know the destination and some intermediary stages on their route.

The goal settled in the first line of Haizi’s work is “magnificence,” but the way to it is not straight. It leads through a sickbed, through the Sun, and through death. The reader never learns whether there is a happy ending, nor whether the Mother manages to save the child’s life. Can this child be identified with Haizi himself? Citing Rimbaud, “We cannot know! / We are weighed down / With a cloak of ignorance.” This hypothesis, however, is not unjustified, taking into account the near-homophony of the word “child” (*háizi* 孩子) and the name “Haizi” (*Hàizi* 海子).¹⁵⁷ Still, bearing in mind Wojaczek’s experiments, and recalling his textual homunculus, which “is like a body” and uses its creator’s name, one should of course be careful speaking of full identification of the lyrical persona with the poet.

Let’s try to unpack the image of the white tiger. In his interpretation of the poem,¹⁵⁸ Liu Guangtao 刘广涛 offers a survey of various meanings of white tiger in China. Two of them appear to be particularly promising. The first—too easily dismissed by Liu—is White Tiger as one of the four mythical creatures that stand for the four sides of the world: Green Dragon (青龙), White Tiger (白虎), Scarlet Bird (朱雀), and Black Tortoise (玄武). The domain of the tiger is West. If we take into account that Haizi was fascinated with Western literature and critical of Chinese tradition, among Chinese poets cherishing perhaps only their half-legendary, half-mythical prototype Qu Yuan 屈原, a relatively consistent narrative emerges from the poem. Mother Nature carried by the tiger of Western culture brings to mind Thoreau’s *Walden*, discovered in Haizi’s backpack at the scene of his death. Together, Nature and (Western) culture offer hope for salvation to a human who sinks into suffering. The ocean, as Liu proposes, might be interpreted in the context of the Buddhist image of the earthly world as *kuhai chongyang* (苦海重洋)—the “ocean of torment” in which one is thrown in the moment of birth. The three elements—Life, Nature (present in the works of Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 and Thoreau), and Western literature—are brought together in an excerpt from Haizi’s prose piece “Poetics: A Draft” (诗学—一份提纲) dated May 30, 1987:

This time, I shall immerse in the Western kingdom of poetry. Because I hate the literati temperament of Eastern poets. They are weak and pale, and self-righteous. They hide in, and are intoxicated by, their

157 Cf. van Crevel 2008: 127.

158 Liu Guangtao 2013.

own pleasures. They turn everything into pleasure. This is unbearable. For example, Tao Yuanming and Thoreau both chose a solitary life surrounded by nature, but Tao Yuanming sought pleasure, while Thoreau celebrated and attentively observed his life and existence as such. This is my poetic ideal: abandon the literati temperament, and directly focus on life and existence. This is the path toward a renewal of Chinese poetry.¹⁵⁹

The other possible interpretation of the white tiger is based on a linguistic association with an expression from the local dialect of Anhui province where Haizi grew up. The idiom 白虎蛋 (lit. “a white tiger’s egg”), pronounced in the dialect as *bohudan*, means a naughty child. The word *bao* 抱 (“clasp, embrace”), in its turn, may be understood as a synonym for *huai* 怀, “carry in a womb,” “be pregnant.” Mother clasping a white tiger would, in this case, be a representation of a pregnant mother. Liu reads the first lines of the poem as an image of labor, arriving thus incidentally—without referring to Rimbaud—almost at the same point as the French poet in “Sun and Flesh” in his vision of the “Ocean / Of Germs, of Foetuses, of Embryos.” Later, however, he chooses a different path, suggesting that the rest of the text is about the process of the (human) mother’s aging after giving birth to a child. Haizi, in his eyes, is an innocent and loving son who remains faithful to Confucian ethics and concerned about his mom living a hard life in the countryside.

There is of course no correct and incorrect reading, and the secret to the poem’s success lies largely in that it can accommodate both of the above interpretations, and more, as mutually complementary and not mutually excluding. When it is read back to Haizi’s early poetry, which is built around images of wheat fields (wheat also appears in the excerpt from Rimbaud’s “Sun and Flesh” cited above) and other symbols of life and plenitude, Liu’s interpretation along the lines of Confucian filial piety works well; on the other hand, when it is read “forward” in the context of Haizi’s ideals, ambitions, and his further artistic development, the story of a child who pursues magnificence trusting that Nature and (Western) culture will belay him gains much greater credibility.

In an entry from Haizi’s diary written in 1987, the same year as “Poetics: A Draft” and one year after “Clasps a White Tiger,” the images from the poem (mother, servant, life, and death) return reinvented, demonized. The noble white tiger is replaced by “the horse of drunkenness.” The horse carries Haizi, similarly to Wojaczek, on his “unfinished crusade” against the natural world order. The world’s division into the realms of life and death is to be overcome, in a Nietzschean fashion, by means of aesthetic creation:

159 Haizi 1987, trans. J. K.

Demon—this is my mother, my servant, my formal life. It rides the horse of drunkenness, flies in darkness, feeds on darkness, and takes darkness as the battlefield. I communicate with desire, helping each other to reinforce the triumph of life, becoming the rhythms of each other, for the midnight drumming sound and the rash massacre. Through the jail gate sealed by a blaze I look like a demon. I myself will be burned to death in this jail trapped by a blaze—I laugh at it. I cannot laugh more cheerfully than this. I will accelerate the steps of life and death. I will squander life and squander death as well. I am the host of the laughing blaze in both heaven and hell. [...] I am in the center of chaos and storms. I do not expect comforts of islands.

Translated by RUI KUNZE¹⁶⁰

In 1987, Haizi also writes “Nietzsche, You Make Me Recall the Sad Tropical Zone” (尼采, 你使我想起悲伤的热带), a travesty of Nietzsche’s poem from *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*) titled “From the Heights” (Nachgesang), a story of a huntsman who receives “the Guest of Guests,” Zarathustra, and welcomes Him with “the Feast of Feasts.” In Nietzsche’s poem, we read:

MIDDAY of Life! Oh, season of delight!
 My summer’s park!
 Uneaseful joy to look, to lurk, to hark—
 I peer for friends, am ready day and night,
 —Where linger ye, my friends? The time is right!

[...]

We keep our Feast of Feasts, sure of our bourne,
 Our aims self-same:
 The Guest of Guests, friend Zarathustra, came! The world now laughs, the
 grisly veil was torn,
 And Light and Dark were one that wedding-morn.

Translated by L. A. MAGNUS¹⁶¹

Oh Lebens Mittag! Feierliche Zeit!
 Oh Sommergarten!
 Unruhig Glück im Stehn und Spähn und Warten:—

¹⁶⁰ Kunze 2012: 339–340.

¹⁶¹ Nietzsche 2009.

Der Freunde harr' ich, Tag und Nacht bereit,
 Wo bleibt ihr Freunde? Kommt! 's ist Zeit! 's ist Zeit!

[...]

Nun feiern wir, vereinten Siegs gewiss,
 Das Fest der Feste:
 Freund Zarathustra kam, der Gast der Gäste!
 Nun lacht die Welt, der grause Vorhang riss,
 Die Hochzeit kam für Licht und Finsterniss.¹⁶²

Incidentally, Wojaczek, two years after “Coast,” wrote “Letter to an Unknown Poet,” which is included in *Unfinished Crusade*. He uses the title of Nietzsche’s *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* as a motto, but the entire poem is constructed from elements of Rimbaudian imagery, especially the famous “Song of the Highest Tower” (*Chanson de la plus haute tour*). Again, like in “Coast,” Rimbaud’s language is framed in the Nietzschean grammar of aesthetic creation. Both Wojaczek’s “Letter” and Haizi’s “Nietzsche, You Make Me” are set in what may be perceived as the authors’ individual hells. In both cases, however, the winter landscape of these hells, more than the feverish hell of Rimbaud, resembles the Dantean icebound inferno in *The Divine Comedy*. Nietzsche’s “midday of life” resonates with Dante’s midday of life—when the poet found himself in the midst of a dark forest to set out in his journey to the other world. Wojaczek ends:

This room is your stronghold and banishment, sir,
 tower over good and bad, and society.
 Don’t you sometimes try to escape it?
 Out of four desperate corners, a Fifth one: death.

Pańską twierdzą i wygnaniem jest ten pokój
 Wieżę ponad dobrem złem i społeczeństwem
 Czy pan czasem nie próbuje z niego uciec?
 Z rozpaczliwych czterech kątów Piąty: śmierć.¹⁶³

Haizi concludes:

My mood forces snakes to dance embracing the eagle of death

¹⁶² Nietzsche 1886.

¹⁶³ Wojaczek 2005: 95, trans. J.K.

[...]

In drops of water myriads of breasts
 return to the nothingness of tropics
 the ancient huntsman is at loss
 he hangs himself on a mountain top.

我的心情逼迫群蛇起舞拥抱死亡的鹰

[...]

水滴中千万颗乳房
 归于虚无的热带
 古老猎手萌生困惑
 在山顶自缢¹⁶⁴

In the above excerpts, the culmination of the Nietzschean will to power, the Rimbaudian will to create, and the Dantean will to cognize leads to essential transformations in Wojaczek's and Haizi's poetic universes. In their twisted geometry (four corners that turn out to be five corners) and arithmetic (myriads of breasts reduced to nothingness) life is not destroyed by death but miraculously "embraces" it like an eagle. This may be a distant association, but not an entirely unjustified one: the situation is not much different than in real-world physics and mathematics, where contradictions and seemingly unsolvable formulas often immediately solve themselves when one assumes the existence of a higher spatiotemporal dimension; some physicists have even calculated how many dimensions the universe should have for a consistent "theory of everything" to be possible (eleven, allegedly). Wojaczek and Haizi, too, try to add a new, aesthetic, dimension to the world, which will allow them to accommodate contradictions, including the most fundamental of all: that between life and death.

As it happens, "Letter" and "Nietzsche, You Make Me" were written when the poets were working on their respective "Bibles"—Wojaczek on a poem series titled "Another Tale," an ironic book of Genesis, and Haizi on his unironic messianic epic *The Sun*. In these works, they further incorporate death into the expanded mathematics and physics of their poetic cosmoses, like engineers, carefully designing everything from the Big Bang to the Apocalypse, and even reaching for vocabulary typical of STEM. There is no room here for a detailed discussion of these two peculiar Books of Creation. Instead, I propose to investigate the effects and side effects of the two authors playing God and training their lyrical personas to perform a "leap through death." I borrow this notion from Agata Bielik-Robson's 2012 book *Erros. Mesjański witalizm i filozofia* (published in English as *Another Finitude: Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* in

¹⁶⁴ Haizi 2008: 168, trans. J.K.

2019). The term was coined to describe one of the basic ideas of “messianic vitalism,”¹⁶⁵ whose remote echoes Bielik-Robson detected in philosophers as distinct as Freud, Benjamin, Lukács, and Derrida. In Wojacek’s and Haizi’s works, too, after this extremal leap, the homunculus/child errs (in the etymological sense of erring as “wandering, straying”) on the territories of Thanatos, with Eros persistently following in their footsteps, even if they try hard to lose him.

In 1970, one year before his suicide, Wojacek wrote a quasi-posthumous poem titled “The End of the World” (*Koniec świata*). Its I-narrator recalls “Wojacek” who hanged himself on “something” (*na czymś*) at the age of “twenty-something” (*dwudziestoilustamletni*) in the year “nineteen-seems-that-sixty-something” (*dziewięćset sześćdziesiątym / Zdaje się—któryś*). Since this leap through death, which reportedly took place in the 1960s, “I” in his poetry has suffered from a bizarre ailment: he sees himself always in “a double person” (*w podwójnej osobie*)—accompanied by his alter ego, who always mimics him, but does everything faster, better, and sometimes earlier. It is as if the “proper” I-narrator sprained his ankle when landing after the leap from one world to another, and now limps and lags behind his own shadow. See, for instance, the poem “In a Double Person” (*W podwójnej osobie*) from 1969:

I don’t sleep
but He too stays awake
I listen
but He too listens
I wait
but He too waits

I’m patient
but He is patient too
I breathe
but he too breathes
I can see Him
but He can see me too

[...]

I wear on my shirt
He puts on the cufflinks
I pull on my pants
He threads the belt

165 Bielik-Robson 2012.

I wear shoes
He ties the shoelaces

When I leave
He leaves too
When I come
He already waits me
Excuse me: sir do you
die too.

Nie śpię
lecz On też nie śpi
Słucham
lecz On też słucha
Czekam
lecz On też czeka

Ja cierpliwy
lecz i On cierpliwy
Oddycham
lecz On też oddycha
Widzę Go
ale i On mnie widzi

[...]

Wkładam koszulę
On zapina spinki
Wciągam spodnie
On przeciąga pasek
Zakładam buty
On wiąże sznurowadła

Gdy wychodzę
On też wychodzi
Gdy przychodzę
Już na mnie czeka
Przepraszam: czy pan też
umiera¹⁶⁶

166 Wojaczek 2005: 112–113, trans. J.K.

In his last poem, “Spring, Ten Haizis” (春天, 十个海子), dated March 14, 1989, Haizi creates a somewhat similar “posthumous” image. In “Spring,” ten dopelgangers resurrect themselves in time while the “original” Haizi—perhaps also “in a double person” (“ten Haizis [...] surround *you and me*”)—apparently procrastinates. As in Wojacek’s poem, the leap through death is only partly successful and it ends not without some damage to the mental and corporeal integrity of the lyrical homunculus/child.

The original Haizi loves death and does not feel like waking up from his eternal sleep. He even seems to be masochistically revolving in tortures and in pain that spreads across the earth:

Spring, Ten Haizis

Spring, ten Haizis all resurrect
in brightness
mocking that one wild, sad Haizi
you slept so deep and long, but for what?

Spring, ten Haizis roaring with rage
surround you and me, they dance and sing
pulling your black hair, riding on your back, raising clouds of dust
cut you open, your pain spreads across the earth

In spring, that wild and sad Haizi
is the only one, the last one who left
this is a child of night, immersed in winter, he adores death
unable to free himself, he loves empty and cold countryside

There, heaps of grain block out the windows
they use half of it on the mouths of a family of six, it's good for stomach
and half for farming, their own production
strong wind blows from east to west, from north to south, defying night
and dawn
the daybreak light you spoke of, in the end what does it mean?

《春天，十个海子》

春天, 十个海子全都复活
在光明的景色中
嘲笑这一野蛮而悲伤的海子
你这么长久地沉睡到底是为了什么?

春天，十个海子低低地怒吼
 围着你和我跳舞、唱歌
 扯乱你的黑头发，骑上你飞奔而去，尘土飞扬
 你被劈开的疼痛在大地弥漫

在春天，野蛮而复仇的海子
 就剩这一个，最后一个
 这是黑夜的儿子，沉浸于冬天，倾心死亡
 不能自拔，热爱着空虚而寒冷的乡村

那里的谷物高高堆起，遮住了窗子
 它们一半而于一家六口人的嘴，吃和胃
 一半用于农业，他们自己繁殖
 大风从东吹到西，从北刮到南，无视黑夜和黎明
 你所说的曙光究竟是什么意思¹⁶⁷

One detail that makes it possible that, unlike earlier poems, “Spring, Ten Haizis” is not only an innocent “alchemy of the word” performed on a fictitious homunculus but might have been written after Haizi had already decided to kill himself, and may indeed project the moment of his death, is the mention of resurrection in the opening line. Haizi was interested in religion and Jesus is more or less explicitly mentioned in many of his writings, including *The Sun*, which contains a section titled “Messiah.” The fact that he chose March 26—the date on which the Catholic and Protestant Churches celebrated Easter in 1989—as the day of his death does not seem coincidental. In the same context, “Daybreak” appears meaningful too: it is at dawn that Jesus is believed to have been resurrected. Add to this that Haizi’s birthday (March 24) that year was the day of Crucifixion, the so-called Holy Friday. It would be difficult to find a more symbolic moment for such a dramatic act. If one continues reading along these lines, perhaps also the presence of the number ten is explained: in Chinese “10” is written as 十 (*shí*), and the word for the cross is *shizijia* 十字架 (lit. a “shelf / frame / scaffolding in the shape of the character 十”). But we are stepping on very thin ice here.

Even if we suppose it that Haizi chose the moment deliberately and skillfully ciphered it in the poem, the reason for his doing so is still anything but obvious. Did he desire to share Jesus’s glory? Conversely, was his suicidal act meant as an ostentatious blasphemy—as if throwing down the gauntlet to God and declaring: “I can resist resurrection, I am the only master of my existence, I was born on the day you died, and I will die on the day you were resurrected”? The

¹⁶⁷ Haizi 2008: 257–258, trans. J.K.

latter interpretation runs against the grain of the most common, martyrological, way of reading Haizi in China, but I find it much more consistent with his philosophical explorations and earlier textual experiments. It recalls a poem by Bolesław Leśmian (1877–1937), a zealous follower of Nietzsche and an idol of Wojacek's, entitled literally "On Resurrection Day" (*W czas zmartwychwstania*) but translated by Alexandra Chciuk-Celt as "On Judgment Day":

On Judgment Day

On Judgment [lit. Resurrection] Day, God's might will meet
 With unexpected opposition;
 That night not everything will go
 According to His supposition.

There are some throats whose cry has died
 And hushed, irrevocably buried.
 Some blood has never been spilled twice,
 Some bloodshed has been solitary.

For some decay, its own demise
 Was horrifyingly sufficient!
 Some buried bones are proud, and won't
 Revive without some opposition!

So what if heaven's trumpet calls
 To daze the world with Death defeated?
 Not every laugh can be revived,
 Not every sob can be repeated!

Translated by ALEXANDRA CHCIUK-CELT¹⁶⁸

W czas zmartwychwstania

W czas zmartwychwstania Boża moc
 Trafi na opór nagłych zdarzeń.
 Nie wszystko stanie się w tę noc
 Według niebieskich wyobrażeń.

Są takie gardła, których zew
 Umilkł w mogile—bezpowrotnie.

168 Chciuk-Celt 1984.

Jest taka krew—przelana krew,
Której nie przelał nikt—dwukrotnie.

Jest takie próchno, co już dość
Zaznało zgrozy w swym konaniu!
Jest taka dumna w ziemi kość,
Co się sprzeciwi—zmartwychwstaniu!

I cóż, że surma w niebie gra,
By nowym bytem—świat odurzyć?
Nie każdy śmiech się zbudzić da!
Nie każda ła się da powtórzyć!¹⁶⁹

Yet “the wild, sad Haizi” from the “Spring” poem does not want to rebel. He appears apathetic and resigned, and behaves passively, like a lamb led to the slaughter, to borrow another biblical image. Perhaps “Spring” should be read alongside another “daybreak poem,” written three weeks earlier on February 22, “Dawn (February Snow, February Rain)” (黎明 (二月的雪, 二月的雨)), which ends with the image of “I” flying like dreaming Icarus on dark, wounded wings made from two volumes of a Holy Book (圣书), likely the Old and New Testament. From his open wound—perhaps burned by the sun which Haizi tried to approach in his epic—snow, rain, and tears pour onto the earth.¹⁷⁰ Maybe he had read somewhere in the Holy Book about a spectacular resurrection at daybreak two thousand years ago, but his own return to life proves disenchanting. He sees no daybreak light that could scatter the darkness in his heart.

Haizi wanted to stage in verse the fundamental showdown between Eros and Thanatos. “Clasps a White Tiger” might be treated as an example of his probing into the territories divided between “the maidservant on the left” (life) and “the maidservant on the right” (death), in the hope that Eros and Thanatos will indeed agree to serve his poetry like hostages trammed with words and locked in a text if this assumes a sufficient size to embrace them, like, for instance, *The Sun*. In “Spring,” we witness a scene in which it is the “wild, sad Haizi” who is taken hostage by Eros and Thanatos and finds himself on a doubly embattled position. On the territory that belongs to death, he is captured by life, surrounded and ridiculed by its ten attendants.

In this last interpretation, “Spring” can be considered a record of the birth of Haizi’s ironic metaconsciousness, which, had it been allowed to develop,

169 Leśmian 2006: 294–295.

170 Haizi 2008: 246–247.

might have brought an interesting change of the course in his writing, and perhaps in the trajectory of the Chinese contemporary poetry at large. By ironic metaconsciousness, I mean the poet's penchant to question and/or compromise (certain concepts of) poetry in and through verse. Contrary to Wojacek, who premeditatedly deployed such irony often bordering on cynicism, sarcasm, and intellectual sadomasochism, Haizi's earlier writings evince little if any ironic predisposition. In this sense, he resembles Ai Qing, who too did not consider poetry a self-reflexive medium capable of recognizing, and coping with, its own artificiality; both wanted their verse to unite the national community and redefine and guard its ethos. Unlike the Chinese Old Master and Young Martyr, Wojacek and Miłosz evinced a deep, ironic (over)awareness of the artificiality of every gesture and every word that is transformed into poetry. Miłosz admitted this with shame, tortured by self-reproach for having cheated his readers, whereas Wojacek exploited it without shame, calculating immaterial benefits.



It may be argued that Wojacek's celebration of inauthenticity and incompatibility between experience and expression, which was subsequently taken up by the Brulioners, paved the way for the reception of postmodern poetics after the feud between the Classicists and the Barbarians ended in the mid-1990s. It is no accident that Andrzej Sosnowski, whose search for Singularity located beyond the logocentric epiphanic grammar of language will be discussed in chapter 6, opens his collection of literary-critical texts with a powerful short essay on Wojacek titled "The Riskiest" (Najryzykowniej). Sosnowski argues that Wojacek was fascinated by "the farthest end of matters: a spectral echo and audition of the lost realness of life."¹⁷¹ Sosnowski shares this fascination and wants to play the "language game"—as some adversaries, including Miłosz, disparagingly call his poetry—to the farthest end, until "game over" appears on the screen and he is thrown into the raw environment of the unreadable source code of the game. In China, the imperative of sincerity and authenticity, which has its origins in classical aesthetics, was reflected in the work of orthodox poets such as Ai Qing, strengthened by the myth of Haizi, and contributed to the slow and limited absorption of postmodernism, even if some approaches resonant with postmodernism began to appear in the 1980s, among which was Che Qianzi 车前子, who will be compared with Sosnowski in chapter 6.

171 Sosnowski 2007: 9, trans. J.K.

Poets and Poetry on Stage

One thing that connects the four protagonists of the previous chapter is their belief in the power and (self-)sufficiency of the poetic word, and of language communication in general. Their interests essentially revolved around literature and philosophy. Ai Qing 艾青 was a painter, but this passion does not translate into his poetry as much as one might expect, either in content or in form. For all four authors, poetry was at the center of themselves, and they saw themselves as being at the center of poetry, only reluctantly traveling to the peripheries of the poetic world to negotiate the definition of poetry with other artistic domains, particularly popular culture. Nevertheless, as the newly emerging poetry discourse was taking shape, such negotiations were consistently undertaken, and they gained tremendous momentum at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, to which the four authors discussed in this chapter significantly contributed.

Tadeusz Różewicz's (1921–2014) theatrical play *The Card Index* (*Kartoteka*, 1960) and its remake *The Card Index Scattered* (*Kartoteka rozrzucona*, 1994), like many of his dramas, can be seen as a way in which the poet abreacts the inadequacy of the poetic medium and the helplessness of language in confrontation with the historical and existential experience of his generation. He seeks a way out from this impasse through performance, reanimating the words he manages to save from spiritual ruins. Similarly, Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954), in bringing his long poem “File 0” (0 档案) to the stage in 1995 in collaboration with the leading avant-garde director Mou Sen 牟森 (b. 1963), tries to free up the kinetic energy of the poetic word, turning nouns (*mingci* 名词, “words-that-name”) locked in the unaired drawers of Newspeak into verbs (动词, “words-that-move”).¹ Marcin Świetlicki (b. 1961), a superstar of the poetry scene in the early 1990s, began his career in the music industry by turning his verses into rock songs to strengthen their firepower but also allow them to absorb new contexts that feed back into their textual layering. Cui Jian's 崔健 (b. 1961) rock songs underwent the opposite process. His powerful lyrics, which express social and political discontent, have since the mid-1990s been incorporated into the poetic canon, offering simple, straightforward, and uncompromising messages that mainland poetry at the time lacked and craved. What poetry in

1 See van Crevel's discussion of translating Chinese parts of speech in Yu Jian's work, van Crevel 2001: 19–23.

general and individual authors and, especially, their texts have gained or lost in these negotiations, and how this intermedial and interdiscursive practice has changed our thinking about the nature and functions of artistic production will be discussed in the following sections.

1 Opening Up the Archives: Tadeusz Różewicz and Yu Jian

How to render the title *Ling dang'an* (档案), or “File 〇” in Maghiel van Crevel’s 2001 English translation, was the most difficult decision for me in translating Yu Jian into Polish. The word *kartoteka* (“card index”) was my first thought, a solution as tempting as it was suspicious, which made me wonder whether it was godsent or “hellsent.” Whatever its provenance, it was certainly mediated by my personal reading experience: the familiar text of Tadeusz Różewicz’s play *Kartoteka* (“The Card Index”). On the one hand, I found this unexpected intertextual encounter exciting and intuitively recognized its huge interpretative potential with regard to the entire text of Yu’s work, including its literary form and philosophical content, a dichotomy which both “card indexes” effectively deconstruct. On the other hand, I did not necessarily want to impose my personal association on the reader, nor imply a given intertextual interaction (in the sense of influence) between Yu Jian’s and Różewicz’s texts. In short, I was in two minds.

Nevertheless, having searched available thesauruses throughout, I realized that the Polish language actually did not have any alternative to offer. All other options were easily dismissed. In Chinese, *dang'an* 档案 means a set of documents that constitute an official record of an individual’s life or its particular period or aspect, which is stored in an archive or record office; in Yu Jian’s long poem, the archive room is located in the work unit of the file’s owner. Thus, other possible translations in Polish include *plik*, *folder*, *dossier*, *akta*, *archiwum*, and *teczka*.

Plik means a set of documents, but it also refers to a computer file, and it is almost exclusively used today in this sense; add to this the number 〇 and the title will certainly suggest to readers a text that has something to do with virtual reality. Likewise, *folder* is now mostly used to refer to a computer folder. *Dossier* means the same as *dang'an*, but today it is heard only very rarely, and when it does appear in everyday communication it refers usually to a résumé or work portfolio. *Akta* would make the reader think, first and foremost, of the documentation of a court case. *Archiwum* suggests a bigger collection of documents or an institution that stores them, but *Archiwum 〇* would generate misleading associations with the popular American TV drama *The X-Files*, which

is translated into Polish as *Z Archiwum X*. Finally, *teczka* (lit. “folder, briefcase”) would be acceptable in theory since files in various archives are stored in *teczki* (“briefcases”), but this word has become deeply politicized by the so-called *afery teczkowa* (“briefcase/file affair”), part of the process of “vetting” (*lustracja*) aimed at identifying public officials who collaborated with the communist government in 1945–1989. There was, I thought, absolutely no point in drawing Yu Jian so directly into Polish politics.

Thus, these six alternatives ruled out, *kartoteka* appeared to be the best solution because it has a relatively broad semantic field; *kartoteki* (“card indexes”) are found everywhere—libraries, medical clinics, courts, schools—so it does not narrow the field of interpretation to particular social-political surroundings. Still, it might have narrowed it to specific cultural intertextuality—with Różewicz’s *Card Index*—and thus efface some of its unique qualities and lead to easy simplifications. One can never be sure whether the accident of meaning that occurs when two texts come together—in this case being connected by one (Polish) word, *kartoteka*—will prove beneficial (in Attridge’s sense of the word) for the texts involved and for the surrounding cultural discourse at large. The only way to find this out is to perform an experiment: repeat the collision several times in laboratory conditions—that is, in my own comparative reading before submitting the translation manuscript to the publisher—allowing the two texts to bump into each other at different angles, trace the various trajectories they assume as they travel further together through the literary space, and, if necessary, try to optimize these trajectories by modifying other elements of the translation. And so I did.

Reading Różewicz’s and Yu’s works together multiple times brought into play additional contexts that surprised me and convinced me that the “accident” of the shared title not only does not narrow but actually broadens possible interpretations, not just of Yu’s long poem but also of Różewicz’s play. Below, I present an account of one of my comparative readings, which I found the most relevant to this study. It foregrounds, on the one hand, the importance of the two “card indexes” to the development of the authors’ singular poetics, and on the other, the interactions between poetry and theater in the negotiation and self-definition of the national poetic canon. It also allows to anticipate the reflection on the abstract grammars of creation and cognition that will be discussed in final chapters focused on the capital-S Singularity.

In May 2021, I received an invitation to speak about “File o” during an annual “Theatrical Encounters” (*Spotkania Teatralne*) festival in Toruń. In conversation with Artur Duda, a professor of theatre studies at Nicolas Copernicus University, I was surprised to learn that Mou Sen’s adaptation of Yu Jian’s poem, translated tentatively as *Akta o*, was performed in Poland in 1995 during

the fifth edition of another Toruń-based international festival, “Kontakt.” Then, Toruń found itself on the route of Mou’s performance tour in Europe and both Americas. Moreover, Różewicz—who only occasionally accepted invitations for theatre festivals—was present in Toruń that year as well, although, unfortunately, it is difficult to confirm whether he watched *File o* or not, so one can only speculate about his possible impressions. Duda, who was a student at the time and saw the play, recalls that for Polish audiences Mou’s work was quite an overwhelming experience, not so much because of the cultural distance dividing Poland and China as the grandiose special effects and the extensive use of technology (a TV screen and an industrial fan on the stage), which were not common in Polish theatre in the mid-1990s.² Materials published after the festival show that critics must have been no less disoriented and *File o*—although featured as one of the main events in the repertoire of that edition—generated a rather scanty feedback, mostly boiling down to the explication of its putative political message, an interpretation that Mou Sen has hopelessly tried to refute. On the other hand, his production received the award of the *Politics (Polityka)* magazine as “the play that most convincingly expresses the concerns of our times,”³ which may testify to a more universal understanding of the work. What surprised and thrilled me the most, however, was another fact. In 2020 Duda coedited an anthology of Polish drama in Chinese,⁴ in which Różewicz’s *Kartoteka* was included, lending its title to the entire collection. It turned out that the Chinese translators of the play, Huang Shan 黄珊 and Zhao Zhen 赵祯, named the work *Rensheng dang’an* 人生档案 (“life file”), using for “kartoteka” the same Chinese word as in Yu Jian’s magnum opus: *dang’an*.

Additionally reinforced in my decision by this fortuitous finding, I hope the comparison with Różewicz implied by the Polish title *Kartoteka o* offers the reader of the Polish translation a good springboard for further multifaceted reflection on the text without unnecessarily disambiguating its message.

1.1 *Managing the Files: Chronology and Context*

Tadeusz Różewicz wrote the first version of *The Card Index* in 1956–1958 and published it in 1960. At the time, he already had eleven poetry collections and long poems published as books to his name. Born in 1921, in his teens, encouraged by his elder brother Janusz, himself a promising poet, he developed a

2 Personal communication with Artur Duda, May 2021.

3 See the accounts on the festival’s website at: <http://teatr.torun.pl/kontakt-1995-2/> (accessed June 15, 2021).

4 I thank Tadeusz Różewicz’s granddaughter, Julia, for drawing my attention to this publication.

passion for literature and created his first poems printed in local literary magazines. On September 1, 1939, as the war broke out, he was about to start high school. Instead, pressed by circumstances, he did various menial jobs to support himself and his parents, and soon joined Janusz in the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*)—the core resistance movement in Poland during the German and Soviet occupation. Between the armed actions in which he participated, he continued to write poetry; in 1944 he compiled his first collection *Forest Echoes* (*Echa leśne*). Infused with the Romantic spirit and occupied with formal perfection, his early poems resembled those of his coevals born around 1920, the so-called Columbus Generation (*Kolumbowie*), many of whom did not live through the war. Among them was his brother Janusz, executed by the Nazis in November 1944. Tadeusz survived, but emerged from the war with a shattered worldview and scattered identity, to which his second collection *Anxiety* (*Niepokój*) from 1947, radically different from the Romanticized *Forest Echoes*, bears hair-raising evidence.

The best-known poem from *Anxiety*—today included in school textbooks—“The Rescued” (*Ocalony*), translated by Adam Czerniawski less literally as “The Survivor,” was a bitter response to Miłosz’s collection *Rescue* (*Ocalenie*, 1945). The beauty of Miłosz’s elaborate, classical style, plasticity of images, and his stubborn hope against hope, stand in stark contrast with Różewicz’s naked, ascetic lines; this poetics was later named by critics the “poetics of a squeezed throat” (*poetyka ściśniętego gardła*). Below, I quote the poem in full, because it is crucial to understanding *The Card Index* and *The Card Index Scattered*.

The Survivor

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

The following are empty synonyms:
man and beast
love and hate
friend and foe
darkness and light.

The way of killing men and beasts is the same
I’ve seen it:
truckfuls of chopped-up men
who will not be saved.

Ideas are mere words:
 virtue and crime
 truth and lies
 beauty and ugliness
 courage and cowardice.

Virtue and crime weigh the same
 I've seen it:
 in a man who was both
 criminal and virtuous.

I seek a teacher and a master
 may he restore my sight hearing and speech
 may he again name objects and ideas
 may he separate darkness from light.

I am twenty-four
 led to slaughter
 I survived.

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI⁵

Ocalony

Mam dwadzieścia cztery lata
 ocalałem
 prowadzony na rzeź.

To są nazwy puste i jednoznaczne:
 człowiek i zwierzę
 miłość i nienawiść
 wróg i przyjaciel
 ciemność i światło.

Człowieka tak się zabija jak zwierzę
 widziałem:
 furgony porąbanych ludzi
 którzy nie zostaną zbawieni.

5 Różewicz 2011a: 41.

Pojęcia są tylko wyrazami:
 cnota i występpek
 prawda i kłamstwo
 piękno i brzydota
 męstwo i tchórzostwo.

Jednako waży cnota i występpek
 widziałem:
 człowieka który był jeden
 występny i cnotliwy.

Szukam nauczyciela i mistrza
 niech przywróci mi wzrok słuch i mowę
 niech jeszcze raz nazwie rzeczy i pojęcia
 niech oddzieli światło od ciemności.

Mam dwadzieścia cztery lata
 ocalałem
 prowadzony na rzeź.⁶

“The Survivor” reveals the source of three critical features of Różewicz’s poetic style that I will later discuss with reference to Yu Jian’s writing: a mistrust of nouns and adjectives, a predilection for verbs (which are least prone to essentialization), and the urge to name the world anew. In Różewicz’s poetry and theatrical plays alike, this grammatical preference stems from the conviction that nouns are empty, devoid of the deep sense they once (i.e., before the war) conveyed. In Yu Jian’s work, conversely, names must be reinvented because they are overloaded with meanings ascribed to them by culture and thus divorced from the things they designate. Put differently, whereas in Różewicz’s poetics nouns were slaughtered in concentration camps, Yu Jian puts them into the “concentration camp of words,” as Zhang Ning 张柠 famously called “File 0,”⁷ from which they emerge naked and exhausted. The theatrical performance directed by Mou is part of this machinery.

The Card Index was written in prose, but—as Różewicz emphasizes—it should be considered an integral part of his poetic project. As an “open drama,” it grows out directly from his experiments with a genre he called

6 Różewicz 2016: 197–198.

7 Zhang Ning 1999.

“open poemat.”⁸ In Różewicz’s “open poemat,” unlike in conventional poemats reserved for substantive universal reflection, “everybody can enter with their own things and affairs.”⁹ The play illustrates the decay of language, which in the failed stage dialogues proves even more helpless than in Różewicz’s squeeze-throated poems. The vestigial action is best summarized in the stage directions that precede the first act:

I am not offering a list of characters. The play’s “hero” is of indeterminate age, occupation, and appearance. On various occasions our “hero” ceases to be the hero of our tale and is replaced by other “heroes”. Many of those who take part in this chronicle do not have significant roles, while other, who might have played the lead, are often not allowed to express themselves or have little to say. The place of the action doesn’t change. The stage setting doesn’t change. A chair moved once during the whole performance will be enough. And the time ...

The play is realistic and takes place in the present. The chair is real, all the objects and pieces of furniture are real. Their measurements are slightly larger than normal. An ordinary average room.

Table. Bookcase. Two chairs. A sink. A bed on high legs. The room has no windows. There are doors at the opposite ends. Both doors remain open all the time. The bed stands against the wall. The light in the room, ordinary daylight, remains constant throughout. The lights are not switched off even when the tale is ended. The curtain doesn’t fall. Perhaps the tale is only interrupted. For an hour, for a year ...

[...]

Various people pass through the doors: some move quickly, others slowly. From time to time we hear snatches of conversation. Some stop to read a newspaper. It appears as though there is a street passing through the Hero’s room. Some stop to eavesdrop on the conversation in the Hero’s room. They may add a few words and then move on. The action is continuous throughout.

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI¹⁰

Spisu osób nie podaje. “Bohaterem” sztuki jest człowiek bez określonego dokładniej wieku, zajęcia i wyglądu.

8 On the poemat in Polish literature, see chapter 2.

9 Różewicz 2011b: 43–44, trans. J K.

10 Różewicz 1969: 34.

“Bohater” nasz często przestaje być bohaterem opowiadania i zastępują go inni ludzie, którzy również są “bohaterami”. Wiele osób biorących udział w tej historii nie odgrywa tu większej roli, te które mogą odgrywać główne role, często nie dochodzą do głosu lub mają mało do powiedzenia. Miejsce jest jedno. Dekoracja jedna. Wystarczy, jeśli w ciągu tych godzin przestawi się krzesło.

Sztuka ta jest realistyczna i współczesna. Krzesło prawdziwe. Wszystkie przedmioty i meble są prawdziwe. Ich rozmiary są trochę większe od normalnych. Zwykły, przeciętny pokój.

Stół. Etażerka z książkami. Dwa krzesła. Łóżko na wysokich nóżkach. W pokoju nie ma okna. W ścianach naprzeciwległych są drzwi; jedne i drugie drzwi są stale otwarte. Łóżko stoi pod ścianą. Przez cały czas światło w pokoju jest jednakowe. Dzielne, mocne światło. Światło nie gaśnie, nawet kiedy opowiadanie jest skończone. Kurtyna nie zapada. Być może opowiadanie jest tylko przerwane? Na godzinę, na rok ...

[...]

Przez otwarte drzwi przechodzą śpiesznie lub wolno różni ludzie. Czasem słychać urywki rozmów. Zatrzymują się i czytają gazety ... Wygląda to tak, jakby przez pokój Bohatera przechodziła ulica. Niektórzy przysłuchują się przez chwilę temu, co mówi się w pokoju Bohatera. Czasem wtrącają kilka słów. Przechodzą dalej. Akcja trwa od początku do końca bez przerwy.¹¹

Among the guests, there are the Hero's parents, a fat woman whom he used to peep at in the bathroom as a boy, his partner whom he abandoned, the peasant Wrona who claims to have been shot dead by him during the war, a young German girl, his uncle, his high school teachers, a journalist, a Man with Part who behaves like a dog, and many others. All of them are like loose cards from a card index which the Hero unavailingly tries to put together in order to consolidate his identity and, preferably, lock it in some archive vault once and forever so that the people from the past stop bothering him. To each of them, he is a different person, called by a different name; his multiple identities include a pupil, a high school student, a director of the operetta, a writer, a lover. In the bedroom, there is also a chorus patterned after the genre of ancient tragedy: three elegant old men who uphold the traditional dramatic conventions and from time to time recite mixed excerpts from dramatic works from different epochs. They try to stimulate the apathetic protagonist to take actions and prevent him from falling asleep for the play to be continued, since according to the

11 Różewicz 2001: 29–30. Italics in the original.

rules of ancient Greek theater, it is always the protagonist—a tragic hero—on whom the play hinges and in whose story various threads are brought together and resolved. Interpreted in this context, Różewicz's apathetic Hero is indeed an antihero.

The Card Index, directed by Wanda Lewandowska, premiered on March 26, 1960. Initially, the reviews were not unambiguously positive, and many of them testified to the profound misunderstanding of the new theatrical language that Różewicz was proposing. Interestingly, while critics associated with the communist government rejected the play for being too pessimistic and influenced by the much-loathed existentialism, “a fashionable faith of neuras-thenic bankrupts,”¹² independent commentators, especially those enthusiastic about Różewicz's work in general such as Stefan Treugutt and Jan Kott, hailed the protagonist of *The Card Index* as a new embodiment of the Romantic hero who will awaken the spirit of the nation.¹³ In the following years, several directors tried their hand at Różewicz's text, including Konrad Swinarski (1967) and Krzysztof Kieślowski (1978), to whom we owe excellent productions available to broader audiences in the series *TV Theatre*. The play was also staged abroad, including at the Zavit Theater in Tel Aviv (1964), the Oxford Experimental Theatre Company (1967), the Boldhustheater in Copenhagen (1971), the Artea Theater in Buenos Aires (1972), and many other places. In 1970, the text of the play was included in the teaching program for fourth grade students at secondary schools.¹⁴

Artists, critics, and audiences slowly adapted to Różewicz's multilayered work and proposed many refreshing interpretations. Joanna Krakowska observes that the protagonist in successive stage productions actually aged with his generation. In the 1967 performance he was fifty, in 1978 sixty, and in 1989 eighty years old, and each time he was troubled with the real-life social-political problems that existed.¹⁵ Indeed, as a literary text, *The Card Index* itself, according to Zbigniew Majchrowski, “absorbs” new meanings in its open structure with the passing of time and, in some cases, even turns out to be “prophetic,” for instance, foreshadowing the aforementioned “teczka affair” or the establishment of the Polish Beer Party (Polska Partia Piwa).¹⁶

The Card Index was created during the immediate political thaw after the so-called Polish October Revolution of 1956 that enabled de-Stalinization and

12 Krakowska 2013: 65.

13 Ibidem: 48–52, 58–62.

14 For a full timeline of various editions and adaptations of the play, see Różewicz 2001: 153–159.

15 Ibidem: 53–58.

16 Majchrowski 2001: 21–22.

a degree of democratization in the country. This, for Różewicz, was a liberating but dangerous experience. After a decade of the cruelest totalitarianism, the time had come for the people to face their past as it was—to rethink the attitudes they had held during the war and in the early period of communist oppression. The door of the central archive room that dictated their (collective) self-narrative had been left open a crack, and many not so pleasant things had started to leak out. A new narrative had to be constructed from the pieces that fitted together only in official documents, where they were reduced to formulas and raw numbers, but never so in the living human memory.

Różewicz observed this general confusion but was not greatly perturbed by it, since he considered disorientation and the restless quest for truth as the only ethically justified mode of existence in the modern world. He was more afraid that after a short period of consternation, society would too easily accommodate the new reality and either grow accustomed to a sort of axiological void or produce a new convenient collective narrative that would discharge them from individual responsibility for their own existence. Such a moment indeed came in the early 1960s with “our little stabilization” (*nasza mała stabilizacja*)—a term in fact coined by Różewicz in his 1963 play *Witnesses, or Our Little Stabilization* (*Świadkowie albo nasza mała stabilizacja*). *Witnesses* portrays the post-October society as one where “love and hate / lowered their expectations / whiteness is no longer so white / blackness is no longer so black / so really black.”¹⁷ In *The Card Index*, the author still tries to prevent this illusory stabilization underlain by unresolved problems and unsettled guilts.

Różewicz was initially unconcerned about the fate of his work, claiming that, to him, the most important thing is what happens on paper¹⁸ and the rest is up to the directors. At some point, however, the tireless experimenter apparently concluded that the text had not sufficiently got out of hand and was beginning to self-stabilize; he thus decided to dismantle the card index himself. In 1990–1992, he organized a series of open rehearsals of *The Card Index* at the Polish Theater (Teatr Polski) in Wrocław during which the author-director, together with the actors, radically reworked the playscript, creating a new version of the play at each rehearsal. In 1994, based on those experiments, Różewicz compiled *The Card Index Scattered*, which also included several scenes written earlier but not incorporated into *The Card Index* due to the restrictions on artistic freedom before 1989. In 2011, a DVD was released, documenting the two years of his work with the actors. Maria Dębicz recalls Różewicz’s strategy and creative process:

17 Różewicz 1986: 6, trans. J K.

18 Różewicz 2011b: 43.

The idea of decomposing *The Card Index* had appeared long ago. The roles in this new *Card Index*, fluid and unclear as they were, occupied a lot of space in the author's memory, receding, morphing, fading away [...]. For a good dozen of years, he was thinking about decomposing (scattering) and recomposing the text again to explore the endurance of the old dramatic structures. Now, in places of rupture, on the proper body of the play, "wild neoplasms" will grow and "devour" increasingly big parts of the old text.¹⁹

In *The Card Index Scattered*, the Hero, thirty years older and bedridden, begins his performance with the triumphant declaration, "From tomorrow on, I will change!", followed by a long monologue compiled largely from excerpts of various poems from Różewicz's oeuvre, including "The Survivor." After several scenes, however, he ends up completely disintegrated—split into two persons: Hero I and Hero II—and unable to answer the most basic questions about his own life.

In 2012, in a short piece titled "The Last Card Index" (*Ostatnia Kartoteka*), which closes the collection *this and that (to i owo, 2012)*, we can once again glimpse the Hero through the open door of his room, fatigued and resigned, experiencing his final, involuntary stabilization. This last card index is reduced to one A5-size page. It consists of a hand-drawn rectangle with a black spot in the middle, and a handwritten note beneath it:

The Hero—age 91

Alone with his thoughts which are inaudible.

[E]verybody and all persons died—i.e.,

persons and participants of The Card Index and The Card Index Scattered. The Hero lies in the bed,

looking at the ceiling, a fly is

sitting on the ceiling. A black point, a spot ...

etc. etc.

Bohater—lat 91

Sam ze swoimi myślami których nie słycać.

[W]szyscy i wszystkie osoby wymarły—tzn.

postacie i uczestnicy Kartoteki i Kartoteki

rozrzuconej. Bohater leży na tapczanie,

patrzy na sufit, na suficie siedzi

19 Różewicz 2001: 142–143, trans. J.K.

muchą. Czarny punkcik, plamka ...
itd. itd.²⁰

Since the 1990s, it has become Różewicz's signature move to supplement his poetry collections with scans of handwritten manuscripts with corrections, text crossed or scribbled out, drawings, and notes in the margins, in order to foreground the concept of poetry as a "work in progress" that undergoes endless de- and reconstruction. In 2011, the full manuscript of *The Card Index* was published in a facsimile edition as *The Card Index: Reprint (Kartoteka. Reprint)*, adding new dimensions to the interpretation of the play. For example, Wojciech Kruszewski found a hand-drawing of what he identified as a catafalque in Różewicz's notes. Based on this discovery, he put forward a hypothesis that the Hero is dead from the beginning, that the bed is in fact a coffin, and that the man undergoes a particular judgment²¹ during which all his sins (embodied by different *dramatis personae*) pass before his eyes.²²

A hypothesis worthy of consideration. But let us leave the Hero alone with his divine tribunal for now and make a brief sojourn to the Chinese archive rooms.

• • •

In 1994, the year Różewicz scattered his *Card Index*, the Chinese literary journal *Great Masters* (大家) published Yu Jian's "File 0." The poem was written two years earlier—roughly the time Różewicz finished his experimental rehearsals—but initially circulated exclusively through unofficial channels.²³ As a work that brought an entirely new quality to mainland-Chinese New Poetry, it raised both curiosity and controversy, including the most fundamental question: is it still poetry or perhaps some hybrid genre of postmodern prose, or does it not maybe deserve to be called literature at all? Today, with hindsight, it is almost unanimously considered one of "milestone texts," in Maghiel van Crevel's words,²⁴ in Chinese avant-garde verse and, what is more, also in Chinese avant-garde theatre, which in the 1990s was actively looking for inspiration and material beyond the available corpus of dramatic texts. Following Yu Jian's "File 0," two long prose poems by Xi Chuan 西川—"Mirage"

20 Różewicz 2012: 83, trans. J K.

21 In Christian eschatology, the divine judgment that a departed person undergoes immediately after death, in contradistinction to the general judgment (or Last Judgment) of all humanity at the end of the world.

22 Kruszewski 2015.

23 van Crevel 2008: 223.

24 *Ibidem*: 52.

(镜花水月) and “Near View and Distant View” (近景和远景)—were adapted for the stage by Meng Jinghui 孟京辉, who was, like Mou Sen, a pioneer of Chinese new theater.²⁵

Yu Jian was thirty-eight when he completed the manuscript of “File o” in 1992, just a year older than Różewicz when he finished *The Card Index*. He was already a recognized poet, a coleader (with Han Dong 韩东) of the emerging Popular camp, and a coeditor of the unofficial journal of the faction *Them* (他们). Yu had started writing during the Cultural Revolution while working in a factory as a riveter and welder, his school education having been interrupted by the political turmoil. His earliest poem, included in the five-volume *Collected Works of Yu Jian* (于坚集), is titled “Your Heart” (你的心) and dates to 1975. Yu’s early works, as van Crevel notes, display many characteristics of Obscure poetry.²⁶ Marked with Romantic and heroic overtones, they praise a “New Don Quixote” (“A Song of a New Don Quixote,” 新堂吉柯德之歌), recall God’s Lamb (“I want to,” 我愿意 ...), or contemplate wind which “wanders together with the notes of Beethoven” (“The Judgment Day,” 末日).²⁷ A breakthrough in his poetics—comparable to the breakthrough in Różewicz’s work between *Forest Echoes* and *Anxiety*—came with the poem “Luo Jiasheng” (罗家生) from 1982, written in plain, seemingly unemotional language, narrating the case of a factory worker who died when “a furnace exploded / bl[o]w[ing] a big hole in his head.”²⁸

Were we to apply the terminology of the Polish poetry scene of the 1990s, we might call Yu Jian a Barbarian; coarse and discourteous as he may sometimes appear, he is, however, a Tender Barbarian, to invoke Bohumil Hrabal’s novel. Beneath the bare-bone language of poems like “Luo Jiasheng,” there is great sympathy toward the subjects of his verse. Wordlessness speaks for itself. In his ability to write about common people without pathos or bias, Yu very much resembles Różewicz, deeply concerned with the “simple gray man” (*zwykły szary człowiek*). This is one of Różewicz’s signature phrases that returns frequently in his work; for example, the protagonist of *The Card Index* calls himself so in a conversation with the Journalist. The “gray man” was first portrayed in “Workers’ Concern about the Common” (*Troskliwość robotnicza o wspólne*), a poem Różewicz wrote during his stay in Hungary on a scholarship in 1950. The text also contains a prototype of the Old Miner from Hungary,

25 The last decade of the twentieth century is known as MM Era (MM 时代), named so after Mou and Meng. On this topic, see, e.g., Zhang and Chen 2013.

26 van Crevel 2008: 254–255.

27 My translations are based on versions included in Yu Jian 2004.

28 Quoted in van Crevel 2008: 256, translated by the same.

who appears in an updated edition of *The Card Index*. The foreign guest recalls how in 1950 or 1951 the Hero had visited a Hungarian mine, accompanied by Party officials, and how he later described the miserable life of the miners in bright colors to satisfy the requirements of socialist-realist aesthetics. This and several other scenes were not included in the first version of *The Card Index* for being too political and were published separately only in 1971, when censorship was eased.

Besides poems like “Luo Jiasheng” speaking of “gray people,” an important part of Yu’s artistic output since the early 1980s have been works that describe public and private spaces, objects, and natural phenomena, this last category—almost absent from Różewicz’s oeuvre—being arguably the most closely related to Yu’s literary-philosophical and linguistic investigations. This is exemplified by several poems about an eagle written in 1984–1987 and a number of verses inspired by other animals, including “Egret” (白鹭), “Black Horse” (黑马), “A Butterfly Died During the Rainy Season” (一只蝴蝶在雨季死去, 1987), “An Ant Died Under a Palm” (一只蚂蚁躺在一棵棕榈树下, 1987), and, the best known, “The Naming of a Crow” (对一只乌鸦命名, 1990). Many of these works have lines of considerable length in which imagery is concentrated to the point of almost collapsing under its own weight. This is how Yu Jian demetaphorizes language, dissecting the “cultural” and “natural” components of the semantic field of words in order to retrieve a direct and “neutral” (中性) connection between the word and the world. This project would later be laid out in Yu’s essays “Reject Metaphor” (拒绝隐喻, 1995) and “On the Hardness and Softness of Poetry’s Tongue” (诗歌之舌的硬与软, 1996).

In the essays in question, Yu draws on his experience of writing and directing “File o.” “On Hardness” contains a statement that sheds light on the “o” in the title “File o.” Praising a poem by Yang Li 杨黎, Yu claims:

[In Yang’s poem, one can see] an effort to make rhetorical devices again approximate common knowledge. A deconstruction of commonly used metaphors which through imagination and sublimation, turned into empty signs. The resetting (“复 o,” lit. re-zero-ing) of the value of language. Neutral[ity] (中性的). A = A.²⁹

This points to another shared feature of Różewicz’s and Yu Jian’s poetic programs: the distrust of metaphor and frequent use of metonymy. Although, again, the sources of this postulate in their respective oeuvres are substantially different.

29 Yu 2004: 149, trans. J K.

Both Różewicz and Yu tend to present metaphoricity as standing in an irresolvable conflict with truth. But for the two of them truth means something essentially different. Yu Jian understands truth mostly in aesthetic, epistemological, and mystical terms; in his language, neutrality is a near-synonym for naturality, which in turn hinges on the poet's metaphysical belief in the existence of strong interconnections between human and nonhuman reality. To Różewicz, truth is, first and foremost, an ethical notion tantamount to the poet's faithfulness to human emotions and experiences; as such, it rules out the use of vivid imagery of the kind that is present in many of Yu's poems. Różewicz says:

An image that is overtly expanded by a poet, that feeds on artificial, fanciful imagination, destroys a germ of a lyric poem, its seed. Finally, it also destroys itself, and gives one no idea of the real drama that develops inside the poem. Poetry isn't made by shuffling images which constitute the most superficial layer of the text. The more complicated, sophisticated, and surprising the outermost garment, the worse it makes for the proper lyric occurrence [*zdarzenie liryczne*], which often cannot make its way through the artful decorations fabricated by poets. In practice, the poet uses images to illustrate a poem, to illustrate poetry. But the events in the world of feelings don't want to be mediated by the most perfect and the most beautiful metaphor-images; they want to emerge by themselves. They want to appear, or rather offer themselves to the reader, all of a sudden and in all their unanimity.³⁰

"File o" is a record of the life of a person whose name we never learn, although we are granted access to all details concerning his apparition and physical and psychological experience. It imitates the dispassionate, formulaic language of official documents, in which all experiences, ranging from trivial things such as getting up in the morning to political issues that echo in his thoughts like empty slogans, boil down to raw data; they are easily compartmentalized with little regard to their mutual linkages and specific roles in the development of human personality. This official "identity" is also totally disconnected from its putative owner—it is separated from him by two floors and unavailable to, or even protected from, him by a series of security measures. In the introductory part, "The File Room," we are presented with the following description of the archive:

30 Quoted in Stankowska 2014: 116, trans. J K.

in an architectural construction on the fifth floor behind locks and more locks in a secret room his dossier is held in a document folder it is evidence of a person two floors separating it from the person himself he works on the second floor the folder is 50 meters away along the corridor and 30 steps up on another floor a room unlike other with reinforced concrete on 6 sides 3 doors no windows 1 fluorescent light 4 red fire extinguishers 200 square meters over a thousand locks padlocks secret locks drawer locks the biggest one is an “Everstrong” hanging outside up the stairs turn left up the stairs turn right then turn left then right again unlock unlock by means of a combination finally penetrate the inner sanctum filing cabinet upon filing cabinet this one next to that one that one on top of this one this one underneath that one that one in front of this one this one behind that one 8 aisles 64 rows between them holding more than a ton of printing paper black ink paper clips and glue his 30 years one folder in 1,800 drawers this person is young only 50-some pages 40,000-some characters

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL³¹

建筑物的五楼 锁和锁后面 密室里 他的那一份
 装在文件袋里 它作为一个人的证据 隔着他本人两层楼
 他在二楼上班 那一袋 距离他 50 米过道 30 级台阶
 与众不同的房间 6 面钢筋水泥灌注 3 道门 没有窗子
 1 盏日光灯 4 个红色消防瓶 200 平方米 一千多把锁
 明锁 暗锁 抽屉锁 最大的一把是“永固牌”挂在外面
 上楼 往左 上楼 往右 再往左 再往右 开锁 开锁
 通过一个密码 最终打入内部 档案柜靠着档案柜 这个在那个旁边
 那个在这个高上 这个在那个底下 那个在这个前面 这个在那个后
 面
 8 排 64 行 分装着一吨多道林纸 黑字 曲别针和胶水
 他那年 30 1800 个抽屉中的一袋 被一把角匙 掌握着
 并不算太厚 此人正年轻 只有 50 多页 4 万余字³²

31 Yu Jian 2001.

32 Yu Jian 2004: 29.

The chapters that follow cover “History of Birth” (出生史), “History of Growing Up” (成长史), “History of Romantic Love (Youth)” (恋爱史 (青春期)), “Text (Romantic Love)” (正文 (恋爱期)), “Daily Life” (日常生活), and “Forms” (表格); the final chapter is blank, and the appendix contains instructions on “File Production and Storage” (档案制作与存放).

One can imagine that the biography of Różewicz’s Hero, before opening up the Polish “archive rooms,” looked exactly the same—put in perfect, if artificial, order and unavailable to him. Sounds rather discouraging, but it is, in a sense, safe and comfortable. Once he was granted access to his card index, the Hero suddenly realized that the freedom he had yearned for is a true nightmare. In “File 0,” there appears a similar intuition. Yu Jian seems to be attempting at destabilize the perfectly compartmentalized artificial memory of the protagonist’s past, smuggling in here and there humorous or “improper” phrases and images that create fissures in the concrete walls of the file room. But he is inconsistent in this, as if afraid that blowing up the archive will be tantamount to destroying lives, the records of which are stored in it. The explosion only takes place when the text is brought on stage. Like Różewicz in *The Card Index Scattered*, in 1995, together with Mou Sen, Yu finally scatters the files, scattering thus also the grammar of his poetry and the grammar of language at large.

One outcome of this scattering of Yu’s poetics is *Flash Cards* (便条), written more or less regularly since 1996—a hybrid collection of seemingly random notes recording everyday reality.³³ Among them, I spotted one (#258) that could have been taken from Różewicz’s *Card Index*. It has stuck in my memory because in translating it I had to correct the author’s calculations (with his blessing and a disarming admission: “I’ve always been bad at math”). The corrected text reads:

#258

Thousands kilometers no idea how much
 this is your Earth
 20 m × 48 m
 area 960 square meters
 this is your housing development
 8.7 m × 13.5 m
 area 117.45 square meters
 this is your apartment
 6.5 m × 4.2 m

33 A selection of these “flash cards” was published in English in Wang Ping and Ron Padgett’s translation, see Yu Jian 2010.

area 27.3 square meters
 this is your living room
 5.6 m × 3.4 m
 area 19 square meters
 this is your bedroom
 2.1 m × 1.8 m
 area 3.8 square meters
 the surveyor thought he could make another step back
 but he bumped into the wall
 this is your kitchen
 1.6 m × 1.1 m
 area 1.76 square meters
 this is your bathroom
 1.4 m × 1.8 m
 area 2.5 square meters
 this is your bed
 1.6 m × 0.5 m × 2
 area 1.6 square meters
 this is you and your wife together
 0.2 m × 0.3 m
 area 0.06 square meters
 this is sir ... the surveyor hesitated for a while
 your box

#258

不知几万里也
 这是您的大地
 20 米 × 48 米
 占地 960 平米
 这是您的小区
 8.7 米 × 13.5 米
 占地 117.45 平米
 这是您的套间
 6.5 米 × 4.2 米
 占地 27.3 平米
 这是您的客厅
 5.6 米 × 3.4 米
 占地 19 平米
 这是您的卧室
 2.1 米 × 1.8 米

占地 3.8 平米
 测量员以为还可以退一步
 结果撞到了墙壁
 这是您的厨房
 1.6 米 × 1.1 米
 占地 1.76 平米
 这是您的卫生间
 1.4 米 × 1.8 米
 占地 2,5 平米
 这是您的床位
 1.6 米 × 0.5 米 × 2 占地 1.6 平米
 这是太太和您本人
 0.2 × 0.3 米
 占地 0.06 平米
 先生，这是 ... 测量员停顿了一下
 您的盒子。³⁴

In *The Card Index*, the Hero is visited by Man In Hat and Man In Cap who come equipped with measuring instruments:

Two men enter the room. One is wearing a cyclist's cap, the other a hat. They wear long, old-fashioned jackets. One of them draws some papers out of a briefcase; the other pulls out a metal measuring tape. They begin to measure the Hero's room. They do this with great meticulousness.

MAN IN CAP: Three meters, forty-eight centimeters.

MAN IN HAT writes. MAN IN CAP measures the door and the bed and calls out the figures. MAN IN HAT writes them down, adds, multiplies, and divides. MAN IN CAP comes over to the HERO, measures his length and breadth, his feet, the circumference of his head and neck the width of his shoulders, etc.

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI³⁵

Do pokoju wchodzi dwóch mężczyzn. Jeden w cyklistówce, drugi w kapełuszku. Są ubrani w długie jesionki, jeden z nich wyciąga papiery z teczki, drugi rozwija metalowy metr. Zaczynają mierzyć pokój Bohatera. Czynią to bardzo skrupulatnie.

34 Yu Jian 2017: 258–259, trans. J.K.

35 Różewicz 1969: 45.

GOŚĆ W CYKLISTÓWCE: Trzy metry czterdzieści osiem centymetrów. Gość w Kapeluszu zapisuje. Gość w Cyklistówce mierzy drzwi, potem mierzy łóżko, podaje cyfry. Gość w Kapeluszu zapisuje, dodaje, mnoży i dzieli. Gość w Cyklistówce podchodzi do Bohatera, mierzy jego długość i szerokość, stopy, obwód głowy i szyję, rozpiętość ramion itd.³⁶

This coincidence reconfirmed my decision to connect Różewicz's and Yu's poem-plays in translation through the shared title "Kartoteka." Comparative treatment of convergences such as the one presented above aims not at disambiguating or deciphering the meaning but at unlocking possible rereadings of the interacting texts. For instance, the box in the final line of Yu Jian's poem, which may be interpreted as an urn—the smallest container for the human body—astonishingly resonates with Kruszewski's reading of *The Card Index* as a record of the particular judgment, opening a new, metaphysical, dimension for a conversation between the two poems. I believe that stimulating comparative operations between texts from different cultures is one of the core qualities of a good translation; hopefully, my rendition of Yu's work fulfills this task. The next section presents an outcome of one of my comparative rereadings of the two transmedial "card indexes" with a focus on the new grammar of poetry they negotiate.

1.2 *Poetic Text, Dramatic Grammar*

Aside from the reflection on social-political reality that *The Card Index* (*Scattered*) and "File o" quite explicitly encourage, for Tadeusz Różewicz and Yu Jian alike, experiments with the theater were aimed at exploring and transforming the deep grammatical and subgrammatical structures of (literary) language.

In 1975, reflecting on the continuity between the idea of "open poemat" and "open drama," Różewicz wrote:

Commenting on [Konstanty] Puzyna's reflections on "open dramaturgy," I once said: *You used a formula "open dramaturgy," "open play." This is of vital importance to me. It grows out of my earlier poetic experiences, namely from "Open Poemat."*

Open Poemat appeared in 1957. The eponymous work from this collection was written in the years 1955–1956. In the same collection, I included the poemats: "Crystalline Interior of a Dirty Man" (Kryształowe wnętrze brudnego człowieka) (September/October 1955), "The Word" (Słowo), "In

36 Różewicz 2001: 39–40.

the Middle of Life ..." (W  rodku  ycia ...), "Curtains" (Zastony) (1954–1955). I give more attention to these texts, because they paved the way for *The Card Index*. I don't mean just topics, biographical elements, but also the structure of the play. Not only the structure of a literary work, but also the structure of a "theatrical work." In this play, I gainsaid claims of theoreticians that drama is something "deeply and essentially different" from lyric poetry. *Open Poemat* is a collection of lyrical poems. Each of them is constructed as a "microdrama"; and all these microdramas add up to a "normal" drama. Little shifts in the structure of the first part of this collection of lyric poems would change it into a drama. [...] This new "dramatic" and theatrical function of "lyric poetry" has remained underexamined by scholars and theoreticians (and "professional literary critics").³⁷

What connects lyric poetry with drama is not language as such but rather the deep existential silence that underlies, and sometimes undermines, language. It is the complex texture of this unspeakable matter that R zewicz's austere poetry and his theatrical plays alike want to convey, each using its own specific methods. Citing the scholar Juliusz Kleiner, R zewicz further emphasizes that a dramatic work in which the word has primacy and *dramatis personae* are constructed only to pronounce certain lines is "pseudodramaturgy." Elsewhere, in a letter to the director Konrad Swinarski, who adapted *The Card Index* for the *TV Theater* in 1967, the poet reveals that originally the Hero was supposed to say only three words, and that "he [the Hero] did not want to participate in this performance."³⁸ This is also in line with the author's postulate that "open theater" is in fact an "inner theater" (*teatr wewn trzny*)—that is, one in which the arrangement of the stage and sequences of action are meant to reproduce the irregular topography and the dynamic of mental experience.

In one of the scenes originally not included in the playscript, the Hero temporarily assumes the identity of a famous poet and is interviewed by the Journalist in this capacity. In this scene, his aversion to language reaches its peak:

JOURNALIST: Could you tell us about the beginnings? How did you encounter the Muse?

HERO: Quite early, already at school, I realized that I'm good for nothing.

[...]

37 R zewicz 1975: 89–90, trans. J.K.

38 R zewicz 2010: 221 (letter dated April 26, 1966).

OK, if this is really an interview about myself, I will tell the truth. I will tell you what I feel and think. And what is happening with me. I, you see, madam, I lie down.

[...]

You see, madam, I'm too primitive. All misunderstandings between me and the world stem from the fact that I'm primitive and I want to take life seriously. Well, this is what I used to be like. Now I don't know what I'm like. Like most people. But the worst are those who think about it. Damned gab. If only humankind, me included, forever shut up this huge yap. Let these two billion people quiet down for one day, and everything will shine again. The words are much worse than you think. The tongue lies to the thoughts, you know.

DZIENNIKARKA: [...] Czy mógłby pan powiedzieć, jakie były początki? Jak doszło do spotkania z muzą?

BOHATER: Dosyć wcześnie, bo już w szkole zorientowałem się, że nie nadaję się do niczego.

[...]

No, jeśli to naprawdę jest wywiad o mnie, to ja powiem prawdę. Powiem, co czuję i co myślę. Co się ze mną dzieje. Ja, widzi pani, leżę.

[...]

Widzi pani, jestem zbyt prymitywny. Wszystkie nieporozumienia między mną a światem wywodzą się z tego, że jestem prymitywny i chcę poważnie traktować życie. Taki byłem, bo teraz to nie wiem, jaki jestem. Podobnie jak większość ludzi. A już najgorsi są ci, co o tym myślą. Przekłeta gadanina, gdyby ludzkość razem ze mną zamknęła na wieki olbrzymią jadaczkę. Niech te dwa miliardy umilkną na jeden dzień i wszystko odzyska swój blask. Ze słowami jest o wiele gorzej. Język kłamie myślom, rozumie pani.³⁹

The final sentence of the above excerpt, which may be taken as Różewicz's frontal attack on poetry, invokes one of the most famous lines from Mickiewicz's Romantic poetic drama *Forefather's Eve* (*Dziady*): "The tongue lies to the voice, the voice lies to the thought" (Język kłamie głosowi, a głos myślom kłamie).

In many other scenes, the insufficiency of language as a medium of communication when there is no community of experience and, perhaps more importantly, no community of conscience, is shown indirectly by means of a subtle parody of various discourses. Among them, we can identify confessional

39 Różewicz 2001: 69–71, trans. J K.

discourse, which became one of the most prominent trends in Polish literature and literary criticism after World War II. In the opening scene of *The Card Index*, the Hero is visited by his parents who recall his childhood sins. He is profuse in self-accusations and apologies which he expresses in exaggerated semi-religious and semi-official formulas. The sins include sneaking sugar from a sugar bowl, eating sausage on Holy Friday on April 15, 1926, at 3:05 p.m., playing with matches, attempting to intoxicate grandma with strychnine which he put inside biscuits when he was five years old, and so forth. But when it comes to real, “adult” faults, he is much less eager to speak about his motives, and instead produces self-contradictory justifications or blames History for his personal guilt. For example, to Olga, his ex-partner, he says that he had never promised her anything, and if he had, it was because he believed the war would soon release him from his promise:

OLGA: [...] You said we would have a house with a garden, a couple of children, a son and a daughter ... The world was coming to an end and you were lying! You broke ...

HERO: The world didn't come to an end. We've come through. Oh, you can't imagine how glad I am to be lying down. I can lie down, trim my nails, listen to music. [...]

Leave me your newspaper. I thought we would all die, so I talked to you about children, flowers, life. It's quite simple.

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI⁴⁰

OLGA: [...] Mówiłeś, że będziemy mieli domek z ogródkiem, parkę dzieci: synka i córeczkę ... Świat się kończył, a ty kłamałeś! Złamałeś mi ...

BOHATER: Świat się nie skończył. Przeżyliśmy. Nie masz pojęcia, Olu, jak się cieszę, że mogę leżeć. Mogę leżeć, obcinać paznokcie, słuchać muzyki. [...] Zostaw gazetę! Myślałem, że wszyscy umrzemy, więc mówiłem ci o dzieciach, kwiatkach, o życiu. Proste.⁴¹

To Wrona, a peasant whom he killed during the war, he first explains that it was a mistake and that he shot him unintentionally while cleaning his gun to subsequently mumble, without rhyme or reason and contradicting himself, that he was simply following an order.

Like his guilt, the Hero's suffering also proves uncommunicable. He does not know how to describe the war to his childhood friend who spent several years

40 Różewicz 1969: 39–40.

41 Różewicz 2001: 34.

abroad and was thus spared the horror. Nor does he know how to describe the war to the German girl who, seeing his room open, mistakes it for a café and enters to have something to eat and drink. He musters up his generosity and broad-heartedness to rise above his personal tragedy and the national trauma and pronounces big words about forgiving and forgetting, peace and happiness, only to discover that, to the young woman, these words lack referents. He realizes that the world peacefully and happily goes on its way and no one waits for his forgetting and forgiveness:

HERO: God! If only you could understand me. It's all so simple. I will only take a few minutes and then go away, but I have a duty to tell you something and you have a duty to listen right through. I wish to say that it is good that you exist. That you are in this world of ours, just like this, that you are eighteen, that you have such eyes, lips, and hair, that you are smiling. That's how it should be. Young, with a clear bright face, with eyes that have not seen ... have not seen. I just want to say one thing: I do not feel hatred toward you and I wish you happiness. I wish you would go on smiling like this and be happy. You see, I am covered with dirt and blood ... your father and I hunted in the forests ...

GIRL: Hunted? Hunted what? ...

HERO: Each other. With rifles, with guns ... no, no, I won't go into that ... now the forests are quiet, aren't they? It is quiet in the forests. Please, do smile ... In you lies all the hope and joy of the world. You must be good, pure, and gay. You must love us. We were all in a terrible darkness beneath the earth. I want to say it again: I, an old freedom fighter, wish you happiness. I wish happiness to the youth of your country as well as ours. Let's say our farewells. We shall not see each other again. I've expressed myself rather clumsily. How silly, how terribly silly. Isn't it possible to say anything, to explain to another person? It's impossible to convey what's most important ... Oh, God!

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI⁴²

BOHATER: Boże! Żeby tylko pani mnie zrozumiała. To wszystko jest takie proste. Zabiorę pani kilka minut i odejdę, ale mam obowiązek coś pani powiedzieć, a pani ma obowiązek mnie wysłuchać. Chcę powiedzieć, że to dobrze, że pani jest. Że pani jest na tym naszym świecie, taka właśnie, że ma pani osiemnaście lat, takie oczy, usta, włosy i że pani się uśmiecha. Tak powinno być. Tak właśnie powinno być. Młoda z czystą, jasną twarzą, z oczyma, które nie widziały ... nie widziały. Chcę tylko jedno powiedzieć:

42 Różewicz 1969: 58–59.

nie czuję do pani nienawiści i życzę szczęścia. Życzę, aby pani tak się uśmiechała i była szczęśliwa. Widzi pani, ja jestem uwalany w błocie, we krwi ... pani ojciec i ja polowaliśmy w lasach.

DZIEWCZYNA: Polowali? Na co? ...

BOHATER: Na siebie. Z karabinami, ze strzelbami..., nie, nie będę opowiadał ... teraz lasy stoją ciche, prawda? Cicho jest w lasach. Proszę, niech pani się uśmiechnie ... W tobie jest cała nadzieja i radość świata. Musisz być dobra, czysta, wesoła. Musisz nas kochać. My wszyscy byliśmy w strasznej ciemności pod ziemią. Chciałem jeszcze raz powiedzieć, ja, dawny polski partyzant, życzę pani szczęścia. Życzę szczęścia waszej młodzieży, tak jak naszej. Proszę się ze mną pożegnać. Już się nie zobaczymy. Wszystko to wyszło jakoś śmiesznie. Jak głupio, jak strasznie głupio. Czy nie można nic powiedzieć, wyjaśnić drugiemu człowiekowi. Nie można przekazać tego, co jest najważniejsze ... o Boże!⁴³

Words always miss the target or the subject, or the addressee. Seeing the man's awkwardness, the Chorus of Elders occasionally tries to prompt him by whispering wise quotes or exotic terms that come in absurd sequences based on phonetic associations; for example, "Guano Guatemala goulash guzzle gun goodies goose gooseberry glucose glue glum glutton"⁴⁴ (Guano Guatemala gulasz gulden guma gumienny gumno Gustaw guślarz gutaperka guz guzik).⁴⁵ Annoyed, the Hero kills the three elders with a kitchen knife halfway through the play, but they soon regenerate and come back to help him at a high school examination as his professors appear in the room.

In *The Card Index Scattered*, Różewicz adds a long prologue composed partly of his own poems, including allusions to "The Survivor," which foreground the helplessness of the human condition and of human language, making it the main theme of the revised text:

before sleep I read in
 a book I don't remember the title perhaps it was a holy book
 that one can go in two directions good: right side forward and up bad: left
 side back and down
 but today it's too late to
 change the left side to right
 changing backward to forward may not be easy either
 perhaps I can try to change down to up

43 Różewicz 2001: 51–52.

44 Różewicz 1969: 63, translated by Adam Czerniawski.

45 Różewicz 2001: 55.

lying in bed
 this should be even easier
 than sitting at the table
 or during a poetry evening
 "candlelit"
 I'll split my sides
 and in this book I also read
 other words
 good evil
 light darkness
 wisdom foolishness
 beauty ugliness
 high low
 warm cold
 strength weakness
 the author or perhaps the philosopher I don't
 remember because I felt asleep set these words
 against one another sicked one on another

from his lofty gab I figured out that
 I should replace evil with good darkness
 with light foolishness with wisdom ugliness
 with beauty low with high cold with
 warm weakness with strength

if I don't manage to accomplish this
 I will never change for the better

but I clearly can't accomplish this
 in my bed
 before sleep

przed zaśnięciem czytałem
 w książce tytułu nie pamiętam
 a może to była księga
 że można iść w dwóch kierunkach
 dobry: strona prawa przód i góra
 zły: strona lewa tył i dół

ale dziś już za późno
 aby stronę lewą zamienić na prawą

tył na przód też nie będzie łatwo
od biedy dół mogę zamienić na górę
nawet leżąc w łóżku
przyjdzie mi to łatwiej
niż przy stole lub stoliku
lub na wieczorze poetyckim
“przy świecach”
pęknię ze śmiechu

i jeszcze czytałem w tej księdze
inne słowa
dobro zło
jasność ciemność
mądrość głupota
piękno brzydota
wysokość niskość
ciepło chłód
siła słabość

autor może filozof a nawet prorok
nie pamiętam bo zasnąłem
napuszczał te słowa na siebie
szczuł na siebie
z jego wysokiej gadaniny
wynikało że
muszę zło wymienić na dobro
ciemność na jasność
brzydotę na piękno
niskość na wysokość
chłód na ciepło
słabość na siłę

jeśli tego nie dokonam
to nigdy się nie zmienię
na lepsze

ale przecież nie mogę tego dokonać w łóżku
przed zaśnięciem⁴⁶

46 Różewicz 2001: 80–81, trans. J.K.

In order to, literally, get himself together, the Hero tries to name his body parts, but real shapes somehow do not fit language forms. One of these names proves particularly problematic, that is “ring finger,” or *palec serdeczny* (lit. “cordial/heartfelt/sincere finger”) in Polish. The protagonist apparently no longer allows the possibility that there might have remained anything described by this adjective in him:

HERO 1: This is my hand. I'm moving my hand. My hand. My fingers. My finger! (*examines his finger*). Ah, how did it go? ... My living hand is so obedient. It does whatever the head thinks. (*scratches himself*) This should be a thumb, and this index finger, and this middle finger, but what was the name of the one smaller than the middle, near the little ... I don't remember ... my head ... oh! yes! ring [lit. “cordial”] finger, ring ... my ring finger ...

BOHATER 1: To nie jest moja ręka. Ruszam ręką. Moja ręka. Moje palce. Mój palec! (*ogląda palec*) Aha, jak to było?? ... Moja żywa ręka jest taka posłuszna. Robi wszystko, co pomyśli głowa (*drapie się*) To będzie kciuk, a to palec wskazujący, a to środkowy, ale jak się nazywa ten mniejszy od środkowego w stronę małego palce ... nie pamiętam ... moja głowa ... a! serdeczny, serdeczny ... mój palec serdeczny ...⁴⁷

In *The Card Index Scattered*, not only abstract nouns but also concrete nouns become disconnected from their referents; the same happens to adjectives; even those most conventional that are part of fixed expressions get out of joint. This time, however, Różewicz does not stop at demonstrating and lamenting the unspeakability of inner experience. Instead of trying to directly convey the ineffable, he diffracts it as a prism diffracts invisible white light into a spectrum of many different colors to form complex patterns on a surface. Throughout the play, the stage is increasingly noisy and chaotic. Excerpts from Różewicz's works are mixed with excerpts from newspaper articles, mostly related to alcohol, read aloud during the performance (e.g., a piece about a contention over kosher vodka) amid noises emanating from a TV set. Among new elements, in *The Card Index Scattered* there is also a pastiche of political speeches in the parliament, a “Warsaw salon”—a grotesque portrayal of the country's elites patterned after another scene from *Forefathers' Eve* which depicts members of the Polish aristocracy and intelligentsia who collaborated with the Russian

47 Ibidem: 83, trans. J K.

tsar—and excerpts from religious preachings from the Renaissance period. Różewicz describes his strategy in one of his best-known poems, “Proposition the Second” (*Propozycja druga*), often quoted in the context of *The Card Index Scattered*:

Proposition the Second

The poem
is finished
now break it
and when it grows together again
break it once more
at places where it meets reality
remove the joints
the random elements
which come from the imagination
those that remain
tie up
with silence
or leave untied
when
the poem is finished
remove the foundation
on which it rests
—foundations
restrict movement—
then the construction
will rise
and for a moment
will soar above reality
with which eventually
it will collide
the collision
will be the birth
of a new poem
a stranger to reality
surprising
splitting
and transforming it

and itself undergoing
transformation

Translated by ADAM CZERNIAWSKI⁴⁸

Propozycja druga

Utwór
skończony
trzeba złamać
a kiedy się zrośnie
jeszcze raz łamać
w miejscach gdzie styka się z rzeczywistością
usunąć elementy łączące
przypadkowe
które pochodzą z wyobraźni
pozostałe powiązać
milczeniem
lub zostawić rozwiązane
po skończeniu
utworu
usunąć fundament
na którym się opiera
—ponieważ fundamenty
ograniczają ruch—
wtedy konstrukcja
uniesie się
i będzie
przez chwilę leciała
nad rzeczywistością
z którą wreszcie
się zderzy
zderzenie
będzie początkiem życia
utworu nowego
który jest obcy rzeczywistości
zaskakuje ją
rozbija
przekształca

48 Różewicz 2011a: 108.

i sam ulega
przekształceniu⁴⁹

By bringing his ascetic poetry on stage, Różewicz sets the phrases in motion, verb-ifies and allows them to collide with other objects in spacetime. From such accidents, new temporary meanings emerge. Thus, the author can be sure that his language will not congeal into any totalitarian or totalizing truth, and that it will keep updating itself with the evolving reality.

In the poems from the collection *Anxiety: Selected Poems (Niepokój. Wybór wierszy, 1995)*, we can observe how after the late 1950s this theatrical grammar was subsequently incorporated into the deepest textual structure of Różewicz's poems. In the afterword, the author explains:

In our times, it is not the final form, i.e., a poem (successful, “beautiful,” “perfect,” etc.), but the formation process itself that is interesting to the reader, because the reader themselves more and more often writes poetry too. Poetry “on the move” toward the unknown still makes sense, while works abundant in “taste,” “wisdom,” “depth” are porcelain ... which I'm always tempted to smash. Only old porcelain has value. Porcelain poems produced now to satisfy critics and reviewers are a futile effort.⁵⁰

Starting with *The Card Index*, Różewicz wrote dozens of plays, many of which problematize and try to overcome nontransparency and the limited intersubjectivity of language, and the irresolvable tensions between (poetic) convention and reality.⁵¹ At the same time, his poems became increasingly theatrical. In 1961, he created a poem “Et in Arcadia Ego” (named after the two paintings of Nicolas Poussin) that he said could be directly played out on stage. This indeed happened but thirty-two years later, in 1993, when “Et in Arcadia Ego” and another poem “Caught” (Złowiony) were adapted for the theater by Jerzy Grzegorzewski; the director's assistant was Andrzej Wojaczek, the elder brother of Rafał.⁵² In 2004, in yet another production, Grzegorzewski merged Różewicz's “Et In Arcadia Ego” with “A Little Soul” (Duszczyka). In the meantime, in 1996, the long poem “Francis Bacon, or Diego Velázquez in a Dentist's Chair” (Francis Bacon albo Diego Velázquez na fotelu dentystycznym, 1994–1995) was “dramatized” by Grzegorzewski in probably the most spectacular of

49 Różewicz 2005: 90.

50 Quoted in van Nieuwerkerken 2014: 68, trans. J.K.

51 For an English-language panoramic study of Różewicz's theatre, see Filipowicz 1991.

52 Zdunik 2014.

his poetic experiments as a thirty-minute play in which the poet Tadeusz R. and the painter Francis Bacon fight in a boxing ring in a theater's foyer accompanied by Pope Innocent x and top model Kiksa. All these performances were well received by critics, many of whom perfectly captured the astonishing translatability of poetic structures into the structure of theatrical spacetime.⁵³ Maria Prussak, for one, wrote in her review of "Francis Bacon":

Różewicz's poemat tries to touch on the identity and mutual inadequacy of the written and painted vision of the world, the community of sensations and expression. This inner tension in Różewicz's text is translated by Grzegorzewski into theatrical reality, who seeks another form of expression for it, beyond the direct opposition of word and image. He seeks in a different way, not in the textual dimension of the poet's work. There's no easy escape into silence, space for pure contemplation could hardly be found. Classical, artificial beauty is no longer available, for today's art consists of constant movement, pulsation, sometimes noisy confrontation. There's no silence, only surprise, and the pressing necessity of asking more and more questions.⁵⁴

"Francis Bacon" deserves more attention since, along with *The Card Index (Scattered)*, it may serve as an interesting context for Yu Jian's "File o" and its stage interpretation by Mou Sen. Written in 1994–1995, Różewicz's poemat boldly reexplores what Mayra Rivera in her monograph focused on different dimensions of corporeality called the "poetics of the flesh."⁵⁵ Różewicz himself is present in the text, and—through his English translator Adam Czerniawski (who is both an intratextual persona and the flesh-and-blood translator of the poemat)—undertakes the dialogue with the British painter.⁵⁶ He speaks of his fascination with Bacon's works and of similarities between himself and the artist, like in *The Card Index Scattered*, quoting from his earlier poems, including "The Survivor":

I digested his terrible
meat-art copulating carcasses
shut in myself
I continued my dialogue

53 See, e.g., Pawłowski 1996; Węgrzyniak 1997; Majcherek 2002.

54 Prussak 1997, trans. J K.

55 Rivera 2015.

56 All excerpts from the poemat come from Różewicz 2016: 755–767 (Polish) and Różewicz 2011a: 249–258 (English, translated by Adam Czerniawski).

with Saturn absorbed in
 eating his own children
the way of killing men and beasts is the same
I've seen it:
truckfuls of chopped-up men
who will not be saved

I wrote in 1945

[...]

Bacon achieved a transformation
 of a crucified being
 into hanging dead meat
 got up from the table and said softly
 yes of course we are meat
 we are potentially carrion
 whenever I am at a butcher's
 I always think it astonishing
 it's not me hanging on the hook
 must be pure chance
 Rembrandt Velázquez
 well yea they believed in the resurrection
 of bodies they prayed before painting session
 while we play
 modern art is a game
 from Picasso onwards we all play
 better or worse

[...]

In 1956 I wrote:

the breathing meat
filled with blood
is still the food
for these perfect forms

they press so close around their spoil
that even silence does not penetrate
outside

we have both travelled
 through a *Waste Land*

trawiłem jego straszną
 sztukę mięsa kopulowanie padliny
 zamknięty w sobie
 prowadziłem dalej mój dialog
 ze Saturnem który był zajęty
 zjadaniem własnych dzieci
człowieka tak się zabija jak zwierzę
widziałem furgony porąbanych ludzi
którzy nie zostaną zbawieni
 pisałem w roku 1945

[...]

Bacon osiągnął transformację
 ukrzyżowanej osoby
 w wiszące martwe mięso
 wstał od stolika i powiedział cicho
 tak oczywiście jesteście mięsem
 jesteście potencjalną padliną
 kiedy idę do sklepu rzeźniczego
 zawsze myślę jakie to zdumiewające
 że to nie ja wiszę na haku
 to chyba czysty przypadek
 Rembrandt Velázquez
 no tak oni wierzyli w zmartwychwstanie
 ciała oni się modlili przed malowaniem
 a my gramy
 sztuka współczesna stała się grą
 od czasów Picassa wszyscy gramy
 lepiej gorzej

[...]

W roku 1956 pisałem:

jeszcze oddychające mięso
wypełnione krwią
jest pożywieniem
tych form doskonałych

zbiegają się tak szczerze nad zdobyczą
że nawet milczenie nie przenika
na zewnątrz [...]

*the breathing meat
filled with blood
is still the food
for these perfect forms*

obaj wędrowaliśmy
przez "Ziemię jałową"

He also "provokes" Bacon, listing potential motifs for his paintings that he should have considered, even more "fleshy" than Bacon's own:

I tried to provoke him
so asked whether he's heard
about Sigmund Freud's rotting mouth cavity
towards the end of his life even his faithful
dog would run away from his master
couldn't stand that stench
why didn't you paint
a mouth roof eaten by a beautiful cancer

chciałem go sprowokować
więc zapytałem czy słyszał
o gnijącej jamie ustnej Sigmunda Freuda
pod koniec życia nawet wierny
pies uciekał od swego pana
nie mogąc znieść smrodu
czemu Pan nie malował
podniebienia zjedzonego
przez pięknego raka

Finally, however, unsatisfied, having received no feedback, he bids farewell to Bacon, and returns to poetry writing. As if suddenly awoken from some horrible nightmare, he realizes that he neglected a crucial element, namely the title, so he quickly concocts one in the final lines of the text:

goodbye Francis Bacon
I have written a poem [poemat] about you
I won't be searching for you any more
end fullstop

wait! there's still the poem's [poemat's] title
 'Francis Bacon
 or
 Diego Velázquez
 in a dentist's chair'
 not bad eh
 none of the Irish
 or English critics
 or poets
 had thought up
 such a title
 perhaps I shouldn't have
 added such a long long poem [poemat]
 to the title
 but one gets talkative
 even garrulous
 over a pint

żegnaj Francis Bacon
 napisałem o Tobie poemat
 już nie będę Cię szukał
 koniec kropka
 a! jeszcze tytuł poematu
Francis Bacon
czyli
Diego Velázquez
na fotelu dentystycznym
 prawda, że niezły
 żaden z irlandzkich
 czy angielskich krytyków
 i poetów
 nie wymyślił
 takiego tytułu
 może niepotrzebnie
 dodałem jeszcze do tytułu
 ten długi poemat
 ale człowiek przy piwie
 robi się rozmowny
 a nawet gadatliwy

Arent van Nieuwerkerken rightly suggests that Różewicz's farewell to Bacon implies that he managed to find a poetic form that "resists aestheticization" and the "aporias of modernist art" in a more effective way than Bacon's paintings, because "text which develops in time can explicitly reconstruct all the entanglements of the everyday life of its author." As a "self-denying artifact that does not arrive at any summation or existential point," this "flawed" poemat constitutes "a perfect—because performative—enactment" of a new formal strategy that Różewicz developed in his subsequent works. In these works, not only boundaries between genres but also those between text, paratext, and metatext are increasingly blurred. In his late poetry, argues van Nieuwerkerken, Różewicz arrives at the point in which "genre differences [...] and purely workshop issues [...] become neutralized by the intuition that problems with poetic texts [...] are a performative representation [...] of the existence of the contemporary human which is ultimately detached from the Absolute."⁵⁷

Wojaczek complained that he could not "write a poem that would be like *ciato*" (Polish for both "body" and "flesh"). Różewicz accomplishes what Wojaczek failed to achieve. But the flesh-ness of his poetry does not imply gravitating toward the more and more saturated, ever-denser materiality of language as it does in Wojaczek, who brought to life an attractive but sluggish homunculus lagging behind his own shadow. Instead, it means evolving toward maximal flexibility and mobility of poetic phrases in order to recreate "mechanical" qualities of the flesh: its vulnerability, plasticity, and proneness to various impulses that come from the external world. Rivera's definition of "flesh," as distinct from "body" (which arguably better fits Wojaczek's approach), aptly describes Różewicz's understanding of, and artistic engagement with, this category:

Flesh is an ambivalent term that names a rather slippery materiality. Its propensity to change distinguishes "flesh" from "body." Body commonly denotes an entity complete in itself and visible to those around it. In contrast, flesh is conceived as formless and impermanent, crossing the boundaries between the individual body and the world.

Flesh is always becoming. Air, water, food, sunlight, and even societies of microorganisms enter our bodies to weave the delicate tissue of our flesh. Imperceptibly to the naked eye, cell by cell, day after day, the world constitutes your body and mine. And our bodies enter into the constitution of the world. They are intimately our own, singular and irreplaceable, and yet formed by and given to the world. [...]

57 All quotes in this paragraph come from van Nieuwerkerken 2014: 73–76, trans. J K.

Words also become flesh. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. Social discourses divide the world and mark bodies differently. [...] Social hierarchies become flesh. We speak casually about a touching account, biting comments, or deadly policies. The term “sarcasm” comes from the Greek *sarkasmos*, “to tear flesh.”⁵⁸

Flesh is the crucial zone of contact between physical and spiritual reality, nature and culture, “I” and the world, and the first stage of transformation of matter into language, chemical processes into discourses, lumps into texts, to borrow Richard Rorty’s dyad, and the other way around. Rózewicz’s poetic “work in progress” installs itself in this zone, its dramatic grammar catalyzing and increasing the efficiency of the processes of transforming the world into the word, and vice versa.

• • •

Akin to Rózewicz, who owes his unique conception of performativity of the flesh largely to his involvement with theater, Yu Jian likes to emphasize that cooperation with Mou Sen taught him to be attentive to corporeality and to the movement that sculpts (in) flesh. In 1993, after writing but before publishing “File 0,” Yu participated in Mou’s trainings for actors at his Theater Workshop (戏剧车间) in Beijing for a play based on Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 (b. 1940) drama *The Other Shore* (彼岸). He recalls:

There were no rigid restrictions on the trainings; only broad, general guidelines. The actors could move freely, they were allowed to invent ways of moving and to give them full play. There were no standards to reach for the movements, no distinctions between right and wrong, clumsy, ugly, coarse and dexterous, beautiful, precise—only body and life on the move.⁵⁹

Fascinated with what he saw, Yu joined Mou’s experiment and after their intense brainstorm over Gao’s text, which was perceived by the leader of the Popular camp as a loathed “product of the mythical era,”⁶⁰ he created an alternative playscript loosely inspired by *The Other Shore* called *A Chinese-Grammatical Discussion of “The Other Shore”* (关于《彼岸》的一次汉语语法讨论). In

58 Rivera 2015: KL 80–91.

59 Yu Jian 2004: 182, trans. J K.

60 Ibidem.

Discussion, Yu tries to destabilize the metaphysical dimension of the concept of other-shore-ness by transforming its grammar, that is turning the noun (the word-that-names) “other shore” into a verb (a word-that-moves). The play has a form of a metatheatrical conversation between a director-like persona with the actors, which is subsequently turned into practice as the actors try to “verbify” metaphysics. The action consists of their attempts to cross a “river”—a net of entangled ropes spread between entresols placed along the walls on either side, which serve as the “shores.” Finally, however, the actors’ efforts prove fruitless and the performance seems to end where it started. The performers, liberated by movement (动) decide to “name” (命名) this movement; that is, find a word-that-names (noun) for something that moves. “Movement” itself becomes their god and they call it ... “other shore.” It seems that there is no way out of the vicious circle of naming/noun-ing.

One year later, in 1994, Yu Jian and Mou Sen undertook one more attempt to break out of this circle. Yu joined Mou’s performance of *Things Related to AIDS* (与艾滋病有关), another avant-garde experiment—this time without playscript, based only on improvised stage movement accompanied by improvised conversations. There, recalls Yu in “Drama as a Verb” (戏剧作为动词), acting on stage, and feeling how his initial nervousness, embarrassment, and inner tension were gradually released, he experienced firsthand the expressive power and communicational functionality of movement, which helps people throw away “cultural masks” and enter into a genuine dialogue.⁶¹ Finally, in 1995, the poet entrusted “File o” to Mou for the director to scatter his own, Yu Jian’s, archives, unlocking the liberating potential of the narratives immobilized in dossiers.

In the text of “File o,” there exists a clear connection between the flesh and movement. As in Różewicz, flesh is performative or, put differently, verb-al; moreover, it is the most verb-al when it is not verbalized; that is, when it does not enter into interactions with language. In chapter one, “History of Birth,” we witness a labor scene, which presents all physiological details of delivering a child into the world:

his origin has nothing to do with writing he came from a 28-year-old
 woman’s labor pains
 a time-honoured hospital third floor host to inflammations medi-
 cations doctors and a morgue
 [...]

61 Yu Jian 2013: 349.

the chrome on the scalpels has come off the doctor is 48 the nurses
 are all virgins
 howl struggle infuse inject pass groan daub
 twist grip rip cut split run loosen drip trickle flow
 these words-that-move are all on-site words-that-move make up the
 site words-that-move steeped in pools of blood
 “the head’s coming out” the doctor’s practiced enunciation testi-
 mony: hands covered with blood
 long white coasts covered with blood sheets covered with blood flood
 covered with blood metal covered with blood

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁶²

他的起源和书写无关他来自一位妇女在 28 岁的阵痛
 老牌医院 三楼 炎症 药物 医生和停尸房的载体
 [...]
 手术刀脱铬了 医生 48 岁 护士们全是处女
 嚎叫 挣扎 输液 注射 传递 呻吟 涂抹
 扭曲 抓住 拉扯 割开 撕裂 奔跑 松开 滴 淌 流
 这些动词 全在现场 现场全是动词 浸在血泊中的动词
 “头出来了” 医生娴熟的发音 证词: 手上全是血
 白大褂上全是血 被单上全是血 地板上全是血 金属上全是血⁶³

It could be said that the hospital as such is a domain of verbs, or, more precisely, it is a place where nouns (words-that-name) are seamlessly linked with, and sometimes indeed indistinguishable from, verbs (words-that-move). At the beginning, when a person is born, in the human body they constitute a unity expressed in the eponymous “o.” “o” is a *shici* 实词, which can be translated as a “notional word” or, alternatively, as a “content word,” a term that encompasses all specific categories: nouns and verbs plus adjectives, adverbs, and numerals:

everywhere are words of cures and words of illnesses words of those
 fighting to live and words of those ready to die everywhere are
 actions to do with treating diseases and actions to do with having dis-
 eases actions to do with final farewells and actions to do with deliv-
 ering babies
 all this ancient stuff will stick to that first-born that first-ever that
 first-time

62 Yu Jian 2001.

63 Yu Jian 2004: 30.

that new tongue those new vocal cords that new brain-box those
 new testicles
 these living things that come from countless words-that-move are
 named in a notional word o

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁶⁴

到处是治病的话与患病的话 求生的话与垂死的话 到处是
 治病的行为与患病的行为 送终的行为与接生的行为
 这老掉牙的一切 黏附着 那个头胎 那最初的 那第一次的
 那条新的舌头 那条新的声带 那个新的脑瓜 那对新的睾丸
 那些来自无数动词中的活动物 被命名为一个实词 o⁶⁵

As a person matures and learns language and writing, the “content word” o splits into narrow categories, which is illustrated in the “History of Growing Up”:

and his listening has begun and his looking has begun and his mov-
 ing has begun
 grown-ups give him hearing grown-ups give him seeing grown-ups
 give him movement
 for mum say “mother” for dad say “father” for granny say
 “grandmother”
 that dark that turbid that obscure that tangled lump of flesh and
 blood
 becomes limpid becomes clear understands fills character-square
 upon character-square page upon page of paper
 turns into words-that-name function words syllables past
 tense word groups passive voice
 affixes turns into meaning significance defined meaning basic
 meaning extended meaning ambiguous meaning
 turns into interrogative sentences declarative sentences compound
 and complex sentences linguistic rhetoric semantic markers
 a parasite living off words from now on unable not to hear words not
 to see words not to meet words
 some words make him public some words give him cover following
 words from simple to complex from

64 Yu Jian 2001.

65 Yu Jian 2004: 30.

shallow to profound from childish to mature from halting to fluent
 this little person
 is weaned at one goes to nursery at two goes to kindergarten at
 four becomes literate at six
 first grade to six certified by Teacher Zhang seventh grade eighth
 grade ninth grade certified by
 Teacher Wang tenth grade eleventh grade certified by Teacher
 Li eventually he graduates from university

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁶⁶

他的听也开始了 他的看也开始了 他的动也开始了
 大人把听见给他 大人把看见给他 大人把动作给他
 妈妈用“母亲” 爸爸用“父亲” 外婆用“外祖母”
 那黑暗的 那混沌的 那朦胧的 那血肉模糊的一团
 清晰起来 明白起来 懂得了 进入一个个方格 一页页稿纸
 成为名词 虚词 音节 过去时 词组 被动语态
 词缀 成为意思 意义 定义 本义 引义 歧义
 成为疑问句 陈述句 并列复合句 语言修辞学 语义标记
 词的寄生者 再也无法不听到词 不看到词 不碰到词
 一些词将他公开 一些词为他掩饰 跟着词从简到繁
 从肤浅到深奥 从幼稚到成熟 从生涩到练达 这个小人
 一岁断奶 二岁进托儿所 四岁上幼儿园 六岁成了文化人
 一到六年级 证明人 张老师 初一初二初三 证明人
 王老师 高一高二 证明人 李老师 最后他大学毕业⁶⁷

In the teaching and learning process, verbs are consistently neglected. They reemerge only in the rare moments when the flesh reasserts itself: in early romantic love and the first experiences of masturbation in a male toilet at school. Love evokes “actions that cannot be named movements that defy language”⁶⁸ (无以命名的行为 不能言说的动作).⁶⁹ Masturbation, in turn, causes an overflow of verbs which yet shamefully try to hide themselves behind words-that-name and present themselves as “movements of something”:

66 Yu Jian 2001.

67 Yu Jian 2004: 31.

68 Yu Jian 2001, translated by Maghiel van Crevel.

69 Yu Jian 2004: 33.

a great many movements the movement of masturbation
 the movement of rape the movement of syphilis the movement of
 heroin bad movements such as these
 masturbate as the first word-that-moves

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁷⁰

好多动作 手淫这个动作
 强奸这个动作 梅毒这个动作 海洛因这个动作 坏的这类动作
 手淫是最初的动词。⁷¹

In adult love, meaning love “at the legal age” that leads to marriage, there is no longer room for movement: the feeling turns into a set of pseudopoetic cultural clichés:

of course it's the moon fading at dawn where willows line the river-
 bank of course it's two paper coasters under two bottles of soda pop
 of course face to face lack words want words stop oneself smile behind
 one's hand want to say it hold it back saying how cool and lovely the
 autumn is

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁷²

当然是杨柳岸晓风残月 当然是两张纸垫着 两瓶汽水
 当然是相对无言预言又止掩口一笑欲说还休却道天凉好个秋。⁷³

Not only in love but in entire mature “daily life” (日常生活), if there are any movements, they are always pushed into a rigid framework of one's everyday routine, work schedule, and regular physical exercises in case they try to “rebel.” At work, he “goes in nods his mouth opens his mouth closes his face moves his hands move his feet move [...] time from 8 to 12 from 2 to 6”⁷⁴ (进去 点头 嘴开 嘴闭 面部动 手动 脚动 [...] 时间 8 点到 12 点 2 点到 6 点)。⁷⁵ Only from the “Thought Report” do we learn that in his “gloomy thought” words-that-move still seethe, impatiently waiting for their time:

70 Yu Jian 2001.

71 Yu Jian 2004: 33.

72 Yu Jian 2001.

73 Yu Jian 2004: 34.

74 Yu Jian 2001, translated by Maghiel van Crevel.

75 Yu Jian 2001: 36.

he wants to rape he wants to go naked he wants to kill a bunch of
people he wants to rob banks [...]

he wants to rebel to engage in frantic activism to agitate to
revolt to bring down an entire class

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁷⁶

他想强奸 他想裸体 他想杀掉一批人 他想抢银行 [...]

他想暴乱 频繁活动 骚动 造反 推翻一个阶级⁷⁷

But the file's owner does nothing of these things to mark his presence in the world. Instead, what will survive him will be a pile of forms with a long list of objects he has possessed—only nouns, adjectives, and numerals:

15 kilos of old magazines 5 kilos of old wall calendars 20 kilos of
waste paper

unit price for old magazines 0.20 yuan per kilo

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL⁷⁸

旧杂志 15 公斤 旧挂历 15 公斤 废纸 20 公斤

单价 旧杂志 每公斤 0.20 元⁷⁹

This is of course not the only possible, and not the only rewarding, way of reading “File 0.” Alternative propositions can be found, for example, in Shen Qi’s 沈奇 report from a 1994 Peking University seminar devoted to a discussion of “File 0,” the first essay-length commentary on the poem published by He Yi 贺奕 in 1994, and Michelle Yeh’s 溪密 article from 1998 which focuses on interactions between poetry and theatrical genres in Mou’s play.⁸⁰ Van Crevel offers a more elaborate account of various interpretations in the translator’s foreword and in his *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, adding his own propositions and emphasizing in particular that “this text is not only about a file, it *is* a file itself; and it not only has a style, but it is *about* style as well.”⁸¹ What I find most important from the perspective of the poem’s theatrical interpretation, is Yu’s utopian attempt at specific structural mimesis, which he seeks to achieve by synchronizing the grammar of language with the “grammar” of existence, directly associating grammatical categories with certain aspects of lived reality and restoring proper proportions and relationships

76 Yu Jian 2001.

77 Yu Jian 2004: 36.

78 Yu Jian 2001.

79 Yu Jian 2004: 39.

80 He Yi 1994; Shen Qi 1995; Yeh 1998a.

81 van Crevel 2008: 238.

between them. This aspect becomes underscored in Mou Sen's interpretation. It is also strengthened by the comparison with *The Card Index* and *The Card Index Scattered*.

In Mou's "File o," the stage is a space characterized by simple, natural laws of dynamic in which the potential energy of elevated words-that-name may be transformed into the kinetic energy of simple words-that-move fueling stage action. One actor, Wu Wenguang 吴文光, speaks of his relationship with his father. Another, Jiang Yue 蒋樾, starts reading from a love story in his past. Their monologues cut through one another and are drowned out by the noise of the various tools and machines operating on stage. These include, among other things, a vintage record player that emits a recitation of "File o": long streams of nouns from the reservoir of the gobbledygook. At some point, on the screen at the back of the stage a video appears depicting footage of an open-heart surgical operation on a young child, which can be interpreted as an illustration of the "History of Birth," showing the process of civilization's intervention into human flesh, as described by Rivera. The play ends with an ambiguous scene: the actors throw apples and tomatoes into a big industrial fan. The fan smashes them and spreads the pieces all around the stage. This final scene, notes Claire Huot, has often been read politically, as an allegory for suppressed individuality and the Chinese government's oppression of dissidence. The director, however, never accepted this interpretation, emphasizing that: "Forceful stories about the Chinese people and the mother country don't interest me. Nor do heroic political deeds. I want to break through the cliché that China can be reduced to a purely political phenomenon, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen, etc."⁸² This and other utterances by Mou Sen and Wu Wenguang allow one to see this final act in a totally different light: as a victory rather than a failure. It is a moment in which verbs hidden in deepest and darkest thoughts ("he wants to kill [...] he wants to rob [...] he wants to rebel ...") are released, and the old grammar of cultural and political discourse is smashed.

This is, arguably, also how Yu understood the effect of Mou's theatrical experiment and, based on that, went on to further theorize and nuance his "grammatology." All his theatrical findings that relate to corporeality, flesh, movement, and materiality feed into Yu Jian's most influential essays written since the mid-1990s, including "Reject Metaphor" (拒绝隐喻), created more or less parallel with Yu's activity in Mou's theater in 1993–1995, "Confession" (交代) from 1998, and "Poetry Expresses Body" (诗言体) from 2000. Essays such as these ensured him a position of leading theorist in the Popular camp during the Intellectual-Popular polemic. After roughly a decade of "a little stabilization," to borrow Różewicz's term, and the declared distaste for poetry

82 Quoted in Huot 2000: 82.

performances, in the 2010s Yu Jian has increasingly returned to the stage in search of a new formula for his writing, though this time usually as the sole director. His techniques include poetry recitals enriched with various special effects ranging from blues music to shamanist rituals, such as killing a chicken on stage. As he did in the 1990s, he also provides theoretical—though perhaps we should say, rather, (para)theological—foundations for this new regrammatization based on the concept of poetry as religion.

A small sample of Yu's new explicit poetics will appear in the next section in the discussion on poetry and popular culture toward which Yu, like Różewicz in the last two decades of his artistic career, is increasingly attracted, although for very different reasons. Różewicz devoted himself to the poetics of *recycling*, fascinated by the idea of processing (pop-)cultural “waste” into texts that clearly expose marks of their derivative, secondary character. Such poetry, trusted Różewicz, mirrors the modern human's experience of the vicariousness of existence, taps into its aesthetic potential, and brings out its ethical advantage, which rests in hard-learned humility. Yu, conversely, believes that popular culture enables verse's return to the Source, to the origins of poetry as epiphany experienced during frantic collective rituals.

The divergent lines of Różewicz's and Yu's oeuvre are roughly parallel with those of Wojacek and Haizi 海子, respectively. Wojacek, like Różewicz, evinced a growing fascination with artificiality; Haizi, like Yu, strived for authenticity of poetic experience and did not allow ironic metaconsciousness to develop in his work. As I noted before, these tendencies also coincide with different degrees of receptiveness to postmodernism in Poland and in China, which will be discussed in chapter 6 with reference to Brian McHale's distinction between postmodernism as ontologically oriented, aimed at overcoming the human-ness of language and arriving at nonperson singular self, and modernism as epistemologically oriented, aimed at exploring the mysteries of the world and subduing them to one's self. In chapter 7, in turn, we will observe how these trends translate into different approaches to technologically supported poetry and its two lines of development: toward the posthuman (in Poland) and toward the transhuman (in China).

2 Hyperpoetry and Hypermusic: Marcin Świetlicki and Cui Jian

Poetry's involvement with theater usually does not raise questions. Of course, specific works may, and sometimes do, spark controversy, but the very idea of connecting the two arts is not considered problematic, since they occupy roughly the same area in the traditional hierarchy of genres in the

Euro-American and Chinese cultural contexts alike. Compared to the theatrical activity of Różewicz, Yu Jian, and other poets, the marriage—or, as some have it—misalliance between poetry and popular arts appears much more problematic. Whether a poet engages with popular culture, or an artist representing a genre considered part of popular culture is invited to join poetry Parnassus, voices of dissent emerge sooner or later.

In the former case—when poets reach for “lower” means of artistic expressions—the objections can usually be distinguished into two types: (1) the poet “prostitutes themselves” and (2) the poet wastes their creative energy, which has a detrimental effect on the quality of their poetry writing; both of these arguments Marcin Świetlicki has heard many times since he established his alternative-rock band Świetliki (Fireflies). In the latter case—that is, when authors or works of popular-culture genres are drawn into poetry canons—three general types of counterargument emerge: (1) the author/work does not deserve the cultural capital of being counted as a poet/poetry; (2) the author/work does not meet the formal requirements to be considered a poet/poetry; (3) those who propose such inclusion do this for “commercial” purposes, to make poetry more attractive to broader audiences and profit as a result. There was heated discussion around the world about awarding the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan, who is the best known but definitely not the only case of a musician being conferred institutional “canonization” as a poet. In this section, we will visit the Chinese “Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Kurt Cobain all rolled into one, one-man rock-and-roll revolution,”⁸³ as Dennis Rea described Cui Jian, whose lyrics were included in school textbooks for literature, as well as in anthologies of the best of the best in twentieth-century poetry.

So far in this book, the Polish and Chinese threads have been closely intertwined. Here, however, I will discuss Świetlicki and Cui Jian separately, although there are similarities between them that might potentially encourage direct juxtaposition: the two artists were born the same year and both are considered leading representatives of their generation in Polish and Chinese culture respectively, although both consistently declare little enthusiasm for such a role; and in terms of poetics, their works make for a fascinating collage of national and individual, political and personal, indigenous and foreign, Romantic and pragmatic elements. Nonetheless, in this chapter I wish to focus on something else, namely, on two conceptually opposing but mutually complementary processes of expanding the domain of (national) poetry at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: by what we may call the colonization (Świetlicki) and naturalization (Cui Jian) of popular culture by poetry

83 Rea 2014: KL 1724–1725.

discourse. As with the previous section on Różewicz and Yu, I want to ask not only what poetry scene or discourse at large has gained or lost on Świetlicki's career in music and Cui's inclusion in poetry canons, but, primarily, what their particular works have lost/gained or may lose/gain from their authors' and/or readers' openness to the musical dimension, in the case of Świetlicki, and to poetic sensibility, in the case of Cui Jian.

2.1 *Świetlicki: The Auricle*

Marcin Świetlicki was the first, albeit today not the only, artist in Poland to be active on the music scene while at the same time be broadly identified and recognized as a poet. A former military man, this soldier of poetry refers to his artistic work as a “base of lyrical operations”⁸⁴ at the front line between poetry and music, high and popular culture, the sublime and the everyday. The artist shares his birthday—December 24—with the Romantic *poeta vates* Adam Mickiewicz, as well as the vocalist and songwriter of the rock band Motörhead, Lemmy Kilmister. “So, I am stretched between the two,” jokes Świetlicki, accurately defining thus the components and climate of his own poetry. “I love Mickiewicz. And I love Lemmy.”⁸⁵

Świetlicki's poetry career begun with promise during his high school years in the late 1970s when he published a handful of well-received poems in the journal *Radar* (*Radar*), but it was soon interrupted by personal and political circumstances. He started studies in Polish literature at Jagiellonian University in Krakow but dropped out twice after failing exams. One of his attempts to restart his education was thwarted by the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, when, as he recalls, “all [student] lists were cleared,” which made him “one of the first victims of martial law.”⁸⁶ In 1984, he was conscripted to the army.⁸⁷ After what he remembers as three traumatic years of obligatory military service, Świetlicki spectacularly returned on the poetry scene.

84 This is an approximate translation of *daleko wysunięta placówka liryczna*, a phrase Świetlicki first uses in his poem “Erring, April” (*Kluczenie, kwiecień*) in 1996, published in the journal *Arkadia* and later included in his collection *37 Poems About Vodka and Cigarettes* (*37 wierszy o wódce i papierosach*). In “Erring, April”, the poetic persona listlessly wanders alone in a city among common folk, before reimagining himself as a kind of poetic sentry on the lookout for fresh experiences and inspirations in nonpoetic territory. The metaphor would later take on new meanings in the hands of others—including some that emphasized a more aggressive incursion of the poetic into everyday life, popular culture, or music—and Świetlicki's original line remains one of most frequently cited in the literary-critical discourse on his poetry.

85 Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 8, trans. J K.

86 *Ibidem*: 78–79, trans. J K.

87 *Ibidem*: 89.

In 1990, he won a poetry contest organized by the *Brulion* magazine; the jury, among whose members was Wisława Szymborska, appreciated his bold, defiant yet melancholy-laced verse. The submitted poems were published as a book titled *Cold Countries* (*Zimne kraje*, 1992) and almost immediately earned Świetlicki the status of the poet of the generation. The afterword, written by Julian Kornhauser, portrayed Świetlicki as a utopian who rejects metaphysical ideas to protect concrete ideals, such as independence, freedom, and loyalty to oneself; perhaps still a little naive, childishly narcissistic, and lost in the chaotic world but deserving attention and leniency. The former New Wave author said of the *Brulion* author that “although his desires are focused in an angry, poetic rejection of the noise of officialdom, which to Świetlicki symbolizes, among other things, all sorts of moralism, one can see that what he proposes as an alternative for the poetry of ideas is not a nihilist hell but an explosion of solitude.”⁸⁸

Świetlicki, however, from the beginning openly manifested his unwillingness to play the role that unexpectedly fell on him, or at least not on the conditions dictated by Kornhauser or even by the *Brulion* magazine. *Cold Countries* ends with the poem “Poland” (*Polska*), which Świetlicki wrote shortly after receiving the award, as a postscript commenting on the fuss that surrounded the author. The text is skillfully compiled from the events from Świetlicki’s private life intertwined with the contemporary history of Poland and details from everyday reality. It reflects the atmosphere of the 1980s and the state of mind of young people who struggled hard to balance public and personal, martial and marital affairs, feeling the wind of change from the West, yet still locked in their partly miserable and partly laughable reality. Crowned with three laconic, misanthropic lines, “Poland” may be taken as quintessential of Świetlicki’s style, artistic personality, and consciously adopted strategy of defiance.

Poland

And when we line up in a row in front of an arsenal, still smelling with
dreams,
And when she touches me with a wet finger to let me know she is crying,
And when the second pigeon in the garden is sold out, and I receive my
share,
And when the artillery sergeant shouts you whoreson, and I go pale and
my eyes speak to him,
And when I’m a ghoul at Central Station, the traveling dirt in neon lights,

88 Quoted in Mus 2019: 22, trans. J.K.

And when my mother for I don't know which time says to me *seems that*
I only dreamed that I had a son
And when they are fighting on the Old Market, it's May and I leisurely
watch *Easy Rider* on TV,
And when at dawn in winter we go with Jaś to Sopot pier,
And when I recover consciousness in the hospital, and the radio plays
Norwegian Wood,
And when during the wedding of my older sister my little sister disap-
pears and I take a cab, and search for her,
And when electricity is temporarily cut off, and we all sit at the table and
light up candles, and talk,
And when I fall into a well in Sandomierz, and look at the sky from inside,
and laugh,
And when Rudy takes pictures of us on the last day of April,
And when she is crossing a bridge with me, she is beautiful, bitter wind
blows, she is beautiful,
And when I get a letter from my little sister, where she writes of my
hypocrisy,
And when I see the drunk warrant officer fire at a sentinel,
And when we plan to watch *Sanatory under the Hourglass*, but they
impose martial law.
And when she leaves after the first visit, and I find her shoes and her red
hair on my sweater,
And when we get married in the empty Wedding Palace accompanied
only by two witnesses,
And when I observe an international express train standing aside in my
working clothes in August 1980,
And when my wife speaks against the criminalization of abortion during
a rally,
And when I try to smoke a cigarette like Bogart but I'm not quite successful,
And when I walk with her slowly, step by step, and when I feel the stiff-
ness of her body,
And when my grandpa dies, and I secretly carve my name with a nail on
the coffin,
And when I'm reading the shitty rightist journal *Young Poland* and it
somehow doesn't make me laugh.
And when the Sejm convenes, and I hear it all on the radio at the
hairdresser's
—they believe they have their poet.

And I wait an ironic, bitter
while, then wince,
and triumphantly deny.

Polska

I kiedy ustawiamy się rzędem przed magazynem broni, śmierząc jeszcze
snami,
i kiedy ona dotyka mnie mokrym palcem w kinie, ażebym wiedział, że
płacze,
i kiedy drugi dąb w ogrodzie zostaje sprzedany, i dostaję za niego swoją
część,
i kiedy ogniomistrz wrzeszczy ty skurwysynu, a ja blednę i mówię do
niego oczami,
i kiedy jestem upiorem Dworca Centralnego, wędrującym brudem w neo-
nowych światłach,
i kiedy ona mi daje do połknięcia swój trójkątny język, lecz na nic więcej
nie pozwala,
i kiedy mama mi po raz któryś mówi *chyba tylko przyszniło mi się że miałam
syna*,
i kiedy biją się na Rynku, maj jest, a ja spokojnie oglądam w TV film *Easy
Rider*,
i kiedy wchodzimy z Jasiem o zimowym świcie na molo w Sopocie,
i kiedy odzyskuję przytomność w szpitalu, i w radiu akurat jest *Norwegian
Wood*,
i kiedy trwa wesele starszej siostry, a młodsza zniknęła—i jadę taksówką,
i szukam,
i kiedy wyłączają prąd, a my siadamy wszyscy przy stole, zapalamy
świece, mówimy,
i kiedy wpadam do studni w Sandomierzu, patrzę w niebo z wnętrza
studni, śmieję się,
i kiedy Rudy robi nam zdjęcia na Kazimierzu w ostatni dzień kwietnia,
i kiedy ona idzie ze mną przez most, jest śliczna, wieje lodowaty wiatr,
jest śliczna,
i kiedy dostaję list od młodszej siostry, list, w którym jest mowa o moim
zakłamaniu,
i kiedy widzę jak pijany chorąży strzela do wartownika—i to tylko
sekunda,

i kiedy mamy pójść na *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*, lecz wprowadzają stan wojenny,
 i kiedy ona wyjeżdża, po pierwszej wizycie, i znajduję jej buty, rudy włos na swetrze,
 i kiedy otrzymuję telegram od Piotra *jak chcesz porozmawiać przyjedź możesz przenocować*,
 i kiedy bierzemy ślub w pustym Pałacu Ślubów w obecności jedynie dwojga świadków,
 i kiedy obserwuję międzynarodowy ekspres stojąc w roboczym ubraniu w sierpniu 80,
 i kiedy moja żona przemawia na wiecu przeciwko ustawie o karalności aborcji,
 i kiedy staram się zapalić papierosa jak Bogart, i niezupełnie mi to wychodzi,
 i kiedy idziemy z nią wolno, krok po kroku, i czuję jak sztywne ma ciało,
 i kiedy dziadek umiera, a ja ukradkiem podpisuję się gwoździem na trumnie,
 i kiedy czytam gówniane prawicowe pisemko *Młoda Polska*, i jakoś mi się nie chce śmiać,
 i kiedy ta idiotka mówi, że podobają jej się moje wiersze, a jeden szczególnie,
 i kiedy Sejm obraduje i słyszę to wszystko przez radio w zakładzie fryzjerskim
 —wydaje im się że mają swojego poetę.
 A ja odczekuję ironiczną, gorzką chwilę, krzywię się
 i triumfalnie zaprzeczam.⁸⁹

In early 1992, shortly before *Cold Countries* came out, Świetlicki—together with his friend Grzegorz Dyduch—brought to life Świetliki (Fireflies), an alternative-rock band whose name is a pun based on the poet's surname. Their debut CD, released in 1995 and comprising mostly of musical adaptations of Świetlicki's early poems, was called *Concentration Garden (Ogród koncentracyjny)*—a provocative allusion to concentration camps which builds on the alliteration *obóz/ogród* ("camp"/"garden").⁹⁰ Since then, Świetlicki, a

89 Świetlicki 2002a: 60, trans. J.K.

90 Świetlicki 1999: 25.

“world champion,”⁹¹ according to Andrzej Sosnowski, whose formula already took a life of its own in literary-critical discourse, has continued as a biathlete, sharing his time and creative energies between poetry and music, as well as engaging in other cultural activities. Today, he has more than twenty poetry collections to his name, three award-winning criminal novels whose protagonist, the poet’s alter ego, is called Mistrz (Champion/Master), several other book-length prose works, six musical albums recorded with Świetliki and eight in cooperation with other groups and individual musicians, plus several cultural programs he hosted on TV in the 1990s. He also participated in the production of two feature films: Wojciech Smarzowski’s *Auricle (Małżowina)* and Artur Więcek’s *Angel in Krakow (Anioł w Krakowie)*, a biographical film, *A Man Called “Swine” (Człowiek zwany “Świnią”)*, in which he stars as himself, and the documentary *History of Polish Rock (Historia polskiego rocka)*. On top of that, Jarosław Borowiec published a collection of Świetlicki’s drawings.

Nevertheless, what today looks like an impressive career which generates huge amounts of interdisciplinary scholarship, in the mid-1990s generated mostly consternation, mistrust, and accusations of betraying poetry toward an author upon whom observers of the literary scene had pinned their greatest hopes. The disappointment of conservative critics and older poets is reflected in many utterances made by Kornhauser. In several essays written since the mid-1990s, Kornhauser scathingly expresses his dissatisfaction with the “inappropriate poetic attitude” of the artist whose promising debut he so optimistically welcomed. In “Transition Period” (Okres przejściowy) we read, for example:

One can easily note how much of infantile kidding around is in these unbosomings disguised as a rock song. This is a constant fight for the acknowledgment of a person. The poet is not a misfit who can’t adapt to his surroundings, or someone with a mental block; he simply wants public applause. There is some falsehood in all of this. The poet from TV and the poet from the poetry collection don’t fit together. But mass culture, which loves all sorts of “stardom,” does not consider this a problem. In such an image, a black turtleneck, a passionately kissed microphone, information about one’s divorce and about the birth of one’s son are essential. The textual world, which is more difficult to verify, is less important.⁹²

91 The term is also the title of Piotr Śliwiński’s 2011 edited volume devoted to Świetlicki’s work published on the occasion of the poet’s fiftieth birthday.

92 Kornhauser 2003: 60, trans. J K; cf. Mus 2019: 26.

Elsewhere, Kornhauser complains that the young author is overly concerned with the trivial matters of “little quotidianity” (*mała codzienność*), and that he is epigonic of Wojacek. He also mocks the myth to which he himself had contributed in the early 1990s:

Marcin Świetlicki was announced as the poet of the 90s. On TV, Marcin Świetlicki. In the press, Marcin Świetlicki. On stage, Marcin Świetlicki. Articles, interviews, hot takes. Świetlicki’s rock band. Eight poetry collections. Three albums. Appearance in a film. Host of a regular TV program. Idol of the youth. Świetlicki in the textbooks and in the tabloids. People outdo one another in compliments, interpretations, in enriching the image. One should just wait on one’s knees. And lick every word off his lips. For, who knows, perhaps he is a Prophet? A Master? A Champion of the Polish Language?⁹³

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (b. 1935), a poet associated with (pre-Brulion) classicism, whose work draws largely on the baroque tradition, seconds Kornhauser, claiming that Świetlicki and his kind “insult literature, humiliate it, and bring it to the level of beat or rock singing”; moreover, they “establish suspicious behind-the-scenes connections with low culture, including especially American mob culture.”⁹⁴

While Kornhauser’s reservations are to an extent justified, Rymkiewicz’s argument appears ridiculous and betrays the confusion caused by Świetlicki’s romance with music in literary circles. “Suspicious behind-the-scenes connections” are the last thing one could say of Świetlicki and his kind, who ostentatiously brought everything on stage and shouted out for everybody to hear. Public performances, in addition to increasing the expressive power of his poetry, also brought out and augmented many of its specific features, positive and negative alike, in both aesthetic and philosophical/ideological terms.

2.1.1 Rock Music as a Poetic Strategy

In chapter 2, I mentioned Świetlicki’s performance in front of Miłosz and Szymborska. Another spectacular appearance of the band took place in 1995 during one of the central events of the musical calendar in Poland—the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole (Krajowy Festiwal Piosenki Polskiej w Opolu) transmitted by public tv. The group triumphantly performed

93 Kornhauser 2003: 207, trans. J K; cf. Mus 2019: 28.

94 Quoted in Śliwiński 2007: 223, trans. J K.

“Nieprzysiadalność,” the most famous of Świetlicki’s songs, written in 1992 and later also published as a poem. The title is a neologism which might be translated as “Un-sit-with-ability.” The lyrics recalls Świetlicki’s conversation with poet the “JP” (probably Jacek Podsiadło) in a café. “Drunk as a swine” (pijany jak świnia), JP notices two nice girls at a table nearby and proposes to Świetlicki—who is, for a change, “sober like a swine” (trzeźwy jak świnia)—that they join (dosiąść się, “sit with”) the girls. But Świetlicki rejects the proposition:

Between a fight with one woman
and a chat with another woman
which will perhaps turn into a fight as well
I don’t feel like
Fucking hell, today I’m in an
unsitwithable mood

It happens usually
that I’m in an
unsitwithable mood
I’m sitting at the table
and don’t feel like
sitting with you
though you’re waving at me
Fucking hell, today I’m in an
unsitwithable mood.

pomiędzy kłótnią z jedną kobietą
a rozmową z drugą
ja nie mam ochoty
ja to pierdołę
dziś jestem w nastroju
nieprzysiadalnym

[...]
tak się zdarza zazwyczaj
że jestem w nastroju
nieprzysiadalnym
siedzę sam przy stoliku
i nie mam ochoty
dosiąść się do was
choć na mnie kiwacie

ja to pierdołę
 dziś jestem w nastroju
 nieprzysiadalnym⁹⁵

The festival audience reacted ecstatically, and most commentators shared the enthusiasm. Still, there were also people who felt the song had stepping over the boundaries of good taste and was a cheap trick aimed at increasing the group's popularity by provocation. In fairness, many years later Świetlicki recalled that he had warned the organizers of the festival that the song might not be appropriate to the occasion, but the staff had already prepared special effects for the piece and insisted on its inclusion.⁹⁶

In any event, the concert in Opole certainly helped build Świetlicki's legend, which the poet, as Wojaczek did with his own, consistently upheld. As Malwina Mus demonstrates in her monograph on Świetlicki as a multimedial artist, his diverse activity on stage from the outset was part of a carefully devised artistic-existential project. The poet had designed in advance the roles for his admirers and naysayers alike. Especially those who succumbed to the temptation of passing on ethical—or, sometimes, metaphysical—judgment,

were inevitably drawn into his performative project. From external commentators, they turned into participants of the events. They, in a sense, lost their autonomy, becoming actors in a spectacle whose scenario had long been written. They put themselves in the roles designed by the director.⁹⁷

At the same time, Świetlicki never ceased to mock those who tried to glorify or imitate him. In “Wanting” (Chcienie) from *Open Until Further Notice* (2001), which corresponds with both “Poland” and “Unsitwithability,” he complains:

and they want me
 to sit with them, again asking the banal:
 are you sitwithable today? I really wish they
 stop quoting me at my
 presence, no, it's not pleasant,
 and on top of that I'm penniless
 and they want me to stand them,

95 Świetlicki 2015: 31–32, trans. J K.

96 Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 239–240.

97 Mus 2019: 54, trans. J K.

so why did I come here? normally, slowly
 going to work, one needs to cross the sea of
 wanting to get to work casually,
 and there, telephones, they want me to
 represent Eastern writers,
 come back, have heart, call back, have time,
 have conscience, because they want,
 they want to want, because they are allegedly entitled to me,
 I'm lying down, looking at the floor, and I don't want.

a ponadto chcą, bym
 przysiadł się do nich, znów pada banalne:
 czy jesteś dzisiaj przysiadalny? dałbym
 wiele za to, by już przy mnie nie
 cytowano mnie, nie, to nie jest przyjemne,
 a nadto nie mam ani grosza,
 a oni pragną, aby im postawić,
 więc po co tutaj lażłem? normalnie, powoli
 zmierzam do pracy, trzeba przejść przez morze
 chcenia, aby do pracy od niechcenia dotrzeć,
 tam telefony, chcą, bym
 reprezentował literatów Wschodu,
 wrócił, miał serce, oddzwonił, miał czas,
 sumienie, bo chcą,
 bo chcą chcieć, bo im się rzekomo należą,
 leżą, patrzę w podłogę i nie chcę.⁹⁸

Such a cat-and-mouse game between Świetlicki and critics lasted roughly until the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Critics needed him as a missing puzzle piece in the self-definition of Polish poetry. Świetlicki, in turn, insisted that he did not fit the jigsaw, often aggressively defending his individual singularity or playing his provocative music to overcome their voices. But this strategy could not work for long, and “Wanting” actually foreshadows its exhaustion; that is, Świetlicki’s unavoidable fall into his own trap. The word “unsitwithability,” which was meant to express the poet’s aversion to organized structures and well-proven models, itself turned into a label and the author’s enfant-terriblist was transformed into a new paradigm of poethood that proved no less problematic than the loathed role of *poeta vates*. Its

98 My translation is based on the version included in Świetlicki 2011: 286.

trickiness lied in that the more Świetlicki insisted on not fitting, the more he actually fitted its structures, reinforcing the image of the Brulion Generation as angry kids, Peter Pans in black turtlenecks who never grew up and draw most of their artistic energy from rejection and refusal, while their unwillingness to represent is itself their most representative feature. Even today, one can come across statements that Świetlicki is the oldest young poet in Poland or that express surprise that Świetlicki is getting old. In 2016, referring to one of the author's controversial interviews, Jacek Dehnel called him a "teenage pony" (*nastoletni kuc*).⁹⁹

Having, they believed, solved the problem—that is, sent the poet child to the naughty corner—many critics apparently lost their former interest with Świetlicki. In the 2000s, it became almost a tradition that after each newly released poetry collection, some reviewers would announce, with pretentious concern or in openly triumphant tone, the "end of Świetlicki," the poet having squandered his talent, wasted his potential, spread himself too thin, and so forth. Świetlicki, who in the meantime wrote many brilliant poems, ironically addressed these speculations in the poem "Tweeting" (*Ćwierkanie*) from *Closed* (*Nieczynny*, 2003):

We hope, birdie, that you have ended.
 Birdie.
 We hope we won't hear
 your songs again, birdie.
 [...]
 We hope we won't see you again, birdie, on TV.
 We hope no publisher
 will accept your books, you've ended
 Birdie.
 [...]
 We hope you've already ended, birdie.
 We hope you've succumbed to us.
 We hope. And if you don't want
 —we will come anyway
 to your funeral, oh, birdie, we will bring wreaths,
 we'll write memories and publish them
 in leading newspapers
 and cultural magazines, birdie

99 Jacek Dehnel's Facebook post from June 7, 2016, see <https://www.facebook.com/jacek.dehnel/posts/10154267799754914> (accessed December 22, 2020).

Mamy nadzieję, ptaszku, że się już skończyłeś.

Ptaszku.

Mamy nadzieję, że nie usłyszymy

twoich piosenek, ptaszku.

[...]

My mamy nadzieję,

że już cię nie ujrzymy, ptaszku w telewizji.

Mamy nadzieję, że żadne z wydawnictw

nie przyjmie twoich książek.

[...]

Mamy nadzieję, że nam już uległeś.

Mamy nadzieję, a jeżeli nie chcesz

—to i tak przyjdziemy na twój pogrzeb, och, ptaszku, przyniesiemy wieńce,

napişemy wspomnienia i opublikujemy

je w najważniejszych gazetach codziennych

i w kulturalnych periodykach, ptaszku.¹⁰⁰

But the birdie did not cease its tweeting and soon sung another song.

In 2007, Wojciech Bonowicz edited *Unobvious: 77 Religious Poems by Marcin Świetlicki According to Wojciech Bonowicz (Nieoczywiste: 77 wierszy religijnych Marcina Świetlickiego według Wojciecha Bonowicza)*, a selection of Świetlicki's religious verse, which in the following years inspired a series of literary-critical and academic papers on religiousness and transcendence in his work.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, the label of religious/metaphysical poet is probably the first label against which Świetlicki does not openly protest, although he does not openly confirm it either. Instead, he continues playfully teasing his readers, declaring that he does not know what made Bonowicz select these particular seventy-seven poems, and not other texts: "Perhaps he just pressed a button and automatically selected those in which the word 'God' appeared."¹⁰²

At roughly the same time, social and political topics started to appear in his poetry and songs with increased frequency, although again in a very specific way, one which does not allow us to reconstruct any consistent worldview. Świetlicki himself declares that he has no views, because "[t]he moment in which a person starts to have fixed, hard views, is their death. A person with

100 Świetlicki 2015: 91, trans. J.K.

101 See, e.g., Spólna 2011; Zarębianka 2011; Niesporek 2014, chapter 3; Grzeszna 2015.

102 Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 28–29.

views is boring. A person with views repeats the same things all the time.”¹⁰³ Clarifying his moral standards, he states laconically that he just does not like people who “are not good.” Thus, in the collections published between 2009 and 2019, and in the numerous interviews, he managed to offend almost everybody who is anybody in Poland in order to fulfill his specifically understood civic responsibility founded on a cynical, anarchoconservative patriotism. Being at turns praised and attacked as a rightist, leftist, Nazist, fascist, nationalist, liberal, feminist, antifeminist, homophile, homophobe, as pro-life, pro-death, and so forth, he seems to be in his element. Asked in 2017 by Rafał Księżyk about his growing use of political themes, Świetlicki confessed that, unbeknownst to himself, he “became a political and historical writer. I didn’t know I’m like this. But this happened. Perhaps because of my father.”¹⁰⁴

Quite apart from unverifiable genetic inclinations, it is arguably not the case that “this” just “happened” in the last ten or fifteen years. Elsewhere in the same conversation, Świetlicki gives a more helpful clue, proudly emphasizing his faithfulness to the “punk, anarchist ideals” of the *Brulion* magazine. In the mouth of a then fifty-seven-year-old poet who three years earlier had been conferred the highest state order, the Order of Polonia Restituta, these words may sound surprising, but, wrapped into ethical argument, they reveal something important that takes us back to socialist Poland and prompts us to reconsider the marriage between poetry and music from a different angle.

2.1.2 Rock Music as Poetic Ethics

In 1981, Zbigniew Herbert wrote the poem “The Power of Taste” (*Potęga smaku*) reflecting on beauty as the foundation and guarantee of ethical decency and setting aesthetic taste against the vulgar simplicity of the official Party rhetoric. The poem contained the following famous lines:

It didn’t require great character at all
our refusal disagreement and resistance
but fundamentally it was a matter of taste
Yes taste
in which there are fibers of soul, the cartilage of conscience

Translated by JOHN and BOGDANA CARPENTER

To wcale nie wymagało wielkiego charakteru
nasza odmowa niezgoda i upór

¹⁰³ Świetlicki and Wysocki 2018, trans. J.K.

¹⁰⁴ Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 13, trans. J.K.

mieliśmy odrobinę koniecznej odwagi
 lecz w gruncie rzeczy była to sprawa smaku
 Tak smaku
 w którym są włókna duszy i chrząstki sumienia¹⁰⁵

Although written with a different intention, these lines, I hold, are instrumental in describing the specific roles of poetry and rock music (including all its alternative and radical incarnations) in socialist Poland as counterparts to the soul and conscience of the collective organism of the nation.

The existential attitude that underlies rock culture, which in democratic Western countries has often been considered a form of youthful rebellion, behind the Iron Curtain (including China) had a very strong ethical and political dimension. Even those who otherwise would likely be considered wrong were considered right because the very noise they produced created the desired disruption to the totalitarian narrative. A telling example is Czechoslovakian group Plastic People of the Universe, whose members were famously arrested for “organized disturbance of the peace” in 1976, in spite of their explicitly declared lack of interest in politics.

The category which Herbert calls “taste” was in fact very broad in socialist society, and people were able to reconcile a variety of aesthetic impulses as a portent of freedom, the shared dream of the whole nation. While poetry, nourished with ideas, aspired to play the noble role of the soul of the nation, which strived to be impeccably clean but often at the expense of clarity and power of expression, rock culture assumed the thankless role of the nation’s conscience, a noisy, pesky, tough, cynical, certainly not clean and often seriously misguided but loud and clear gristle-like conscience on which one can break one’s teeth. The two organs had a common antitotalitarian goal that temporarily united and synchronized their functions but remained essentially disjunctive. After the disappearance of the common goal, they would likely drift each its own way.

In the late 1980s, the Brulion poets attempted to transplant the rock conscience into the soulful poetry to prevent the schizophrenic development of culture. They never questioned the importance of beauty or taste (later in this section, I will say more, for example, about their admiration for Brodsky and the formal perfection of his verse). But they did not want beauty to rely only on soulful abstractions. The experiment, as one might expect, caused a serious “disturbance in the peace” of the highbrow national verse. The unpolished diamonds of individual singularities, with all their bizarre idiosyncrasies and

105 Herbert 2000: 144–147.

lumps of petty everyday matter built into their texts, irritated like a pebble in the shoe of culture. They did not allow literary discourse and culture at large to move comfortably forward through the dreamscape painted by the Old Masters and the New Wave poets.

At the early stage, the transplant of rock music into poetry was fiercely resisted, if not outright rejected, by the oversensitive, aristocratic organism of national verse. Later, however, it was gradually absorbed and became almost dulled during the decade of stabilization (2000s) that followed the decade of transition (1990s). In the mid-2010s, however, as life in Poland became dramatically repoliticized, this absorption flashed into controversy once again. Nevertheless, today, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, with poetry's skin hardening and most conventions long broken, the rock conscience must be much more clamant and insolent than it was in the 1980s if it is to draw attention to itself. At times it appears to outshout and outgrow the poems in which it resides, detracting from their artistic quality, as is the case with some of Świetlicki's texts that seek to serve as social commentary. There is some risk that one day it may kill its host organism. Moreover, the situation in present-day Poland is ethically more nuanced than before 1989, when the problem of totalitarian oppression overshadowed all other social issues. During this period, everybody who worked against the system basically played on the same team; today, authors are held accountable for every single line, their every word being checked against a variety of moral codes by different social groups. Thus, the old rock conscience, like the poetic soul that fed on old ideas, may not be able to handle the current challenges.

That said, whatever the strategic, social, or ethical reasons and consequences of Świetlicki's engagement with music were, it should be emphasized that it was also a very natural artistic step for him to take due to his personal predispositions, especially his rare sensibility to sound. This is manifest in his works on many levels, including frequent alliterations, sound-based puns (an example being the title *Concentration Garden*), or sound-induced intertextuality, which consists in echoing a melody or rhythm of another poet's language. In the third part of this section, we will observe this in Świetlicki's dialogue with Joseph Brodsky (Иосиф Бродский) and other poets. There, I will also investigate how the intertextual element is catalyzed by music in the poem/song "The Spat-Upon (44)" (Opluty (44)).

2.1.3 Rock Music and Poetic Text

In 1998, Świetlicki starred in the debut film of the now leading Polish director Wojciech Smarzowski entitled *Auricle (Matłżowina)*. The film tells the story of M., a writer who rents an apartment in an old Warsaw tenement house in order

to work on a novel. However, noisy neighbors, who represent all pathologies of Polish society in the era of transformation, consistently hamper his work. Instead of writing, M. spends most of his time drinking, smoking, and house-partying with an importunate friend who does not understand the importance of his artistic enterprise. The only sentence he manages to write using his old-style typewriter is a quote from Franz Kafka's *Diary*: "The auricle of my ear felt fresh, rough, cool, succulent, as a leaf, to the touch."¹⁰⁶ The film was not intended as a biographical film about Świetlicki, but it reflects and at the same time reinforces the legend that started emerging around him at the time. More importantly, it captures one of the fundamental aspects of his writing, namely its audiality. Świetlicki often emphasizes that inspiration comes to him and is processed by him aurally, be it from overheard conversations or listening to songs. And it is sound that most matters to him in his own poetry. In a conversation with Andrzej Sosnowski, he explains:

Unfortunately, as a child, I used to read good Polish poems [...] I'm enchanted with the language of Leśmian, Gałczyński, Tuwim. [...] And when I look at a poem, I first check how it sounds. This is terrifying, because content reaches me only later. I don't focus much on content. A poem can be about nothing, as long as it sounds good. I was thrilled listening to Brodsky reading his poetry. Unfortunately, I reject those stories in poetry that don't sound good. I'm an audile. I'm a son of a man who played various instruments, it's in my blood.¹⁰⁷

Although this might appear surprising, Brodsky was among the *Brulion* magazine's favorite poets at the early stage of the journal's activity, toward the end of the 1980s, when the editors were exploring Milan Kundera's concept of Central Europe as a possible foundation for a new identity of Polish poetry. In 1987, after the Nobel Prize was awarded to Brodsky, *Brulion* released a thematic double issue devoted to him.¹⁰⁸ Later on, the journal changed course and drifted toward the ideals of counterculture, but the Central and Eastern European authors they promoted have since remained an integral part of Polish literary discourse.

Incidentally or otherwise, Kafka's image of a sensual, fleshy auricle is a central image in the Russian-language poem by Joseph Brodsky "I Was Only That

106 Kafka 1948: 11.

107 Quoted in Śliwiński 2007: 227, trans. J K.

108 Polewczyk 2017: 26.

Which ...” (Я БЫЛ ТОЛЬКО ТЕМ, ЧЕГО ...),¹⁰⁹ whose influence echoes in Świetlicki’s poetry. Dedicated to the painter Maria Basmanova, the text mentions an auricle as part of a melancholic erotic narrative. Below, I quote the initial stanzas of Brodsky’s original Russian, preceded by Wiktor Woroszyński’s Polish translation and my own in English based on the Russian. Woroszyński makes extensive use of his translational license, while I try to be literal, sacrificing formal perfection, hence there are some differences that readers of both Polish and English may observe. In the third stanza, where the auricle is mentioned, the twisted syntax used in translation allows also for another interpretation of the line: “you sculpted me, an auricle, in hot whisper” (mnie—małozownię uszną lepiąc w gorącym szepcie), which would imply the I-speaker’s self-identification *as* an auricle, making the image even more suggestive, although straying from Brodsky’s concept.

I was only that which
 you touched with your palm
 over which in a crow-deaf night
 your body softly leaned

I was only that which
 you slowly identified
 first a sad contour of mine
 much later all of me

It was your whisper
 that sculpted at night
 with a hot breath my
 left and right auricle.

Tym tylko byłem, czego
 Ty dotknęłaś dłonią,
 nad czym w noc głuchą, wronią
 pochylałaś się, strzegąc.

109 The Polish translation by Wiktor Woroszyński comes from Brodsky 2006: 198. The English translation is my own based on the Russian-language original at *Culture.ru* (Культура. РФ): <https://www.culture.ru/poems/31065/ya-byl-tolko-tem-chego> (accessed May 10, 2020). A recording of the poem read by the author in Russian is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H02wEC6A3Pk> (accessed May 10, 2020). The first edition of Brodsky’s selected poems in Polish was published in 1989 as *82 Poems and Poemats* (*82 wiersze i poematy*) edited by Stanisław Barańczak with an introduction by Czesław Miłosz.

Tym tylko byłem, co
 rozróżniałaś tam, w dole,
 w licach zatartych, w czole
 rysy nawykła ciąć.

Tyś potraçała przecież
 zmysł by drżał, by nie usnął,
 mnie małżowinę uszną
 lepiąc w gorącym szepcie ...

Я был только тем, чего
 ты касалась ладонью,
 над чем в глухую, воронью
 ночь склоняла чело.

Я был лишь тем, что ты
 там, снизу, различала:
 смутный облик сначала,
 много позже—черты.

Это ты, горяча,
 ошую, одесную
 раковину ушную
 мне творила, шепча.

I include the excerpt in three languages because, juxtaposed with another work by Świetlicki, it helps illustrate his specific rhythm-based intertextuality, which is effaced in translation. In the collection *Open Until Further Notice* (*Czynny do odwołania*, 2001) we find a poem titled “Bidding Farewell” (*Żegnanie*), written in the wake of one of Świetlicki’s stormy love affairs. “Bidding Farewell” remotely echoes Brodsky’s rhythm, which was faithfully reproduced by Woroszyński in Polish at the expense of literal loyalty. On the content level, in turn, it might be read as a postscript to “I Was Only”: “I” in Świetlicki’s work questions his own existence in the absence of a woman, whose palm in Brodsky’s poem “creates worlds” (*Так творятся миры*) and makes the man’s body, senses, and voice gradually emerge out of nothingness. With her disappearance, he loses all confidence and doubts in his own existence and creative powers.

Bidding Farewell

What was I? If my only heroism
 was a stubborn urge
 for procreation? What was I? If many times
 I curved straight people? What was I? Did I
 try to malign others when cultivating myself in order to
 prove in such an underhanded way that
 I am? Prove an
 illusion? This and that? And now
 when I say it's over and when I express
 hope—am I? And now, when I stand
 on a station of tram lines eight, nineteen
 and twenty-two—am I going?

Żegnanie

Czy byłem? Skoro bohaterstwem
 jedynym moim był uparty pęd
 ku płodzeniu? Czy byłem? Skoro wielokrotnie
 krzywiłem ludzi prostych? Czy ja byłem? Czy
 krzewiąc siebie usiłowałem krzywdzić innych, w ten
 pokrętny sposób pragnąc udowodnić,
 że jestem? Udowodnić
 złudę? To i tamto? Czy
 teraz, gdy mówię koniec i kiedy wyrażam
 nadzieję—jestem? I czy teraz, stojąc
 na przystanku ósemki, dziewiętnastki i
 dwudziestki dwójki—czy wybieram się?¹¹⁰

“Bidding Farewell” is not the only poem in Świetlicki’s output that plays with “I Was Only that Which.” Paweł Panas also identifies its influence in “False Start” (Falstart) from 2002,¹¹¹ where the I-speaker situates himself in a fissure between the Old and New Testament, and between Brodsky and Neil Young, struggling with the hurricane of aesthetic impulses that surround him and desperately trying to say what he wants to say and be what he wants to be.

110 Świetlicki 2001: 56, trans. J.K.

111 Panas 2014: 16.

False Start

I am only that which I want to say.

(between the Old and the New
Testament, there is a
fissure, it contains the sense)
(I didn't want
to say this)

Cruel Monday!
Neil Young with Crazy Horse
perform the song "Like a Hurricane" in the darkness.

One always should leave a good piece
for the end.

Falstart

Tym tylko jestem, co powiedzieć zechcę.

(pomiędzy Starym i Nowym
Testamentem jest
szczelina, tam mieści się sens)
(nie chciałem
tego mówić)

Okrutny poniedziałku!
Neil Young z Crazy Horse
grają piosenkę *Like A Hurricane* w ciemnościach.

Zawsze trzeba zostawić jakiś dobry numer
na koniec¹¹²

Additionally, "False Start" offers an illustration of a frequent intertextual literary-musical occurrence in Świetlicki's poetry: quotes or paraphrases of

112 Świetlicki 2002b: 15, trans. J K.

song titles and lyrics and employing singers as lyrical personas. Other examples include poems featuring Jim Morrison, Patti Smith, Jimi Hendrix, and John Coltrane.

Another context corresponding with both “Bidding Farewell” and “I Was Only” is Świetlicki’s song “Auricle” (*Małżowina*), written for Smarzowski’s film but rejected by the director and eventually included in the poetry volume *Songs of a Layman* (*Pieśni profana*, 1998). Its lonely Hero, abandoned by everybody, “turn[s] toward the black wall” (*odwracam się do ciemnej ściany*), to enjoy “erection into darkness” (*wzwód wymierzony w ciemność*),¹¹³ a negative of Brodsky’s erotic scene.

Alongside the resonances with Brodsky’s work, “Bidding Farewell” contains intertextual traits that lead to Czesław Miłosz, also through phonetic associations. The question that starts in line 3 and ends in line 4, “If many times I curved straight [alternatively: simple] people?”, reads in Polish “Skoro wielokrotnie krzywiłem ludzi prostych.” It makes one immediately think of Miłosz’s famous “You Who Wronged a Simple Man” (*Który skrzywdziłeś człowieka prostego*), a part of which is inscribed on the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970 in Gdańsk. The interplay between the words *krzywić* (“to curve”) and *krzywdzić* (“to wrong, to harm”) is conspicuous. The adjective *prosty* has two meanings: “straight” and “simple.” Miłosz uses it in the second sense (*prosty człowiek* as “simple man”) and Świetlicki reaches for the first, more literal, one (*prosty człowiek* as “straight man,” with no heterosexual connotations in Polish). In so doing, he achieves a caricatural effect, bringing Miłosz’s elevated rhetoric down to earth.

In “Bidding Farewell,” the dialogue with Brodsky and especially with Miłosz appears to be intentional, but this is not always the case in Świetlicki’s oeuvre. Intertextuality in his poetry is an element whose surge is hardly controllable. One shall mention, for instance, an incisive two-part paper, based on an academic thesis, whose author, Michał Wróblewski, traces echoes of Malcolm Lowry’s novel *Under the Volcano* in Świetlicki’s oeuvre.¹¹⁴ Lowry’s book is among Świetlicki’s favorites and he even wrote a poem with the same title, but—as he says without irony—it was only from Wróblewski’s thesis that he learned how much he actually unknowingly borrowed from the English writer in many other works as well.¹¹⁵ “I’m a medium. When someone says something

113 Świetlicki 1998: 55, trans. J.K.

114 Wróblewski 2008, 2009.

115 Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 184.

or writes something, it flows through me, I transform it, and a totally different thing emerges," he explains, tongue-in-cheek.¹¹⁶

Music in many ways catalyzes this "mediumic" flow of phrases, echoes, and associations, and increases the share of audial associations in the intertextual layers of the poems/lyrics. A rich example of artistic dialogue ciphered in sounds is "The Spat-Upon (44)," included in the album *Concentration Camp* and published as a poem in *37 Poems About Vodka and Cigarettes (37 wierszy o wódce i papierosach, 1996)*.

The Spat-Upon (44)

One day this city
will belong to me.
For now I walk.
For now I look.
For now I'm whetting my knife.
I put it in—taking off the brass knuckles.

Spat upon. Spat upon.
They spat on my back.
I know nothing of that—I walk around the city.
Planty,
Szewska.
Old Market.
I walk around the city: Planty—Szewska—Old Market.
Spat upon.
Spat upon.
SPATUPONSPATUPONSPATUPON ...

One day this city
will belong to me.
For now I walk, I look.
And nothing happens.

One day
a pirates' ship
with five masts
and twenty cannons

116 Ibidem: 357.

will sail past
 the Vistula river.
 And they will ask:
 —Which one is Świetlicki?
 And then I will stand
 in the middle of the Old Market
 and will pick:
 This. This. This one.
 This. That. This.
 Bump off this.
 Do away with that.
 This. That. ALL of them!

K r a k o w a n d N o w a H u t a
 S o d o m a n d G o m o r a
 f r o m S o d o m t o G o m o r a
 o n e t a k e s a t r a m .

I walk around the city.
 I walk around the city.
 Spat upon.
 Spat upon.

Opluty (44)

Któregoś dnia to miasto
 będzie należeć do mnie.
 Na razie chodzę. Na razie patrzę.
 Na razie swój nóż ostrzę.
 Wkładam—zdejmuję kastet.

Opluty. Opluty.
 Napluli mi na plecy.
 Nic o tym nie wiem—chodzę po mieście.
 Chodzę po mieście:
 Planty,
 Szewska,
 Rynek.
 Chodzę po mieście:
 Rynek—Szewska—Planty.

Opluty. Opluty.
OPLUTYOPLUTYOPLUTYOPLUTYOPLUTY

Któregoś dnia to miasto
będzie należeć do mnie.
Na razie chodzę, patrzę.
Na razie nic.

Któregoś dnia
rzeką Wisłą
przybędzie statek piratów,
o pięciu masztach,
dwudziestu armatach.
I zapytają:
—Który to Świetlicki?
A ja wtedy stanę
na samym środku Rynku
i będę wskazywać:
Tego. Tego. Tego.
Tego. Tego. Tamtą.
Tego sprzątnąć.
Tamtą skasować.
Tego. Tamtą. WSZYSTKICH!

K r a k ó w i N o w a H u t a .
S o d o m a z G o m o r ą .
Z S o d o m y d o G o m o r y
j e d z i e s i ę t r a m w a j e m .

Chodzę po mieście.
Chodzę po mieście.
Opluty.
Opluty.
Opluty ...¹¹⁷

The first line, as Świetlicki confesses, was “unconsciously borrowed” from Piotr Bratkowski (b. 1955), a poet representing so-called the New Privacy (*nowa*

¹¹⁷ Świetlicki 2015: 20–21, trans. J K. The song is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APqnVPMVnTQ> (accessed May 10, 2020).

prywatność) school in the poetry of the 1980s, an important point of reference for the Brulioners. The number 44 in the title is, as the author claims, the number of a tram line in Krakow he often took,¹¹⁸ but simultaneously also an obvious allusion to Mickiewicz, which Świetlicki deploys in several other poems as well. It is probably the most important number in Polish literary mathematics. In *Forefather's Eve*, Father Piotr experiences an epiphany in which God announces the advent of a new Messiah who will liberate the Polish nation and His name will be "Forty and Four." Świetlicki's poem is a quasi-prophecy in which the author is presented as an anti-Messiah powerful enough to sentence everybody to death with one gesture. Later, from "The Spat-Upon 2" (*Opluty 2*) we learn that

I was wrong
 this city
 will never
 belong to me
 [...]
 I no longer walk.
 I take a car.
 A cab.
 [...]
 Please don't look at me.
 I leave.
 Please don't speak to me

Pomyliłem się
 to Miasto
 nigdy nie będzie
 należeć do mnie [...]
 Ja już nie chodzę.
 Ja jeżdżę.
 Jeżdżę taksówką.
 [...]
 Proszę na mnie nie patrzeć.
 Ja wychodzę.
 Proszę do mnie nie mówić.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Świetlicki 2015: 226.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem: 39–40, trans. J.K.

As always, dodging all responsibility for good and bad alike, Świetlicki ostentatiously withdraws only to return in a next book or a next poem in a yet more spectacular way.

At the same time, "The Spat-Upon" is a text very closely affiliated with music. It was primarily written to music and music not only decides on its rhythm but also fosters its intertextuality in a strictly literary dimension. In his autobiographical book, Świetlicki mentions how he arrived at Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*) via Bob Dylan's song:

I brazenly borrowed this motif [the pirates' ship] from Brecht. [...] Dylan sung this as well, in his specific rendition. [...] Dylan travestied Brecht's ballad and I travestied Dylan. I've stolen a lot in my life. The first line of "The Spat-Upon" (*Opluty*) is unconsciously borrowed from Piotr Bratkowski's poem. I very often build on the texts of others. Only I know how many loans from The Beatles' songs could be found in my poetry.¹²⁰

The word *opluty* ("spat-upon") repeated rhythmically several times in one breath as a refrain of the song additionally brings to mind the refrain of Jacek Kaczmarski's allegorical ballad "The Hunt" (*Obława*). Performed by the Polish bard of "Solidarity," the ballad is an adaptation of Vladimir Vysotsky's (Владимир Высоцкий) "The Wolfhunt" (*Охота на волков*, 1968). In Kaczmarski's version, the word *obława* ("hunt") is repeated frequently, producing an atmosphere of ultimate oppression and danger. This heavy atmosphere corresponds with the mood of the I-speaker in "The Spat-Upon," who finds himself surrounded by hostility in the cities, which he compares to the biblical cities of sin. But it also allows one to observe the radical shift from poetry as a narrative of collective experience (a big hunt for young wolves in Kaczmarski/Vysotsky) to individual experience (a lonely man rejected by society in Świetlicki), and from the focus on the sophisticated aristocratic evil of organized hunts to the low, primitive evil that flows from the sewers with saliva. As if the rock conscience was consistently pulling the poetic soul down to earth. The mechanism is similar to Świetlicki's citation of Miłosz's verse in "Farewell," where a small mishearing in the word *krzywdzić* ("to wrong") changes the diction of the text and transforms the universal reflection into part of the I-speaker's individual existential struggles.

Finally, "The Spat-Upon (44)," and the entire collection in which it appeared, *37 Poems About Vodka and Cigarettes*, is also reminiscent of Wojaczek, for example his cycle "Street Song" (*Piosenka uliczna*). Wojaczek's poetry in general is

120 Ibidem: KL 484–489, trans. J K.

very auidial too and is characterized by regular prosodic patterns. Świetlicki does not hide the fact that at some point he wanted to match Wojaczek, and not only in musicality. He was fascinated, among other things, by Wojaczek's lyrical subject's gender transgressions and tried to imitate his poems written from the perspective of a woman, but, as he admitted, "Wojaczek was a better woman than me."¹²¹ He also—as we remember from the third section of chapter 2—sang some of Wojaczek's poems together with Julia Kamińska.

In fact, it is not always possible to tell which of these intertextual connections were consciously inscribed in the piece by the author, which of them are not deliberate but nevertheless can find justification in his reading/listening experience, and which were created by me as the reader/translator or are created by his audiences in general. In this sense, too, one can say that stage performance and turning a poem into a performative event increases the flow of associations triggered by multisensual impulses and expands the text's semantic space. It encourages a sort of fleeting, spontaneous intertextuality, sometimes at the cost of bookish intertextuality focused on detecting deep conceptual affinities in the process of reading.

Examples of the above-described phenomenon abound in Świetlicki's oeuvre. Music brings out many of the inherent qualities of his writing, as if someone put a microphone in front of poetry that collects otherwise hardly distinguishable polyphonic noises in a text. This holds not only for intertextuality, but also, for instance, for the effect of mundaneness or banality, which is consciously constructed in some poems/lyrics. Of course, added value hardly ever comes at no cost. A microphone may create unwanted disturbances or expose imperfections that one would prefer to conceal. Also, not all scenic habits function equally convincingly on paper. Even commentators who are favorably disposed toward Świetlicki point out certain negative artistic consequences of his long-term involvement with music. For example, Śliwiński observes that the humor of Świetlicki's poems, when these are converted into songs, where the most provoking phrases are obsessively repeated, often evolves into "horror, and finally humbug," and that "good, and especially great, poetry is not a poetry that [...] doesn't care,"¹²² as its provocatively careless interpretation on stage in Świetlicki's performances may suggest. Maliszewski, in turn, complains about "obtrusive repetitions" and "empty returns" that haunt Świetlicki's verse, techniques that are desirable in stage performance but often disturbing in literary texts.¹²³ All in all, however, looking from the perspective of poetry—both

121 Świetlicki and Księżyk 2017: 356, trans. J K.

122 Śliwiński 2007: 232.

123 Maliszewski 2006: 124.

Świetlicki's poetry and poetry at large—the experiment was arguably worth the risk that it involved at the outset. Especially if one takes into account that a large part of Świetlicki's poems would have never come into existence were it not for music. In 2002, interviewed by Stanisław Bereś, Świetlicki declared:

Before, I used to clearly distinguish [poems and songs]. Now it is not the case anymore. In this book [*Open Until Further Notice*], for example, there are probably only songs, but no one knows of it. Truth be told, all these poems had been intended as songs. But since no one noticed this, the boundaries are apparently very unclear. I suppose, I'm approaching something that is a song and a poem at the same time. Or perhaps is simultaneously theater, prose, poetry, film, that is all possible disciplines of art. That would be fun to embrace all genres in one brief work.¹²⁴

At the same time, he often emphasizes that for all his multidisciplinary interests, he is primarily, and “only,” a poet: “Writing poetry is the only thing I can do. I'm not a vocalist in fact, I'm not a radio man, I'm not a journalist, I'm not a prose writer, I'm not an actor. I'm no one, only a poet.”¹²⁵

In his review of Mus's work, Śliwiński tentatively proposed the term hyperpoetry,¹²⁶ which, I believe, very accurately conveys the primacy of poetic intention in this multimedial and at times provocatively unpoetic oeuvre in the conventional sense of poeticness. Seen from this perspective, Cui Jian's artistic output, to which we shall now turn, might be analogously called hypermusic. Cui's songs came on, and partly colonized, a ground prepared by literature. They inherited some of literary paradigms with the benefit of an inventory, enjoying many privileges of poetry but also having to pay part of its social and spiritual liabilities. At the beginning, poetry discourse, convinced of verse's supremacy, made some attempts to neutralize and naturalize rock and roll, but these attempts were not entirely successful, and tensions between the two arts remained, which, I will argue, actually guarantee their healthy and productive interaction.

124 Quoted in Mus 2019: 11–12, trans. J K.

125 Ibidem: 38.

126 Śliwiński 2017: 3. The review was of Mus's doctoral thesis, before it was published as a monograph.

2.2 *Cui Jian: A Phony Poet?*

“Perhaps Cui Jian’s rock music is the only cultural form in China that can bring enlightenment” (Gao Ertai 高尔泰, writer, painter, art critic).

“Cui Jian is China’s greatest troubadour” (Wang Shuo 王朔, novelist).

“In fact, Cui Jian is the best Chinese poet. Reading his lyrics, we, who make poetry our profession, should blush [...]. In the real future history of literature, Cui Jian certainly will have his chapter” (Yi Sha 伊沙, poet).

“Cui Jian and Haizi are the most outstanding poets of the 1980s in China” (Yu Jie 余杰, writer).¹²⁷

The above four utterances of established Chinese authors were collected by Li Si 李思 in “A Fake Poetic Topic: Criticizing Cui Jian” (一个虚假的诗歌话题: 崔健批判), included in the collection *Criticizing Ten Poets* (十诗人批判书) along with Xu Jiang’s 徐江 essay on Ai Qing, Qin Bazi’s 秦巴子 essay on Haizi, and seven other provocative pieces. Another name that could be added to Li’s list of Cui’s admirers from the world of literature is Yu Jian, who befriended Cui Jian in the 1980s, as he recalls in his piece “Remembering Cui Jian” (怀念崔健), and found in him a kindred spirit. He even points out some analogous passages in his own poetry and Cui’s songs.¹²⁸ After Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize, Yu was asked in an interview whether Chinese culture has a similar figure. He mentioned Cui, although not without some hesitation, noting that Dylan’s work is more affirmative and makes one love life, whereas Cui is an artist of resistance who makes one question one’s surrounding environment. This is not surprising in light of the earlier reflection on the rock conscience of totalitarian nations in the context of Marcin Świetlicki’s artistic activity. By and large, however, Yu Jian believes that Cui Jian fits his vision of poetry as evoking spirits (招魂) and poethood as a form of shamanism (Yu likes to call poets *wushi* 巫师 “wizard” or *bimo* 毕摩 “shaman” in the indigenous religion of the Yi minority in Yunnan),¹²⁹ which became a leitmotif in his recent metaliterary output.

The record of utterances made by Gao Ertai, Wang Shuo, Yi Sha, Yu Jie, and Yu Jian can be complemented with a considerable number of scholarly papers analyzing the literary valor of Cui Jian’s songs¹³⁰ and a wave of comments from

127 Quoted in Li Si 2001: 194, trans. J K.

128 Liu Chun 2010: 128.

129 Liu Youxiang 2016.

130 See, e.g., Liu Lifan 2010; Xin Da 2015; Zhang Fuping 2007; Shi Xiaofei 2009a, 2009b; Yang Qing 2009; Hong Zhu 1999; Zhang Wuwei 2012; Zheng Fei 2018; Zhi Yuan 2009.

his fans who speculate whether Cui, too, might get a Nobel in the future.¹³¹ It appears that Cui Jian's status as a full-fledged poet has been widely accepted and indeed was institutionally confirmed through the inclusion of a chapter devoted to his most famous song "Nothing to My Name" (一无所有) in *Teaching Materials for the History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (中国当代文学史教程, 1996) edited by Chen Sihe 陈思和 and the inclusion of the lyrics as such in the *Canon of a Hundred Years of Chinese Literature* (百年中国文学经典, 1996) edited by Xie Mian 谢冕 and Qian Liqun 钱理群. But things are not that simple.

2.2.1 Rock Music on the Poetry Scene

Cui Jian himself maintains that he has never had poetic aspirations. He holds that he taught himself how to write and that he only can create lyrics when stimulated by music.¹³² Perhaps it is exactly this lack of a claim to poethood that made him so attractive in the eyes of other poets, especially those representing the Popular camp, whose postulates included authenticity, sincerity, straightforward expression, interest in quotidian life, colloquial language, and so forth. The above-quoted utterance of Yi Sha comes from an interview he gave in the late 1980s when he was still a budding poet seeking his own voice and Cui Jian was a rising star of the national music scene. When in the late 1990s Cui Jian's lyrics started to evolve toward a more metaphorical style, Yi Sha held it against him. In the essay "The Eighth Bronze Statue Is Cui Jian" (第八铜像是崔健) from *Desecrating Idols* (亵渎偶像), he pours out his grievances, blaming Cui for developing an "elite consciousness" (精英意识) and betraying his ideals and his audience in favor of commercial success, especially after the musician's cameo in Zhang Yuan's 张元 movie *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, 1993).¹³³ On the other hand, Yi Sha's change of heart toward the idol of his youth might be a result of his personal conflict with Cui Jian and another rock musician Zhang Chu 张楚, his former high school classmate.¹³⁴ In a piece devoted to Zhang, Yi Sha warns the singer "not to write for intellectuals" and not to go out of his way to write "profound" lyrics.¹³⁵

131 See, e.g., the material and discussion at the following websites: <https://www.jianshu.com/p/f6780646c4bb>; https://m.sohu.com/n/470305160/?wscrid=95360_5; <http://m36it.scb8.com/vxswmdlw/983852724/> (accessed May 13, 2020).

132 Cui Jian 2016.

133 Yi Sha 1999: 53–58; for a comprehensive study on *Beijing Bastards* and Cui Jian's role in the film, see Xiao Ying 2017, chapter 3.

134 Yi Sha 1999: 67–71.

135 *Ibidem*: 66.

This is a significant remark if we take into account that, in the 1980s, rock music was a new phenomenon in China, one that had to be somehow integrated into local cultural life and critical discourse. Popular poets were particularly interested in recruiting rock musicians to their team. Yet, one can imagine that for the Intellectuals, too, rock music, as part of Western culture, would be a precious asset. Authors such as Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 or Xi Chuan 西川 always spoke and wrote of Western rock stars and their relevance for the development of world literature with respect.¹³⁶ Thus, rock and roll became one more field in the tug of war between different factions on poetry scene at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

In “A Fake Poetic Topic,” Li Si makes a case which may appear wayward but is quite typical of poetry discourse in China in that period. After a several-pages-long discussion of the rather indisputable fact that Cui Jian’s songs have little to do with ancient poetry, which was inextricably, also institutionally, linked to music, Li posits that considering Cui Jian a poet and drawing his works into the *Canon of a Hundred Years of Chinese Literature* is a mistake that stems from the general weakness of Chinese contemporary poetry. This weakness is ascribed to the expansion of Intellectual writing. He illustrates this point by deploying the example of Wang Jiixin 王家新:

And so, seeing the pseudopoetry of Wang Jiixin and others, some in cultural circles (文化界) of course perceive the more authentic, more passionate “parapoetry” (准诗歌) of Cui Jian as a fellow traveler (同路人) of contemporary poetry, and wholeheartedly praise it. But these poets and scholars apparently forgot one thing: taking ten or even fifty percent of something as an entire thing [i.e., taking Cui’s 10%-poetry or 50%-poetry as poetry], is always false, and misleads the audience. This is a debt we owe to truth and justice. Even if one has noble motives, this still doesn’t give one the right to replace one mistake with another. Because a mistake is a mistake, and nothing else.

Mistaking Cui Jian or any other rock musician for a poet is not something that the said musicians should be blamed for. This is the mistake of our ignorant cultural circles. It is also a disastrous effect of the specific atmosphere of the cultural environment of our times.¹³⁷

I will not go deeper into Li’s futile discussion that presents Cui Jian as a living proof of the alleged critical condition of poetry. Instead of asking whether Cui

136 See, e.g., Liu Youxiang 2016; Ouyang Jianghe 2016.

137 Li Si 2001: 213–214, trans. J K.

deserves to be called a poet, what poetry may gain, and *whose* poetry may gain from canonizing his lyrics as poems, I would want to turn the question 180 degrees and ask whether, what, and how Cui's works might gain or lose (or already have gained or lost) from reading them in "poetry mode" with the main focus on text and its interactions with the reader. I propose to consider three songs: "Nothing to My Name" and "A Phony Traveling Monk" (假行僧) from the album *Rock and Roll on a New Long March* (新长征路上的摇滚, 1989) and "A Piece of Red Cloth" (一块红布) from *Solution* (解决, 1991).

2.2.2 Literary Paradigms in the Reception of Rock Music

"Nothing to My Name" was the song that shot Cui Jian to stardom in one evening when he performed it in a TV talent show in 1985. Four years later, in 1989, the same song was sung by students at Tiananmen Square as the anthem of the democracy movement in China. Cui Jian, too, appeared on the square three times, as he recalls, and during his second visit, on the seventh day of the hunger strike (i.e., probably May 18), he gave a brief concert for the protesters. Yet, he did not perform "Nothing to My Name" and instead chose four pieces with much stronger political overtones: "Once Again From the Beginning" (从头再来), "Rock and Roll on the New Long March" (新长征路上的摇滚), "Like a Knife" (像一把刀子), and "A Piece of Red Cloth" (一块红布). In 2009, the website Danwei¹³⁸ put online a recording of that spontaneous concert in which one can hear Cui Jian asking whether the students wanted to listen and whether the loud music would not prove unbearable for their weakened bodies. The crowd encouraged him to start. In an interview for the *Independent*, the musician recalls that "it felt like a big party. There was no fear. It was nothing like it was shown on CNN and the BBC."¹³⁹ However, Eddie Cheng, the author of *Standoff at Tiananmen*, who took part in the protests, suggests that these might have been voices of those who did not participate in the strike and stood in the foreground; he claims having heard hunger strikers at the scene complaining that this was too much for them.¹⁴⁰

Be that as it may, Cui Jian only very reluctantly speaks about his involvement in political initiatives at the time, conceivably for two reasons. First, the situation in the PRC still does not encourage open declarations of one's political views; second, he is aware that his connections to the prodemocracy movement may overshadow his further musical achievements and distract audiences' attention from the artistic aspect of the songs and their

138 Martinsen 2009; see also Cheng Eddie 2009.

139 Eimer 2005.

140 Cheng Eddie 2009.

experimental, innovative character. About “Nothing to My Name” the author says that it was created without any political subtext, for the purpose of a TV contest, inspired by real conversations with his ex-girlfriend, who used to mock his poor material condition, something she has confirmed.¹⁴¹ Dennis Rea, who knows Cui Jian personally and performed with him in Beijing in the 1990s, notes:

In a sense, given his refusal to unequivocally criticize authority, Cui Jian could be viewed as a consummate performance artist, enjoying all the notoriety of a political subversive without ever having leveled a substantive critique of his country’s policies. Although viewed by many as the epitome of the rebel archetype, Cui Jian’s customary ambiguity places him within a longstanding Chinese tradition that privileges circumspection and obliquity over confrontation.¹⁴²

Before we discuss possible interpretations of “Nothing to My Name,” let’s have a look at the lyrics. I have retranslated the song, although it is available in several renditions, including Rea’s, to make it as literal as possible for the purpose of the following analysis, which is more focused on the text than on the work’s musical qualities:

Nothing to My Name

How long have I been asking you,
when will you go with me?
But you always laugh at me,
for I have nothing to my name.

I want to give you my pursuit
and my freedom.
But you always laugh at me,
for I have nothing to my name.

Oh, oh ... when will you go with me?

The earth is turning under [my] feet.
The water is flowing beside [me].

¹⁴¹ Lu and Li 2003; Beijing Qingnianbao 2009.

¹⁴² Rea 2014; KL 1803–1807.

But you always laugh at me,
for I have nothing to my name.

Why do you always laugh at me
that I always keep on seeking?
Is it that in front of you
I will forever have nothing to my name?

Oh, oh ... when will you go with me?

I tell you I've been waiting a long time,
I tell you, here's my last request:
I want to grab you by the hands,
then you would go with me.

Your hands are trembling.
Your eyes overflow with tears.
Do you really mean to tell me
that you love me as I am?

Oh, oh ... when will you go with me?

《一无所有》

我曾经问个不休
你何时跟我走
可你却总是笑我
一无所有

我要给你我的追求
还有我的自由
可你却总是笑我
一无所有

噢.....你何时跟我走
噢.....你何时跟我走

脚下的地在走
身边的水在流

可你却总是笑我
一无所有

为何你总笑个没够
为何我总要追求
难道在你面前
我永远是一无所有

噢.....你何时跟我走
噢.....你何时跟我走

脚下的地在走
身边的水在流
告诉你我等了很久
告诉你我最后的要求

我要抓起你的双手
你这就跟我走
这时你的手在颤抖
这时你的泪在流
莫非你是在告诉我
你爱我一无所有

噢.....你这就跟我走
噢.....你这就跟我走
噢.....你这就跟我走¹⁴³

On the literal level, “Nothing” is indeed a simple romantic song about love in the time of nascent capitalism. As such, now, at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, it becomes arguably even more actual than in the 1980s when the expected minimum economic threshold for a Chinese man to marry was notably lower. The earth turning under their feet and the flowing water—which Jonathan Matusitz, for one, reads as an allusion to political ideals¹⁴⁴—might well be taken as a representation of sexual desire. In this way, their bodies express their own truth, silenced by the truth of the market: “but you always laugh at me / for I have nothing to my name.” The last stanza

143 Lyrics available, e.g., at <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/22208668/> (accessed December 22, 2020).

144 Matusitz 2010: 159.

brings something like a suspended happy end: a hopeful conjecture that the trembling hands and tears in the eyes mean the sacramental “yes, I do.” How then did the love story start to function so smoothly as a political declaration intuitively understood, tacitly accepted, and taken up by thousands of people?

Conceivably, a small part of the answer lies in poetry or in literature at large. In the 1980s, rock music was a novelty in China. For several decades musical production had been dominated by patriotic or political songs, none of which could provide effective patterns of interpretation for this new genre with its complex interplay between sound and sense. The interpretative patterns were thus automatically transplanted, or perhaps just traveled osmotically, from literature, where two prominent trends could be distinguished at the time: the Obscure movement in poetry and Scar Literature (伤痕文学) gradually giving way to Introspection Literature (反思文学) and Root-Searching Literature (寻根文学) in fiction. Citing Zhao Jianwei’s 赵建伟 early identification of rock music of the 1980s as “scar music” (伤痕音乐), Shi Xiaofei 史笑非 observes similar generational concerns in Cui’s lyrics as in Scar fiction, focused on the experience of past trauma and current oppression.¹⁴⁵ This model of reception was strengthened by the model of reception of Obscure poets, who at the time—as van Crevel put it—were enjoying some kind of “rock stardom” themselves.¹⁴⁶ The same students who sang “Nothing to My Name” at Tiananmen were also reciting Bei Dao’s cult classic “Answer” (回答) and in their eyes both works were part of the same narrative. In 1995, Zhang Xinying 张新颖 published a paper in which he traces the development of the spirit of resistance in Chinese culture “from Bei Dao, through to Cui Jian, through to Wang Shuo 王朔,” making the case that without Bei Dao and Obscure poetry, Cui’s project would not be possible in China. Identifying analogous interests and images in Bei Dao’s poems and Cui’s songs, Zhang shows how the rock singer absorbs and transforms the “elitist cultural attitude” (精英式文化心态) of Obscure poetry to arrive at his unique individual idiom.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, discerning an individual language and style is for Cui Jian, I think, only part of dealing with the complex relationship between poetry and rock music at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The other part is negotiating his way out of the interpretational models and habits of his audiences to resist being homogenized in and by mass reception.

Obscure poetry is characterized by a specific understanding of subjectivity. It explicitly expresses the author’s concern about individuality, but never actually executes this concept. It is a collective manifesto of the necessity of

145 Shi Xiaofei 2009b: 40–41.

146 van Crevel 2008: 91.

147 Zhang Xinying 1995: 36.

developing and foregrounding individual voice rather than an embodiment of the individual voice itself. This is exactly how Cui's early lyrics were read; in practice, no one seriously took into account the possibility of individual experience standing behind them, and, on the other hand, Cui did nothing to make such a connection visible in the text. This is, for example, how Chen Sihe reads "Nothing to My Name," emphasizing the common, intersubjective experience of solitude and vulnerability:

The central concept of the lyrics is to "negate." The "nothing-to-my-name" attitude means "negation and rejection of history, reality, and everything else"; that is a difficult and painful cultural resistance, an antagonistic relationship between the self and external world. This implies that on the one hand an individual is not subject to external control, but on the other, they don't receive internal support from their culture. They are exposed, helpless, and solipsistic singular souls.¹⁴⁸

In such an interpretation, the song represents what might be oxymoronicly called universal individualism, which constitutes a logical opposition to, but not a substantial alternative for, what we may refer to as the universal collectivism of communist ideology. It is a simple negation of the ideas expressed, for instance, in the "Internationale," which Andrew F. Jones interestingly connects to Cui's piece. Observing that the Chinese translation of the "Internationale" contains the title phrase of the song in question, "*yiwusuo you* 一无所有" (have nothing [to one's name]), Jones proposes:

["Nothing to My Name" can be seen as] an ironic response to the Chinese lyrics of the "Internationale" ("Guoji ge"), a socialist anthem whose ubiquity in Chinese everyday life is second only to that of the national anthem:

Slaves rise up, rise up!
We cannot say that we have nothing [*yiwu suo you*]
We will be masters of all under heavens.

The substitution of "we" for "I" makes implicit sense both in terms of the politicization that has surrounded Chinese popular music since its inception and in the way in which we enjoy pop music. Much of the pleasure of listening to popular music results from identifying our own passions with

148 Chen Sihe 1999, trans. J K.

those of the singer. This identification, of course, links us not only with the performer but with the other members of the audience—with a community of shared feeling. The singer's "I" becomes *our* "I". Our "I's", in turn, merge with a collective "we". Cui Jian denies that the song addresses the government, that "I Have Nothing" is equivalent to "we have no freedom and democracy". On the streets of Beijing and Hong Kong, however, the use of the song as a marching chant in the spring of 1989 demonstrated that his objections may well have been beside the point.¹⁴⁹

In Cui's lyrics, similarly to Obscure poems, the textual "I" becomes a medium of emotions and feelings considered as individual but has no explicit anchorage in any specific personal experience that would distinguish him from anyone else. Therefore, "I" immediately merges again into "we," and is easily repoliticized in another context, for instance for the purpose of prodemocracy struggle. Many former Obscure poets also claim they never wanted to be read politically, but even if this really was not their intention, such a way of reading was unavoidable. A faceless I-narrator who represents the entire spectrum of human moods, from near-hysteria to excessive self-confidence, is a convenient abstract mold to be filled with real-life substance. And it is usually filled with the hottest, freshest matter which needs to be urgently dealt with before it congeals into an official narrative. Moreover, once the mold becomes filled, only after a long time, when the content cools down and dries, can one retrieve it and fill it with something else. Put differently, a text that once became so clearly disambiguated is difficult to reambiguate. Thus, authors often prefer to discard their old molds that were used once for political purposes rather than encourage readers to reuse them.

One example of a virtually unrefillable form from Cui Jian's oeuvre may be "A Strip of Red Cloth," which the author performed at Tiananmen, effectively complemented by his famous scenic gesture during live performances and in the later videoclip: tying a red cloth over his eyes. In June 1989, protesters at Tiananmen reportedly repeated this gesture. Compared to "Nothing to My Name," the situation described in "A Strip" is reversed: in "Nothing," "I" finally grabs "You's" hand to draw "You" into his miserable life. In "A Strip," "You" covers "I's" eyes with a piece of red cloth and grabs his hand to lead him through the imagined landscape he saw through his covered eyes. The first three stanzas read:

149 Jones 2002: 156–157.

That day you covered up my two eyes
 Covered the sky with a strip of red cloth
 And then you asked me what I saw
 I told you I could see happiness

Oh this feeling is so positive
 Makes me forget I've no place to live
 You asked me where I want to go
 I say I'm on the road to you

I can't see you, I can't see the road
 My hand in your hand is tightly held
 You ask me what I'm thinking of
 I say I want you to take the lead

Translated by CANAAN MORSE

那天是你用一块红布
 蒙住我双眼也蒙住了天
 你问我看见了什么
 我说我看见了幸福

这个感觉真让我舒服
 它让我忘掉我没地儿住
 你问我还要去何方
 我说要上你的路

看不见你也看不见路
 我的手也被你攥住
 你问我在想什么
 我说我要你做主¹⁵⁰

Technically, one could interpret the above excerpt as a reflection on blind love, but in the next several lines we learn that “you’re just as hard and sharp as steel can be” (像铁一样的强和烈) and the only thing that warms this hard and sharp “You” is “blood on Your skin” (你身上有血). In the last two stanzas, the language of romantic love, too, seems to be gravitating toward the language of Romantic patriotism:

¹⁵⁰ Cui Jian 2017: 35–38. The collection contains the lyrics written in traditional characters.

And I can feel this is no waste land
 Yet I can't see the cracks in the ground
 And now I feel as dry as a drought
 And yet your lips cover up my mouth

I cannot cry, and I cannot run
 Because my body has all withered up
 I want to stay with you forevermore
 Because I understand your suffering

Translated by CANAAN MORSE

我感觉这不是荒野
 却看见这儿的土地已经干裂
 我感觉我要喝点水
 可你的嘴将我的嘴堵住

我不能走我也不能哭
 因为我的身体现在已经干枯
 我要永远这样陪伴着你
 因为我最知道你的痛苦¹⁵¹

The double coding of the color red as a traditional symbol of love and happiness on the one hand and the color of communism on the other is disambiguated by the specific content and context of the song's most famous performance in 1989. What happened at Tiananmen shortly after the concert reinforced this disambiguation: "You's," that is China's, hands were again dripping with fresh blood. When Cui Jian sung this song during the first (and last) concert tour he was permitted to undertake after the massacre, neither the audience nor the authorities doubted what this meant. At the time, there was already an unofficial ban on his concerts in Beijing, but he was allowed to perform because he promised to donate the benefits toward the Asian Games organized in China in 1990. Jones quotes one of the participants of the Beijing gig saying:

[Y]esterday he challenged the authorities again. He sang a forbidden song when the audience encouraged him with passionate applause. He tied a red cloth over his eyes, and his guitarist gagged himself with a red cloth as well. What did this mean? Of course, everyone in Beijing knew exactly what it meant! Most of the audience of 15,000 people rose to their

151 Ibidem.

feet. It was so exciting, just like that other unbelievable day and night [i.e., June 3–4, 1989],¹⁵²

It comes as no surprise that the second half of Cui Jian's tournee in China was cancelled.

But Cui Jian did not want to abandon his song at Tiananmen without any attempt to reclaim it. Performing "A Strip" in Berlin in 1993, he offered the following interpretation:

Literally, the lyrics seem to be about love, but I observe that today many young people eagerly cover their eyes, because they feel comfortable like this. When you see too much reality, you can't cheat yourself. Culture to a large extent also works in this way. If you see things as they are, you will find yourself too weak or life too complicated and impure. They believe it's good to cover their eyes; the less you see, the happier you are. So, it seems that there are two meanings: one is connected to culture and politics, and the other one is related to love.¹⁵³

Cui makes some hermeneutic efforts to strengthen the universal dimension of the text. He also shifts the emphasis from a human as a victim of deceit to a human as guilty of self-deceit. Still, four years after Tiananmen, in the West there were conceivably not many people who would take this song as romantic or existential rather than political. Today, when we read "A Strip of Red Cloth," not retrospectively back to Cui's early career including the Tiananmen performances, but prospectively through the prism of his later songs, the content indeed tends to gain a more universal perspective and the emphasis in reception is likely to be shifted from specific political observations to a more general social diagnosis. One can, for instance, juxtapose it with the eponymous song from Cui's 1994 album *Eggs Laid by the Red Flag* (红旗下的蛋), better known under a mistranslated title placed on the original cover of the CD: *Balls under the Red Flag*, with the word *xia* 下 interpreted as a preposition rather than a verb as in *xia dan* 下蛋 ("lay eggs"). In the song, Chinese society is ironically portrayed as passive, myopic, cowardly, lacking in ambitions and independent thinking, their "personalities round like eggs laid by the red flag" (我们的个性都是圆的 / 象红旗下的蛋).¹⁵⁴ Humor, distance, self-mockery, concrete,

152 Jones 2002: 157.

153 Zhang Wuwei 2012: 41, trans. J.K.

154 Lyrics available, e.g., at <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/崔健/红旗下的蛋> (accessed December 22, 2020), trans. J.K.

grotesque imagination, and language invention make “Eggs” a more intriguing and inspiring text than “Nothing to My Name” or “A Strip of Red Cloth,” and certainly more difficult to disambiguate and dispose of as “used up” for one specific narrative. These features also testify to Cui’s considerable literary intuition, which allows him to overcome the Obscure mode of creation and reception.

All in all, one may say that it is Obscure poetry that, along with the semi-autobiographical fiction of the former “educated youth,” prepared the social ground for rock music in China and contributed to its smooth root-taking in the Chinese soil. On the other hand, it also pushed the newly emerging genre into quite predictable interpretational ruts that were not easy to break out from, given the high demand for this specific type of textual mold in society at the time. Even if Cui Jian did not imitate or draw inspiration directly from Bei Dao and others, he certainly recognized this demand and, perhaps intuitively, worked to meet it. At the same time, one should not ignore the many moments of the awakening of sharp formal self-awareness, or minimally intuition, that stimulated him to subvert this default mode of textual production at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. One of the earliest instances is “The Phony Traveling Monk.”

“The Phony Traveling Monk” does not automatically fit any specific historical or political context. Instead, it can be convincingly read as a variation of the story of Goethe’s *Faust*, as some interpreters have aptly pointed out.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps this intertext is mediated by Qian Zhongshu’s 钱钟书 short story “The Devil Pays a Nighttime Visit to Mr. Qian Zhongshu” (魔鬼夜访钱钟书先生, 1939), where the devil complains that he has nothing to do in the contemporary world, that his “soul business” was ruined because most humans no longer have souls.

Certain echoes of Bei Dao’s poetry appear in “The Phony Traveling Monk” as well, not as a passively received, osmotic influence, but as a quite distinct intertext that complicates the message of the lyrics. The music, especially in the first part of the song, is monotonous and mantric, but, like the monk himself, this is a “fake” mantra: traditional Chinese instruments (suona horn, bamboo flute, and guzhen) are mixed with technologically advanced electronic instruments. As the song develops, the musical accompaniment and singing become increasingly dynamic, as if conveying the atmosphere of an inner struggle.

155 See, e.g., Zhang Fuping 2007: 6.

Below I quote the lyrics in Morse's translation which reproduces the rhythm and artistic valor of the song,¹⁵⁶ including more literal renditions in square brackets:

The Phony Traveling Monk

I walk the earth from low to high	[I walk the earth from south to north]
I walk from black and into white	[I want to walk from white into black]
Everyone someday will see my face	[I want people to see me]
But no one'll know my life	[but not to know my life]

If you should see me weary grow
 Come pour some water in my bowl
 If you should fall in love with me
 Then kiss me on my mouth

I've got my two legs and these two feet
 Ten thousand hills and rivers deep
 I want the whole of your everything
 Except for regret and hate

In loving me, you can never hold on	[don't be afraid that you'll regret]
I'll fly away and forever be gone	[one day I will fly high]
I gotta move and I never remain	[I don't want to stay in one place]
And no one's coming along	[I don't want anybody to follow me]

I walk the earth from low to high	[I want to walk from south to north]
I walk from black and into white	[I want to walk from white into black]
Everyone someday will see my face	[I want people to see me]
But no one'll know my life	[but not to know my life]

Just want to see how pretty you look
 Don't want to know 'bout the beating you took
 Don't want tears, just a heavenly spring
 Whose water I may drink

¹⁵⁶ Morse's interesting blog post on translating Cui Jian's lyrics can be found online in Morse 2021.

I won't [don't want to] believe that devils exist
 I'll never make any enemies
 Forget about ever knowing who I am
 Or finding my emptiness
 Lei—

Translated by CANAAN MORSE

《假行僧》

我要从南走到北
 我还要从白走到黑
 我要人们都看到我
 但不知道我是谁

假如你看我有点累
 就请你给我倒碗水
 假如你已经爱上我
 就请你吻我的嘴

我有这双脚 我有这双腿
 我有这千山和万水
 我要这所有的所有
 但不要恨和悔

要爱上我你就别怕后悔
 总有一天我要远走高飞
 我不想留在一个地方
 也不愿有人跟随

我要从南走到北
 我还要从白走到黑
 我要人们都看到我
 但不知道我是谁

我只想看到你长得美
 但不想知道你在受罪
 我想要得到天上的水
 但不是你的泪

我不愿相信真的有魔鬼
 也不愿与任何人作对
 你别想知道我到底是谁
 也别想看到我的虚伪¹⁵⁷

Cui Jian's modern Faust chokes on illusion, and no longer believes in the devil who conjured it up, giving him eternal youth. Faust's story is reread through the manifesto of the I-speaker of Bei Dao's cult poem "The Answer" who repeats stubbornly: "I—do—not—believe" (我—不—相—信). He does not believe "that the sky is blue" (天是蓝的), "that dreams are false" (梦是假的), "that death has no revenge" (死无报应). He envisions "the watchful eyes of future generations" (未来人们凝视的眼睛) as "a new conjunction and glimmering stars / adorn[ing] the unobstructed sky now" (新的转机和闪闪的星斗, / 正在缀满没有遮拦的天空) who will see the evil of his times and will do justice to him as the righteous one.¹⁵⁸ Cui Jian's song unmasks the treacherous alchemy of the self-proclaimed priests. The I-speaker in his lyrics is like an inner voice of the I-speaker from "The Answer." This voice tells the same story from inside, blaming the monk/poet, in whose soul it settled, for being dishonest. It knows that the "host organism" is not thirsty but wants to look thirsty for beautiful girls to bring him water and fall in love in him. Needless to say, he will not take responsibility for this love because he plans to fly high. The line that follows after the declaration of disbelief in devils, in English translation may bring to mind Liu Xiaobo's 刘晓波 (1955–2017) famous words: "I have no enemies, no hatred," from his manifesto supporting the hunger strike at Tiananmen. Liu repeated these words in 2009 in his final statement in the trial that sentenced him to eleven years in prison for inciting subversion of state power; the essay was read out by Liv Ullman during the 2010 Nobel Prize ceremony in which the laureate could not participate.¹⁵⁹ Contrary to Liu, however, Cui's phony monk, a man without qualities, has no enemies, not because he is so generous, forgiving, and filled with love toward humanity, but because he is not even worth others' hostility and he himself is too indifferent to make the emotional effort of hating anybody. And thus, day by day, he gradually sinks into darkness, from white walks into black.

157 Cui Jian 2017: 21–24. The collection includes the lyrics written in traditional characters.

158 Bei Dao 1990: 33 (English, translated by Bonnie S. McDougall), Bei Dao 2011: 2–3 (Chinese).

159 Liu Xiaobo 2009.

2.3 *Negotiating Conditions*

Akin to Świetlicki's work, the rock-and-roll subject of Cui Jian's song installs himself as a tough, certainly not unblemished, but uncompromised conscience of the lyrical subject of (Obscure) poetry and of the entire generation fed on its "round like eggs" ideas. Cui unbendingly mocks the phony-monk attitude, but with all due awareness that he, too, is not free of the temptations that haunt the character portrayed in his song. Interestingly, Zhang Xinying arrives at a similar conclusion confronting Cui's "Solution" (解决) with Bei Dao's "Personal History" (履历) and "Accomplice" (同谋):

Cui Jian is not sober and grave like Bei Dao. There is a difference between them: Bei Dao wrote of the experience of his times, but he did so adopting a perspective of someone who has already been awakened, someone from the future who examines things that happened with hindsight; there is anger but also some rationality. Cui Jian is more focused on directly exposing the experience, this being a completely irrational experience, an experience of fascination with empty promises; he faithfully reconstructs the tragic scene of the total vanishing of self-consciousness in the red ocean of history. [...] The song metaphorically expresses a fact that is difficult to accept: adopting a passive, obedient attitude, through their marriage with history humans become accomplices to the absurd and the painful.¹⁶⁰

On the one hand, one can see that Cui Jian's artistic practice resonates with the postulates of the Third Generation and their desire, as mentioned in the previous chapter, to outdo Bei Dao and break the hegemony of Obscure poetry. On the other hand, it is also quite obvious that Cui takes a different path than the ones taken by the Intellectual and Popular factions. Unlike the Intellectuals, he does not propose enhancing and building on the legacy of Obscure poetry. Nor does he call for an upheaval or an instant coup d'état as the Popular poets did. The relationship between his music and Obscure verse is not temporal or linear but should rather be visualized spatially, as cutting into this poetic territory. Indeed, it establishes what, contra Świetlicki, might be called a base of musical operations on poetic soil. His base remains fixed in place as the territory itself moves, as the poetic canon passes from the hands of one faction to another. Meanwhile, Cui continues to "disturb the peace" with mantric refrains sung in hoarse vocals accompanied by electric sounds. It is, I believe, a good deal for both parties—poetry and rock music—and neither his extradition

¹⁶⁰ Zhang Xinying 1995: 37, trans. J K.

from nor his compulsory naturalization into the poetic canon would be particularly desirable. Why should he be dragged onto the poetry Parnassus or be taken hostage by a specific poetic faction? There is nothing wrong with including Cui's lyrics in poetry anthologies or literary textbooks—on the contrary, it is a manifestation of the editors' appreciation of Cui's writing skills—but only as long as the reader is aware that this is a foreign body, divorced from its primary context and function, and that interpretative methods and paradigms used for texts that were primarily created on paper do not exhaust its affordances. Approaching rock songs as representative works of poetry of the 1980s is counterproductive and does not do justice to the uniqueness and originality of the artist's proposition. It is, after all, not just a case of deserving but of serving. Cui's texts were written to serve his musical project and even if he creates them while wandering on the territories of poetry, he still wants to send the product back to his native rock soil for it to bear fruit there, believing that this is the optimal environment for his works.

Świetlicki, conversely, holding a poetry passport, enjoys life in the foreign land of rock music. He writes with a heavy rock accent typical of the other artistic universe, but usually sends his works back to their poetic home for them to lead their afterlife in the “cold country” of poetry, according to its laws and paradigms, even though this to some extent limits the texts' freedom. This was the case, for instance, with Świetlicki's hit “Callouses” (*Odciski*), which was improvised many times and finally was included in the poetry collection *Songs of a Layman* as “Callouses (One of Many Versions)” (*Odciski (jedna z wielu wersji)*). On the one hand, the author wanted his work to settle in the realm of poetry; on the other hand, he was afraid that perpetuating one “canonical version” on paper may kill its lively spirit. Finally, he adopted a consensual solution. He decided to write the lyrics down but retained the trace of its multiple identities in the title, leaving the text open to a variety of multimedial interpretations. The author recalls that someone even drew a comic based on it.¹⁶¹

From a bird's eye view, the comparative stage in this final scene of the chapter looks like the yin-yang symbol of harmonious and productive dualism: Świetlicki the white dot of poetry on the black territory of rock music / popular culture, Cui Jian the black dot of rock music / popular culture on the territory of poetry. Without drawing pseudophilosophical conclusions from this happenstance, let's nevertheless treat it as a good closure of this comparative act and a promising sign for the next one.

161 Świetlicki comments on “Callouses” and many other poems/songs in a conversation with Marcin Kleinszmidt included in the volume *Evil Hits (Zło, te przeboje, 2015)*, a collection of his songs-turned-into-poems and poems adapted for songs. Świetlicki and Kleinszmidt 2015: 220–221.

Invisibility

The poetics and processes discussed in the previous two chapters all belong to what is usually considered the mainstream of contemporary poetry in Poland and China. Leaving behind the more and less substantive negotiations of poetic territories and hierarchies, in this chapter we will explore the less visible but no less powerful forces that played a crucial role in shaping the topography of the national poetics at the turn of the century. The significance of these forces was long underestimated in literary-critical discourse, when all eyes were instead locked on the poets who had come to make revolution, to dethrone and enthrone, desecrate and canonize, those who occupied the theatrical and musical stages. But when the dust of the feuds and polemics settled, the contours of a new landscape emerged in both countries and the accumulated effects of literary-critical discourse's longtime persistent transformation by hidden, subcutaneous energies could no longer be ignored. The new landforms ranged from vast plateaus and valleys with peaceful and beautiful surroundings to single mountain peaks that offered little more than a difficult climb.

The protagonists of this chapter are four women poets: Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 in section two and Krystyna Miłobędzka and Zhai Yongming 翟永明 in section three. To continue the landscape metaphor, Szymborska's and Wang's poetry resemble isolated peaks on the horizon, while Miłobędzka's and Zhai's writing creates a broad expanse for others to develop and nourish. These poetics have flourished particularly abundantly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, hence the many connections that we will observe between this and the final chapter, which speaks of the most recent phenomena in Polish and Chinese poetry, including new approaches to language poetry and diverse experiments with ecopoetry, technologically supported poetry (cyberpoetry, AI poetry), and other forms of symbiosis between poetry and various disciplines of knowledge. However, I shall first explain what I mean by invisibility and why these particular authors have been selected for scrutiny.

1 The Meaning of Invisibility

As I anticipated in the introductory chapter, this chapter had not been intended as a chapter focused exclusively on women poets. Rather, I had hoped to offer a counterbalance to the phenomena discussed in chapters 2 and 3 that made poetry of the 1990s a political and tremendously adversarial activity, often detracting from the sense of intimacy and disinterested artistic, intellectual, and/or spiritual experience that many readers crave when reaching for a text in verse. Initially, I had included a comparative study of two male authors, but ultimately I found their propositions aesthetically and philosophically less convincing, and decided to give more space to the female quartet instead.

It is quite symptomatic that speaking of invisible men—especially the today almost proverbial “white straight men”—conventionally invokes associations with misanthropic geniuses or otherwise outstanding individuals who retire to their ivory towers to pursue higher goals that are unavailable to the masses; this is, for instance, what Wojacek’s and Haizi’s legends partly hinge on. Invisible women, in turn, are—by default—housewives who silently contribute to the greater visibility of their male partners, relieving them of trivial burdens so that they might focus on “more important” public affairs. While men’s invisibility is associated with a quest for the transcendental, women’s invisibility is reduced to purely social context and axiologized, depending on one’s point of view, as a social virtue (by those who believe it is good for a man to have a woman sitting quietly at home) or as a form of social injustice or failure (namely, a woman’s failure to make her own way in a male-dominated world—or her fear, or perhaps lack of self-awareness, to do so). While men’s invisibility is liberating, women need to be liberated from their invisibility. While men’s invisibility is poetic, women’s invisibility is prosaic. Et cetera. The four authors discussed here complicate this cliché. Although, having gained popularity and respect among literary audiences, they could presumably live a visible life in the limelight, all of them, for different reasons, *chose* invisibility, not as a passive condition but as an active position, being aware of—and knowing how to maximally tap into—its potential.

In 2019, within the period of just one month, between early February and early March, two hugely different, widely echoing woman-authored studies on invisibility came out in the US, which illustrate what I mean by the distinction between passive and active invisibility, namely Caroline Criado Perez’s *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* and Akiko Busch’s *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*. Criado Perez makes a convincing case demonstrating how inherently biased and incomplete Big Data distorts the image of the world and leads to a situation whereby

the everyday needs of women are ignored in various spheres of life, ranging from the seemingly trivial (e.g., the architecture of public toilets or the design of cell phones) to the glaringly significant (e.g., the composition of drugs or the construction of vehicle safety systems).¹ Busch, in her turn, shows what she believes to be a perk of invisibility in the world of Big Data, where identity is “curated” in various ways, which “refers to the self-promotion, personal branding, and ability to create and cultivate assorted profiles—consumer, social, political, professional—on social media that are viewed as valued, indeed essential, commodities.”² She advocates for invisibility as a desirable mode of existence, claiming:

When identity is derived from projecting an image in the public realm, something is lost, some core of identity diluted, some sense of authority or interiority sacrificed. It is time to question the false equivalency between not being seen and hiding. And time to reevaluate the merits of the inconspicuous life, to search out some antidote to continuous exposure, and to reconsider the value of going unseen, undetected, or overlooked in this new world. [...]. The impulse to escape notice is not about complacent isolation or senseless conformity, but about maintaining identity, propriety, autonomy, and voice. It is not about retreating from the digital world but about finding some genuine alternative to a life of perpetual display. It is not about mindless effacement but mindful awareness. Neither disgraceful nor discrediting, such obscurity can be vital to our very sense of being, a way of fitting in with the immediate social, cultural, or environmental landscape. Human endeavor can be something interior, private, and self-contained. We can gain, rather than suffer, from deep reserve.³

For all the self-evident differences between Criado Perez’s and Busch’s approaches, there is no essential conflict between them. The two propositions should be considered mutually complementary rather than mutually contradictory. Criado Perez, in many places, signals that increasing women’s visibility by making them fit into the structures designed by and for men is not an ultimate solution but rather a temporary emergency measure. For example, discussing the job market, she points out that, unlike women, who tend to be quite realistic in their self-assessment, men’s self-assessment is usually inadequately

1 Criado Perez 2019.

2 Busch 2019: 7.

3 *Ibidem* 9.

high compared to their actual abilities. She criticizes Google's well-intentioned initiative to hold workshops for women to "fix" them and encourage them to nominate themselves for promotion, as men do. "In other words, they held workshops to encourage women to be more like men. But why should we accept that the way men do things, the way men see themselves, is the correct way?" asks the author, and adds: "Recent research has emerged showing that while women tend to assess their intelligence accurately, men of average intelligence think they are more intelligent than two-thirds of people."⁴ Criado Perez also cites seemingly gender-neutral job adverts in which the criteria for applicants are formulated in a way that discourages women from applying, not because they feel they do not deserve the position, but because they simply do not share the worldview they are expected to conform to; they do not feel like being, for example, "aggressive and competitive." One digital design company, for instance, observed that "when they changed the wording of their ad for a senior design role to focus more on teamwork and user experience and less on bombastic single-minded egotism," the number of women's applications grew immediately. "The role was the same, but the framing was different—and the number of female applicants more than doubled," comments Criado Perez.⁵

Busch, without explicitly inscribing her own reflection into feminist discourse, actually puts Criado Perez's implicit postulates into practice and works to create social demand for what many women can, and are willing to, contribute on their own terms to make the world a better place. Her attitude is shared by the four poets discussed in this chapter, who, each in her own individual way, develop affirmative projects of invisible existence in the most positive sense of the term, as an alternative to the dominant image of a successful life.

2 At Home in the World: Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni

This section has an autobiographical background, which I described extensively in the introductory chapter. In China, events such as the 2016 Gansu poetry festival are not rare. Heather Inwood's book *Verses Going Viral: China's New Media Scenes* (2014) offers a more elaborate account of this form of artistic activity and explains the cultural and economic mechanisms behind it that allow a businessman to become a poet and a poet to become a superstar. One recent example of such poetic stardom is Chen Ang 陈昂 (b. 1992), who first became famous for a poem about the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 he submitted

⁴ Criado Perez 2019: 108–109.

⁵ *Ibidem*: 110.

for a competition. Today he is a TV celebrity and social activist. He was only twenty-five when, in 2017, Lin Xinrong 林新荣 published his biography *Poetry Prince Chen Ang* (诗歌王子陈昂). Maghiel van Crevel's long fieldwork essay, titled "Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene" (2017), among many other fascinating observations, also provides insights into poetry as a particularly robust and eventful branch of the "culture economy," which abounds in all sorts of social-literary (with the emphasis on social) initiatives: "the muchness and the speed of it are out of this world."⁶

Against such a background, Wang Xiaoni's model of poethood and her poetry of intimacy, modesty, understatement, and tactful whimsicality may not seem to be the most efficient strategy to draw the attention of wider audiences and gain broader recognition. But reality has shown the opposite. Her success on the national and international poetry scene, partly reflected in the number of prestigious prizes she has won (including the Lucien Stryk Award for a collection compiled and translated by Eleanor Goodman), achieved without any self-promotion, provocation, or even active participation in local poetic current affairs, allows one to conclude with moderate optimism that good poetry can speak for itself. I say moderate optimism because of course we will never know how much good poetry has failed to find readers for reasons that were anything but poetic, gender bias being one of them.

Poland, too, is known for the dynamism of its poetry scene, but, unlike in China, this is commercialized only to a very small extent. In the business world, poetry writing is almost taboo. And vice versa: business in poetry is taboo, too. Still, there is some kind of splendor and prestige that poets enjoy, especially compared to Western European countries; big festivals, poetry contests, or readings by well-known authors usually attract wide audiences in Poland, and public appearances of the Great Four often received broad media coverage. Wisława Szymborska dodged such public attention as far as she could, cherishing private, interpersonal communication instead. She is known for the handmade cards that she would make and send to her friends (many among the cultural elites) and for the quirky gifts that she would buy for them on her travels in which her famous taste for kitsch manifested itself.

Since 1996, when she was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature, dozens of anecdotes have circulated in Poland about her reaction. Her secretary, Michał Rusinek, recalls:

When, one year earlier, the Nobel Prize in Literature had been awarded to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, Szymborska had sighed with relief. It had

⁶ van Crevel 2017c: 2–3.

seemed very unlikely that in the near future another poet from Europe (as Barańczak adds, not just from Europe but from another Catholic country with a stormy history where potatoes constitute a staple food) would have received the prize [...]. Her friends had been making whimsical remarks that she was probably the only poet in the world who did not want to win the Nobel, being afraid of the pandemonium the prize causes in one's life. But the next year, in line with the principle that everybody gets what they want the least, the Swedish Academy decided to award Szymborska, "for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality."⁷

Marcin Świetlicki remembers the situation differently. One day, after some social event at *Catholic Weekly* (*Tygodnik Powszechny*), Szymborska invited several people for tea. Most of them quickly sought excuses to reject the invitation. Świetlicki wanted to go but was afraid that someone may "think something bad about us." Two weeks later, Szymborska won the Nobel. "This makes you think. She was treated like a nice literary auntie. And then, suddenly, a Nobel," comments Świetlicki.⁸ He mentions that he was unable to relish Szymborska's success because he was concerned about her health and that she would be overwhelmed.⁹ Comparing Rusinek's and Świetlicki's accounts, for example, with the portrait of Wang Xiaoni sketched by her husband, the avant-garde poet Xu Jingya 徐敬亚, in his essay "My Wife Poet Wang Xiaoni" (我的诗人妻子王小妮), cited more extensively later in this section, one may venture that she would react to such honors in a similar way.

It is unlikely that Wang has never read Szymborska. Nevertheless, the many convergences between their respective poems that we will observe in this chapter are arguably not an effect of inspiration or intended dialogue with the Polish poet, for both authors tend to draw their material directly from their surrounding reality unmediated by texts, at least not in a way that would allow one to trace consistent influences. Rather, this is an effect of their similar sensibility and, perhaps to some extent, a consequence of the more general mode of artistic subjectivity they both adopted early on, whether consciously or otherwise, as the most fitting to their personalities.

⁷ Rusinek 2016: 13–15, trans. J.K.

⁸ Świetlicki and Księżyk 2015: 147, trans. J.K.

⁹ *Ibidem*: 170.

2.1 *Invisible Androgyne*

For all the uniqueness of her idiom, Wisława Szymborska is, in many ways, very representative of Polish women poets, especially though not limited to those of the Columbus and New Wave Generations. Among authors born in the 1960s and 1970s, her model of womanhood and poethood is not uncommon either. It is characterized by a suspicion of male-dominated mainstream structures, not because they are created or shaped by men, but because the poet does not share the values on which they are built and/or the way in which they function. Instead of taking men as a crucial—be it positive or negative—point of reference, women authors who subscribe to this model construct their poetics on an alternative ethos and hierarchy of interests, needs, and goals, without hostility toward the world ruled by the men but also without expecting any particular support, if only a generous gesture of transferring part of the male-occupied territory into women's hands. Anna Nasiłowska connects this attitude to what she identifies as female androgyny, “a typical formula of modernist individualism,” which proved particularly appealing in Poland in the twentieth century; besides Szymborska, its impact is visible in the work of authors such as Julia Hartwig (1921–2017), and earlier Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna (1892–1983). Nasiłowska proposes:

It is, I feel, something more than an adventure of sex/gender [*przygoda płci*] in times of Young Poland [*Młoda Polska*], an epoch that was particularly inimical to women. This is the starting point from which we can observe the development of one of the most frequent models of the self, related to emancipatory efforts of women. The androgynous “I” defines herself vis-à-vis the world per se and does not consider the relationship with a man as the only, the most important, or the privileged model based on which one's self-narrative can be developed. Of course, in many cases women poets can be seen as simply submitting to the dominant pattern, yet it should be emphasized that androgyneity does not imply a lack of female self-identification but rather its coexistence with models that are culturally identified as “more male” and, at the same time, the awareness of the nonfinality of all definitions, of the liquidity that is “underneath.” At the beginning of the previous century such self-identification required independence and courage. Today, this option is no longer as distinct and legible as in the past. But it has its continuations, and it is these continuations that constitute the main voice of poetry created by women.¹⁰

10 Nasiłowska 2004: 119–120, trans. J.K.

Obviously, the above formula is not a specifically Polish formula. One couldn't not mention Virginia Woolf, the first advocate of female androgyny, and her famous book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which ends with what she calls a "peroration," encouraging women:

When I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.¹¹

Its "continuations," as Nasłowska has it, among famous figures in the contemporary humanities outside Poland can be identified, for instance, in the work of Hannah Arendt who was cited in chapter 1 as a proponent of *vita contemplativa*, a necessary counterbalance to *vita activa*. Woolf's words echo in Arendt's response to Günter Gaus in their conversation in 1964:

You ask about the effects of my work on others. If I may wax ironical, that is a masculine question. Men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand—in the same sense that I have understood—that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.¹²

Arendt's utterance brings to mind a famous experiment carried out by scholars from the University of Virginia and Harvard University in 2014 that suggests that women indeed seem to have greater predisposition to invisibility, taken in a positive sense, which preserves a healthy proportion between the active and the contemplative in life. The research showed that as much as 67% of men, and only 25% of women, were unable to sit in silence, alone with their thoughts, for 6–15 minutes, a skill that should be quite useful in writing poetry. To stimulate themselves, men, almost three times more often than women, took an irrational choice to press a button that gave them an unpleasant electric shock in the ankle, even though before the experiment they had declared that they would never agree to inflict this shock on themselves and had been

11 Woolf 2012: 128.

12 Arendt and Gaus 2000: 5. Many thanks to Frank Kraushaar for reminding me of Arendt in this context.

willing to pay money to avoid it. One of the participants used the button 190 times within just a quarter hour.¹³

Drawing far-reaching conclusions from a small experiment in laboratory conditions is unjustified. Indeed, establishing the possible reasons behind, and implications of, the observed differences between men and women in the experiment would require thorough discussion. Still, it should be safe to say that the research illustrates that women tend to be psychologically more independent of their surroundings, meaning, as the researchers suggest, that they do not need so many external sensations to stimulate and organize their mental reality.¹⁴ This makes them more capable of invisible existence in the sense ascribed to the word by Akiko Busch. Men, on the other hand, even if they declare their desire to disappear, often tend to romanticize and theatricalize invisibility, turning it thus into its opposite. This is what Wang Jiaxin, for one, does when he fantasizes that if he had been born in the US in the nineteenth century, he might have been Emily Dickinson—in the same interview, cited in chapter 2, in which he discusses the communion of souls or the necessity of taking a “breathturn” at the graves of the Great Masters of world poetry. Frankly, it is difficult to imagine Dickinson doing such things. Oftentimes, when a male poet puts on an invisibility cloak, a limb still sticks out and, after taking several heavy steps, he stumbles and falls, exposing his not-so-transparent intentions. Perhaps a little light physical training—such as several centuries of foot-binding or corset wearing—would help remedy his clumsiness.

But jibes aside, it can certainly be argued that what I call the psychological independence of women is in fact a mechanism developed in reaction to their longtime suppression and social dependence on men, and that gains in this case are not necessarily equal to pains. However, even if the above hypothesis of the inglorious social origins of this difference is true, this should not diminish the achievement of those women who, instead of mulling over their victimhood or militantly settling accounts with the patriarchal system, have transformed their seemingly underprivileged—in the male understanding of privilege—situation into a precious aesthetic, intellectual, and/or spiritual asset. Patiently observing external reality, carefully selecting what they find valuable there, and rejecting everything else without regret, because they never actually identified themselves with it, these women created their own unique universes. As the man-made world threatens to go out of joint today, gradually pushed out of its orbit by its own madness, these universes have been attracting ever-bigger cohorts of intellectual and spiritual refugees. Once they

13 See, e.g., Sample 2014.

14 Wilson et al. 2014: 75.

arrive, they come to realize that the place is not just a cozy bunker in which to wait out the apocalypse but rather something of a rabbit hole that leads to a whole new dimension, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, a favorite book of Krystyna Miłobędzka, to which we will return in section 3 of this chapter.

To add credibility to my statement, I shall invoke at least one utterance of a male reader. In 2015, White Pine Press published the first, and thus far the only, English-language anthology of women poets edited by Karen Kovacik, titled *Scattering the Dark*. For many foreign readers, this was the first opportunity to familiarize themselves with female-authored poetry in Poland. In Miłosz's famous anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry* from 1965, among the twenty-five featured authors there were only three women: Wisława Szymborska, Anna Swir (Świrszczyńska) (1909–1984), and Urszula Koziół (b. 1931). Exactly the same proportion is found in the 2003 anthology *Altered State: The New Polish Poetry* edited by Rod Mengham, Tadeusz Pióro, and Piotr Szymor, which consists mostly of the works of the Brulion Generation; the three women selected by the editors are Julia Fiedorczuk (b. 1975), Marzanna Kielar (b. 1963), and Marta Podgórnik (b. 1979). One of the blurbs on the back cover of *Scattering the Dark* was written by Robert Hass, a respected poet, friend, and translator of Czesław Miłosz, and an admirer of Zbigniew Herbert's work. Hass does not hide his delight and astonishment:

Wow! What a book! American readers are well aware of the powerful tradition of Polish poetry that produced Miłosz and Herbert and Różewicz and Szymborska. Here is something else—the tradition of women's writing that flows out of the work of Szymborska and Anna Swir and Julia Hartwig and Ewa Lipska. This book also gives us a chance to see something else—the way this mighty tradition turns in the hands of a younger generation from the traumatic history of their country to a poetics of everyday life, of play, experiment, the poetics of a postmodern condition. An absolutely rich and appealing book.¹⁵

There are conceivably many social factors that contributed to the inception of the hybrid model identified by Woolf as female androgyny among Polish women poets in the first decades of the twentieth century, including things as different as, on the one hand, the spectacular success of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, a Nobel laureate in two “male” disciplines: physics in 1903 and chemistry in 1911 (Szymborska cites Skłodowska-Curie in her own Nobel lecture), and, on the other hand, a strong matriarchal trait in the social model adopted

15 Kovacik 2015, back cover.

by indigenous Slavic communities, which in the Middle Ages resulted in the development of the Mariocentric form of Christianity, in contradistinction to the Christocentric model in Western Europe. However one assesses its overall impact on Polish history, the widely spread worship of the woman who conceived a child without a man as the Queen of Poland (officially crowned so by King John Casimir in the seventeenth century) must have left an imprint on the (self-)perception of women's role and place in society, especially in the official discourse and among the intelligentsia, as common social practice certainly left much to be desired. Although in the current social-political circumstances this might sound difficult to believe, for many centuries Poland, which still often proudly calls itself "a country without stakes" (*państwo bez stosów*), was actually among the most inclusive European countries, with women enjoying a high degree of status and autonomy and the rights of minorities (national, religious, sexual) broadly protected by law. This is also reflected in Polish politics of the early twentieth century. Just seventeen days after regaining independence, on November 28, 1918, a document was signed securing women's equal voting rights.

At any rate, it is arguably largely because of the prevalence of the implicit androgynous model and its various extensions that in Polish poetry discourse there was no specific revolutionary moment that could be identified as the moment of emancipation for female authors. In general, the explicit interest in feminist activism was very limited in poetry until the early twenty-first century, when the generation born in the 1970s entered the poetry scene. In postwar verse, the female undercurrent and the mainstream gradually merged without an active emancipatory effort on the part of women, based on the unquestionable merits of their writing.

The situation in China was quite different. It is not surprising that in the country where women's oppression for centuries took radical—and officially legitimized—forms, the answer given by women, when they found themselves in the position to speak and be heard, was radical as well. The feminist movement was of course present in the cultural life of the first half of the twentieth century, but it lost its momentum after the proclamation of the PRC, its postulates selectively incorporated into Mao's social politics, which granted women theoretically equal rights but at the cost of masculinization and a continued neglect of their needs. The mid-1980s witnessed an eruption of "female consciousness" among the authors of the Third Generation, which triggered a long process of discourse formation described by Jeanne Hong Zhang in her pathbreaking monograph *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China* (2004). It was initiated by Zhai Yongming's 1984 poem series "Woman" (女人) and its accompanying essay "Night Consciousness"

(黑夜的意识). Zhai was joined by authors such as Tang Yaping 唐亚平 (b. 1962), Lu Yimin 陆忆敏 (b. 1962), and Yi Lei 伊蕾 (1951–2018), all of whom were fearless and uncompromising in breaking taboos about female physical and mental experiences and sexual desires. These authors were resolute in their postulates of the feminine awakening. Unlike in Poland, where the androgynous model was actualized but rarely actually thematized and problematized, in China this and many other concepts were explicitly raised and constituted an ideological matrix of emancipation strategies. In the case of the reception of Woolf's concept of female androgyny, this led to what might be perceived as a somewhat paradoxical situation in which the writer who called for women's breaking out of the system of constant, be it positive or negative, references to the male-made world, provided her Chinese followers with arguments targeted quite unanimously against male domination, instead of offering encouragement to dismantle the structure of omnipresent references to maleness, although—as we will see in the section on Zhai's work—this has obviously been evolving in the decades since the mid-1980s.

From this perspective, Wang Xiaoni's poetry, which grows out of the Obscure poetry (朦胧诗) movement, often referred to as the second wave of Chinese modernism, is quite unique, and arguably might be much more effectively read through the model of female androgyny than the works of the above-mentioned emancipationists as one that directly embodies and implicitly reenacts its postulates. Wang, one of two female authors, along with Shu Ting 舒婷, who excelled in the hugely popular Obscure school in the early 1980s, never accepted the category of "woman poet" (女诗人) as defining her artistic identity,¹⁶ because she did not consider gender or the man/woman divide the primary criterion upon which poetry should be written, read, or classified. Instead, she in various ways emphasizes the importance of having a room of her own to perform her literary experiments unnoticed and undisturbed by anybody.

This is of course only a very rough reconstruction of the history of women-authored poetry, which does no justice to its complexity and to the complexity of the ambiguous connections between womanhood, poethood, and invisibility. But it gives an idea of the main differences between Poland and China in this regard and partly explains why Wang Xiaoni seems to be somewhat closer to the Polish "literary auntie" Szymborska than to her own coevals from the Chinese poetry scene of the 1980s and 1990s.

16 Xu Jingya 2008.

2.2 *Experiments with Gravity and Other Natural Laws*

One feature that is common to both Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni is the nearly complete separation of the art and the artist. Moreover, the detachment of their poetic work from their respective biographies goes hand in hand with the almost anevolutionary development of their oeuvres, which are characterized by a rarely seen consistency in style and themes throughout the poets' lives. After World War II Szymborska was briefly fascinated by communism. In the first years after her recovery from the official socialist-realist aesthetics, her poems were perhaps a little more "embellished" compared to those written since roughly the mid-1960s, but one cannot speak of a significant change of diction or tone in her oeuvre. Moreover, except for some extremely subtle poems about love and the deaths of those whom she loved, one can hardly distinguish any traces of direct interaction between her personal life and poetic project at large. It would require an interpretational equilibristic to argue that one poem or another from her oeuvre reflects the mental state of the author at the time of writing. When she had a difficult time in her life—after the Nobel Prize, that is—she just put down the pen.

A similar thing could be said about Wang Xiaoni. An important event in her life that certainly shaped her perspective was her forced migration from the north of China to the south, following her husband Xu Jingya in the mid-1980s after Xu had become a target of the campaign against "spiritual pollution" and lost his job as an editor of the local journal *Can Hua* 参花.¹⁷ She wrote about that experience in her book of essays *Exiled to Shenzhen* (放逐深圳, 1995). But even in her Obscure-style poetry of the early 1980s and her recent work from the 2010s one can identify the same driving force, the same sensibility, graceful dignity, and attention to detail. In the preface to her 1997 collection *My Paper Wraps My Fire* (我的纸包着我的火), she explained:

For the past ten years now, I have rarely looked at magazines or newspapers. [...] These days, my standard for deciding what is good writing is getting more and more simple. [...] Poetry is by no means the product of profundity or of ideas. The poets of today in particular have to resist the incursions of reason, of trends and fads as if trying to avoid a virus. However, much of what I read is nothing other than viruses that "play" with their readers. An individual is only granted a certain amount of wisdom. Poets should take in everything with their latent individual consciousness. Poets must release themselves with care. I have always argued

17 Wu Jinhua 2021: 146.

for poetry's naturalness and accessibility: to contain a large number of things within the most ordinary language is the basic skill of the poet.¹⁸

Szyborska disliked commenting on her verse, even in private. Yet, in her Nobel lecture, in one of her very few utterances on poetry, for which she claims to have “sacrificed one poem and one feuilleton,”¹⁹ she made several important statements that help us understand the secret of her creativity. They also concur with the above utterance by Wang. Having expressed her mistrust of all those who always “know” everything from the start and are afraid to broaden their horizons not to encounter something that might undermine their certainty—among them “[a]ll sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues”—Szyborska goes on to explain the source of her poetics:

This is why I value that little phrase “I don’t know” so highly. It’s small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself “I don’t know,” the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Skłodowska-Curie never said to herself “I don’t know”, she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying “I don’t know,” and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

Poets, if they’re genuine, must also keep repeating “I don’t know.” Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that’s absolutely inadequate to boot. So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their “oeuvre.”

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH and STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK²⁰

18 Quoted in *Poetry International* 2004, translator unknown.

19 Rusinek 2016: 35, trans. J.K.

20 Szyborska 1996.

Some of Szymborska's most unyielding critics—those who always “know”—did not shrink from making scathing remarks that, by and large, boil down to the argument that Szymborska compromised both herself and Polish poetry in its entirety. How can a Nobel laureate say that s/he does not know and, moreover, question the authority of another (double) Nobel laureate, Maria Skłodowska-Curie? If not Nobel laureates, then *who* should know? Rusinek recalls one such reaction:

In the conservative Krakow-based *Time* journal, one feuilletonist expressed his astonishment that “such an outstanding poet delivered such a foolish speech,” for it is clear that “the fact that someone doesn't know something is nothing to be proud of.” A true authority, and a true nonconformist, should—polemicizing with Szymborska—acknowledge publicly only that they know. Interestingly, the same feuilletonist is an expert on Socrates.²¹

It would be interesting to juxtapose Szymborska's Nobel speech with Miłosz's lecture from 1980, some three times longer, in which Miłosz carefully traces his poetic lineage back to ancient poetry and reconstructs the history of European literatures that fed into his oeuvre and their various metaphysical and theological implications. To Szymborska, the history of poetry reinvents itself with every single thing the poet encounters. Instead of comparing the lectures, however, let's turn to a poem that best embodies the postulates expressed in her speech, and that Miłosz famously interpreted in the spirit of his own Nobel lecture. Szymborska's reflection on Newton's laws of gravity will subsequently be complemented with Wang Xiaoni's reflection on the strange disruptions of these laws caused by humans and her attempts at retrieving basic physics through poetry.

A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth

She's been in this world for over a year,
and in this world not everything's been examined
and taken in hand.

The subject of today's investigation
is things that don't move by themselves.

21 Rusinek 2016: 43, trans. J.K.

They need to be helped along,
shoved, shifted,
taken from their place and relocated.

They don't all want to go, e.g., the bookshelf,
the cupboard, the unyielding walls, the table.

But the tablecloth on the stubborn table
—when well-seized by its hems—
manifests a willingness to travel.

And the glasses, plates,
creamer, spoons, bowl,
are fairly shaking with desire.

It's fascinating,
what form of motion will they take,
once they're trembling on the brink:
will they roam across the ceiling?
fly around the lamp?
hop onto the windowsill and from there to a tree?
Mr. Newton still has no say in this.
Let him look down from the heavens and wave his hands.

This experiment must be completed.
And it will.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH and STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK)²²

Mała dziewczynka ściąga obrus

Od ponad roku jest się na tym świecie,
a na tym świecie nie wszystko zbadane
i wzięte pod kontrolę.

Teraz w próbach są rzeczy,
które same nie mogą się ruszać.

22 Szymborska 2016: 332.

Trzeba im w tym pomagać,
przesuwać, popychać,
brać z miejsca i przenosić.

Nie każde tego chcą, na przykład szafa,
kredens, nieustępliwe ściany, stół.

Ale już obrus na upartym stole
—jeżeli dobrze chwycony za brzegi—
objawia chęć do jazdy.

A na obrusie szklanki, talerzyki,
dzbanuszek z mlekiem, łyżeczki, miseczka
aż trzęsą się z ochoty.

Bardzo ciekawe, jaki ruch wybiorą,
kiedy się już zachwieją na krawędzi:
wędrówkę po suficie?
lot dokoła lampy?
skok na parapet okna, a stamtąd na drzewo?
Pan Newton nie ma jeszcze nic do tego.
Niech sobie patrzy z nieba i wymachuje rękami.

Ta próba dokonana być musi.
I będzie.²³

The poem was written in 2001 inspired by a real-life scene. Its heroine is Michał Rusinek's infant daughter, Natalia. One day, when Szymborska called her secretary, he was alone at home with Natalia. When he went to another room to answer the call, leaving the girl sitting in a baby chair at the table, she performed the "experiment" described in the poem. Informed of what had happened, Szymborska exclaimed: "this is a perfect topic for a poem!" and put down the handset. A couple of weeks later, she handed a manuscript to Rusinek and asked him to type it up for her, since she never learned how to use a computer.²⁴

Miłosz appreciated the poem and, at a poetry house party at which Szymborska was also present, he praised her work, proposing a philosophical

23 Quoted in Rusinek 2016: 150–151.

24 Ibidem: 149–151.

interpretation of the described scene. The author protested, explaining that it was just a reminiscence of an authentic situation and asked Rusinek to testify. But Miłosz was not convinced and elaborated on his understanding of the text in an essay published in June 2003 in *Literary Decade* (*Dekada Literacka*) under the title “Wisława Szymborska and the Grand Inquisitor” (*Wisława Szymborska i Wielki Inkwizytor*). Later, he also discussed it at seminars organized in Krakow by the University of Houston.²⁵

Miłosz read Szymborska’s text through the lens of the famous poem included in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Ivan envisions the Grand Inquisitor who believes Jesus was wrong to reject the three temptations in the desert: to turn stones into bread, to jump off the mountain for the angels to carry him, and to accept rule over the earth from Satan’s hands. Ivan holds that the three temptations were Satan’s concrete proposition of fixing the laws of physics and the order of human society; the triple rejection hampered the development of an ideal society which Jesus could then establish. When Jesus comes to earth again, the Inquisitor puts God’s Son in prison and continues his own project for a perfect world. Jesus gives him a symbolic kiss, as he did to Judas after his betrayal. Miłosz interprets this gesture as a kiss of pity and mercy: acknowledging the good will of revolutionists while knowing the futility of their efforts. Miłosz’s thought takes twists and turns through Søren Kierkegaard’s and Lev Shestov’s antistoic philosophies, to finally arrive at his favorite philosopher Simone Weil and her ultimately deterministic conception of *le pesanteur* (the force of gravity), which can only be overcome by God’s grace. And thus—he concludes—“we can see that under Wisława Szymborska’s innocent poem an abyss stretches, in which one can immerse endlessly, some dark labyrinth, which, whether we want it or not, all of us explore in our lifetime.”²⁶

It is difficult to refute Miłosz’s argument, for the poem indeed is open to all the contexts he mobilizes. But one should also note that Miłosz does not in fact interpret the text as such but rather interprets the (seemingly) obvious continuation of the described scene. Szymborska’s poem is but a snapshot capturing the moment of the child’s pure curiosity and stretching it out across the twenty-six lines of the poem. She writes from the point of view of a one-year-old in whose eyes everything may happen and all perspectives are open, and who really does not know the result of her action. In the final stanza, the poet leaves the child with her hand holding an edge of the tablecloth and

25 Ibidem: 152–154.

26 Miłosz 2003, trans. J.K.

Newton with his hand suspended in the air in a gesture of pointless warning. The experiment has not yet been completed. “It will,” but its effect is beyond the frame of the poem.

Szyborska is not interested in Newton and his commonsense laws. She is fascinated by potentiality—with multiple versions of history, all possible trajectories of development, countless what-ifs that lead to alternative realities. This is a motif that often returns in her oeuvre, and is perhaps most evident in “Astonishment” (Zdumienie), where she begins her litany of questions with:

Why, after all, this one and not the rest?
 Why this specific self, not in a nest,
 but a house? Sewn up not in scales, but skin?
 Not topped off by a leaf, but by a face?
 Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days,
 and why on earth, pinned down by this star’s pin?
 In spite of years of my not being here?

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH²⁷

Czemu w zanadto jednej osobie?
 Tej a nie innej? I co tu robię?
 W dzień co jest wtorkiem? W domu nie gnieździe?
 W skórze nie łusce? Z twarzą nie liściem?
 Dlaczego tylko raz osobiście?
 Właśnie na ziemi? Przy małej gwieździe?
 Po tylu erach nieobecności?²⁸

It is also present in “Among Multitudes” (W zatrzęsieniu), where the I-speaker states:

I am who I am.
 A coincidence no less unthinkable
 than any other.

I could have had different
 ancestors, after all. I could have fluttered
 from another nest

²⁷ Szyborska 2016: 322.

²⁸ Szyborska 2007: 181.

or crawled bescaled
from under another tree

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH²⁹

Jestem kim jestem.
Niepojęty przypadek
jak każdy przypadek.

Inni przodkowie
mogli być przecież moimi,
a już z innego gniazda
wyfrunęłabym,
już spod innego pnia
wypęzła w łusce.³⁰

This poem ends with an optimistic conclusion that among all those existent possibilities, fate has been kind to her; after all, she

might have been myself minus amazement
that is,
someone completely different

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH³¹

Mogłam być sobą—ale bez zdziwienia,
a to by oznaczało,
że kimś całkiem innym.³²

This amazement is arguably a, if not *the*, key to her work.

Szyborska's imagination is not that of classical physics focused on continuity and large-scale processes in the world that lend themselves to a description within classical, Newtonian laws but rather that of quantum physics, which explores the strange nature of space, time, and matter as both continuous wavelike processes and discreet microparticles in which endless possibilities are encoded. What never ceases to puzzle her is why it is such and such an option that becomes actualized and not another one that is equally logical.

29 Szyborska 2016: 177.

30 Szyborska 2007: 326–327.

31 Szyborska 2016: 177.

32 Szyborska 2007: 326–327.

Although she cannot change the course of things, she can at least preserve the alternative worlds in her writing. She speaks of it in one of her “school-textbook” poems “The Joy of Writing” (*Radość pisania*), where a “written doe” runs through a “written forest,” and its fate is entirely in the “mortal hand” of that who writes:

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply
of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,
prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,
surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns.

They forget that what's here isn't life.
Other laws, black on white, obtain.
The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,
and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,
full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.
Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so.
Without my blessing, not a leaf will fall,
not a blade of grass will bend beneath that little hoof's full stop.

Is there then a world
where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding?

The joy of writing.
The power of preserving.
Revenge of a mortal hand.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH³³

Jest w kropli atramentu spory zapas
myśliwych z przymrużonym okiem,
gotowych zbiec po stromym piórze w dół,
otoczyć sarnę, złożyć się do strzału.

Zapominają, że tu nie jest życie.
Inne, czarno na białym, panują tu prawa.
Okamgnienie trwać będzie tak długo, jak zechcę,

33 Szyborska 2016: 109–110.

pozwole się podzielić na małe wieczności
 pełne wstrzymanych w locie kul.
 Na zawsze, jeśli każe, nic się tu nie stanie.
 Bez mojej woli nawet liść nie spadnie
 ani źdźbło się nie ugnie pod kropką kopytka.

Jest więc taki świat,
 nad którym los sprawuję niezależny?
 Czas, który wiąże łańcuchami znaków?
 Istnienie na mój rozkaz nieustanne?

Radość pisania.
 Możliwość utrwalania.
 Zemsta ręki śmiertelnej.³⁴

Wang Xiaoni's own play with Newton (or, perhaps, her playing Newton) begins in 1995 when she restores the classical notion of gravity in the poem "Suspended in Midair" (悬空而挂), which may be interpreted as Wang's rejection of elevated poetics, and her declared interest in the, literally, down-to-earth aesthetics of everyday life:

Suspended in Midair

What a sin had they committed
 that they were so desperately hanged?
 Hanging on high
 these objects flutter in the wind.

Eyeless waiting.
 Umbrella. Crab apple.
 Flowerpot. Maize.

I fear they will fall all of a sudden.

I want to liberate you from your hanging.
 Here
 hanging amounts to violating my laws.
 I want everything to come back on the ground

34 Szyborska 2007: 113–114.

I will cushion the land meaning all that is not ocean
with soft lamb wool.

I will collect fragrance finer than flower pollen.

I will make animals like hot springs
wear soles stuck to their paws to soften their steps.

I see the Sun and the Moon
throwing calm light on earth's surface
and then black and white enter the world,
and things take shapes and colors.

The entire earth
flourishes because of me.

Like children of different height
sitting on the ground.

My bright red jewelry was still bumping.
But now it too obediently returned to the ground.
And with my free hand
I'm touching the peak of all things.

1995

《悬空而挂》

犯什么重罪
它们被绝望地悬挂？
高悬
那些半空中随风飘荡的物体。

没有眼睛的等待。
雨伞。海棠。
花盆。老玉米。

我害怕突然的坠落。

我要解放你们于高悬。
在我这儿
悬挂就是违反了法律。
我要让万物落地
我在海洋以外的全部陆地

铺晒羔羊的软毛。
 接住比花粉更细微的香气。
 让野兽，像温泉
 贴着鞋底缓走。
 我看见日月
 把安详的光扑散在地面
 世界才有了黑白
 有了形色。

整个大地
 因为我而满盈。
 像高矮不同的孩子们
 席地而坐。

我红亮的珠宝还在蹦跳。
 它现在落地为安。
 我正用疏松的手
 摸过万物细密之顶。

1995³⁵

It might be said that Wang Xiaoni performs exactly what Mou Sen 牟森 did with Yu Jian's 于坚 "File o" (o 档案) on stage: she knocks nouns off from on high to release their kinetic energy and make them work in the world, moving her audiences. But, unlike Mou and Yu, who throw apples in the industrial fan, Wang does not want to smash or hurt them, nor does she want to create havoc. She paves the floor with wool to amortize falling nouns. This is one example of how her irony works—subtly ridiculing those who place umbrellas and crab apples in midair while at the same time alleviating the strangeness of the world they have arranged with her gentle imagery. By cushioning the fall, she also protects her privacy. What if the neighbors downstairs hear the sound? Perhaps they will come to see what happened? And this is the least desirable thing in Wang's plan. She brings the things down to earth, back to grounded reality, where she can observe them and contemplate their reach in solitude, and not share with those who would fail to comprehend. Perhaps, similarly to Szyborska, she believes that there are experiences that can only

35 Wang Xiaoni 1995, trans. J K.

be communicated through poetry. Sharing them in other ways amounts to squandering their rich potential.

To safely continue her poetic experiments with gravity at home, the poet first has to deal with the no-less-problematic laws of optics—in particular the transparency of (window) glass. In a poem written one year later, in 1996, “A Rag’s Betrayal” (一块布的背叛), the I-speaker complains that after cleaning the windows, she feels so helpless, so shamelessly and uncomfortably visible.

A Rag’s Betrayal

I didn’t imagine
after wiping the glass clean
the whole world would immediately infiltrate in.
The last shelter disappeared with the water
even the leaves thickened their eyebrows
to spy in.

I really didn’t imagine
with only two hours of work
and a rag, a huge mistake could be made.

Every thing is proficient at betrayal.
This most ancient craftsmanship
was easily done by a dirty soft rag.
Now I’m stranded in the midst of its violence.

Other people’s greatest freedom
is the freedom to see.
In this complex and beautiful spring
cubism walks across the canvas.
Everyone has gained a superhuman ability to traverse barriers
my life is penetrated in layers.

Hiding in the depths of the house
but exposed to people beyond these four walls
I am just an impoverished bared body.
A thatched peachwood chair
I hide in its wooden strips
my thoughts restless.

The earth ought to be abruptly reduced to dust
I should return
to the pit of that peach tree seed.

Only humans want secrecy
now I'd like to pass myself off
as anything but human.

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

《一块布的背叛》

我没有想到
把玻璃擦净以后
全世界立刻渗透进来。
最后的遮挡跟着水走了
连树叶也为今后的窥视
纹浓了眉线

我完全没有想到
只是两个小时和一块布
劳动，忽然也能犯下大错

什么东西都精通背叛。
这最古老的手艺
轻易地通过了一块柔软的脏布。
现在我被困在它的暴露之中

别人最大的自由
是看的自由
在这个复杂又明媚的春天
立体主义者走下画布。
每一个人都获得了剖开障碍的神力
我的日子正被一层层看穿

躲在家的最深处
却袒露在四壁以外的人
我只是裸露无遗的物体。
一张横竖交错的桃木椅子
我藏在木条之内
心思走动

世上应该突然大降尘土
我宁愿退回到
那桃木的种子之核

只有人才要隐秘
除了人现在我什么都想冒充。³⁶

Wang apparently must have found a way to ensure invisibility by some cunning trick known only to herself. In a poem dated June 1996 and titled “Becoming a Poet Anew” (重新做一个诗人), known also as “Work” (工作), she again takes up her home-based experiments with natural laws and delivers an image of a place that appears enclosed by one-way mirrors through which the I-speaker can observe the external world but is not seen by others. Below, I quote the poem in my translation—although it was beautifully rendered by Goodman (as “Starting Anew as a Poet”)—in order to preserve the coherence between my discussion of this text in the present book and the argument I made in my doctoral dissertation. There, I illustrated the mechanisms of what I termed “quantum literature,” using this work as an example and proposing that Wang’s flat would be a perfect place to keep Schrödinger’s cat. This, incidentally, would make her home resemble Szymborska’s in “A Little Girl” and from “Cat in an Empty Apartment” (Kot w pustym mieszkaniu), to which I will return shortly. Yet Wang, instead of a dead-and-alive quantum cat, keeps quantum butterflies; her *chenmo de hudie* 沉默的蝴蝶 may be rendered either as lively “quiet butterflies” or as a dead body of the metaphor “butterflies of silence.”

Becoming a Poet Anew

At the shortest end of the century
the Earth bobs
humans bustle about like monkeys between trees.

While my two hands
dangle idly in China’s air.
The table and the wind
are both sheets of pure paper.
I make my sense
happen only at home.

36 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 20–23.

When I rinse the rice
 whitish water drips onto my page like milk.
 The gourds, at the sight of new-grown fingers
 cry out in fear.
 Outside the sun shines with a stab wound
 snow fills the sky.

Every day from dawn to night
 my door is shut.
 I hang the sun at the angle that I need it
 people say in this city
 lives someone who doesn't work.

Walls tightly closed
 sandwiched between two small glass shards the world self-ignites.
 Quiet butterflies flutter everywhere
 Creation unknowingly leaks out.
 I predict the tiniest rustle of grass leaves in the wind
 without eyes.
 Without hands.
 Without ears.

Every day writing but a few words
 it's like when a knife
 cuts a tangerine's skin to release a fountain of finely woven juice.
 Let the layers of blue light
 penetrate a world that's never been described.
 No one sees my
 silklike finely woven light.

In this city I
 silently work as a poet.³⁷

《重新做一个诗人》

在一个世纪最短的末尾
 大地弹跳着
 人类忙得像树间的猴子。
 而我的两只手

37 Krenz 2018: 99-100.

闲置在中国的空中。
桌面和风
都是质地纯白的好纸。
我让我的意义
只发生在我的家里。

淘洗白米的时候
米浆像奶滴在我的纸上。
瓜类为新生出手指
而惊叫。
窗外，阳光带着刀伤
天堂走满冷雪。

每天从早到晚
紧闭家门。
把太阳悬在我需要的角度
有人说，这城里
住了一个不工作的人。

关紧四壁
世界在两小片玻璃之间自燃。
沉默的蝴蝶四处翻飞
万物在不知不觉中泄露。
我预知四周最微小的风吹草动
不用眼睛。
不用手。
不用耳朵。

每天只写几个字
像刀
划开橘子细密喷涌的汁水。
让一层层蓝光
进入从未描述的世界。

没人看见我
一缕缕细密如丝的光。
我在这城里
无声地做着诗人。³⁸

One can point out clear convergences between this poem and Szymborska's "Joy of Writing," both being poetic proclamations of a new world order that obeys its own laws defined by the poet. In both, the poet's "mortal hand" acts unrestrainedly, aware of its power over the created reality, its gestures bordering on brutality. Szymborska projects a hunt threatening the written doe only to reveal it as a pretext to generously save the animal by stopping the bullets she herself produced in mid-flight; Wang Xiaoni stabs a tangerine with a knife for the purposes of an effective simile.

This is quite an unexpected turn if one considers the two poets' sensitivity to the pain of every living thing. Consider, for instance, Wang's elegiac "The Watermelon's Sorrow" (西瓜的悲哀), in which she tries to guess how a watermelon she bought feels when traveling with her by bus "without rhyme and reason" (无缘无故), "like a blindfolded prisoner [...] with no bones but too much blood / who grew up being thumped countless times" (像蒙了眼的囚徒 [...] 不长骨头却有太多血的家伙 / 被无数的手拍到砰砰成熟的家伙).³⁹ Or take her poem cycle "Ten Water Lilies" (十枝水莲), in which she accuses herself of taking away the freedom of the lilies by placing them in a flower vase:

It is me who put them in this way
 their ten faces turned to the walls
 I haven't expected that I too can become an oppressor. [...]
 I want to liberate them
 I want to make them satisfied
 let these peach-blossom faces look further out

是我放下它们
 十张脸全面对墙壁
 我没想到我也能制造困境。 [...]
 我要做一个解放者
 我要满足它们
 让青桃乍开的脸全去眺望⁴⁰

Or think of Szymborska's "Under One Small Star" (Pod jedną gwiazdką), where she produces a long list of apologies to everybody and everything for all she has and has not done, including animals and plants:

39 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 36–37, translated by Eleanor Goodman.

40 Wang Xiaoni 2017: 175, trans. J K.

Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.
 And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,
 your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,
 forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.
 My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH⁴¹

Darujcie mi, pustynie, że z łyżką wody nie biegnę.
 I ty, jastrzębiu, od lat ten sam, w tej samej klatce,
 zapatrzony bez ruchu zawsze w ten sam punkt,
 odpuść mi, nawet gdybyś był ptakiem wypchanym.
 Przepraszam ścięte drzewo za cztery nogi stołowe.⁴²

Why, then, in the two metapoetic texts in question are the authors so ruthless in their treatment of the creatures they called into existence? To answer these questions, we need to take a detour through a more metaphysical part of their respective oeuvres.

2.3 *Metaphysics and Miracles*

Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni rarely allow their emotions and mental states to permeate the tissue of their poems. They tend to desubjectivize their texts or sometimes indeed go even further and try to resubjectify them; that is, invert the relationship between the writing persona and the object written about so that the latter, in a sense, starts to observe and describe the former.

Szymborska often speaks of herself using passive verb forms, as one who is seen, or thought about, or imagined by someone (or something) else. In “The Old Turtle’s Dream” (Sen starego żółwia), she wonders how the fragile human world is remembered, and dreamed of, by the near-immortal reptile. The same mechanism is applied in “Cat in an Empty Apartment” (Kot w pustym mieszkaniu), probably the most personal and intimate poem in Szymborska’s oeuvre, where death is presented from the perspective of a cat who has survived its owner, the poet’s longtime partner Kornel Filipowicz.

Die—you can't do that to a cat.
 Since what can a cat do
 in an empty apartment?
 [...]

⁴¹ Szymborska 2016: 192.

⁴² Szymborska 2007: 195.

Something doesn't happen
 as it should.
 Someone was always, always here,
 then suddenly disappeared
 and stubbornly stays disappeared

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH⁴³

Umrzeć—tego się nie robi kotu.
 Bo co ma począć kot
 w pustym mieszkaniu
 [...]

 Coś się tu nie odbywa
 jak powinno.
 Ktoś tutaj był i był,
 a potem nagle zniknął
 i uporczywie go nie ma.⁴⁴

In “Sky” (Niebo), in turn, the poet describes herself as “a trap within a trap, / an inhabited inhabitant, / an embrace embraced, / a question answering a question” (Jestem pułapką w pułapce, / zamieszkiwanym mieszkańcem, / obejmowanym objęciem, / pytaniem w odpowiedzi na pytanie), assuring that the boundaries between subjects and objects are fluid and illusionary: “it’s not the proper way to contemplate this wholeness”⁴⁵ (to nie jest właściwy sposób myślenia o tej całości).⁴⁶

Wang Xiaoni, too, seems to be absorbed by the question of what secures her existence from the outside, whether and how she exists when she is not seen. In “Nights of Lightning” (闪电之夜), she sighs:

These nights of lightning fascinate.

Strange images follow the thunder
 follow the light
 and likely follow a few ghosts.

43 Szyborska 2016: 296, translated by Clare Cavanagh.

44 Szyborska 2007: 300–301.

45 Szyborska 2016: 282, translated by Clare Cavanagh.

46 Szyborska 2007: 286–287.

Perhaps I have or haven't disappeared for a while,
 then after a while appeared again.
 The rapidly suturing hand hides in the sparkle of the murderer

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

闪电之夜让人着迷。
 有些异象跟着雷来
 跟着光来
 很可能还跟着几只鬼。

我或有或无
 一会儿消失，一会儿又出现。
 谋杀的闪电里藏着飞快缝合的手。⁴⁷

The poem, like Szymborska's "Sky," ends with a trait of mixed feelings of "rapture and despair"—simultaneous amazement and fear of what is beyond our bodies, in the space to which we have no direct access:

I know, I'm here for now.
 But I don't know anything
 about what's outside of myself

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

我知道，这会儿我还在。
 可是我完全不知道
 在我以外的全部。⁴⁸

In the long poem "Fear" (害怕), she repeats similar thoughts pondering life after death:

One must finally bring up death, because after death there is no knowledge
 the worst is before death, there is no discussion or cracks, people are
 deceived

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

47 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 74-75.

48 Ibidem.

最后得说到死，因为死掉以后什么都不再知道
最可怕的是死之前，没有商量没有缝隙，人是完全被蒙蔽的⁴⁹

Earlier in the same work, she offers a description of a moment of extreme fear leading to what psychologists would call derealization and depersonalization, which from a psychological perspective is in fact a defense mechanism of the brain against longtime pressure:

Those holding wine bottles and scheming
those shaking with laughter, those with mouths open to overcast sky
get an eyeful going in and out
they don't know if their shoes have soles,
if their feet and legs are still connected

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

端起酒瓶的，带着阴谋的人
笑得前仰后合，嘴巴正对着阴天的人
满眼的走进来又走出去
不知道鞋是否有底，脚是否还连接腿杆⁵⁰

Normally, these things are automatic and obvious, but once their obviousness is undermined by an overinquiring mind, the world suddenly appears to be on the ropes, like a reticular construction that may disassemble at any moment, as in “Early Morning” (清晨). There, the poet wonders:

How much wisdom does it take
for them [humans waking up in the morning] to take their keys
from yesterday's pants.
What force of connection is needed
when they set out on their journey
so that not a single intersection
makes them lose their way.
[...]
Disaster and luck
both hang from the thinnest thread.
The sun, like a gallbladder,
rises.

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

49 Ibidem: 104–105.

50 Ibidem: 98–99.

需要多么大的智慧
 他们在昨天的裤子里
 取出与他有关的一串钥匙
 需要什么样的连贯力
 他们上路出门
 每一个交叉路口
 都不能使他们迷失。
 [...]
 灾害和幸运
 都悬在那最细的线上。
 太阳，像胆囊
 升起来了。⁵¹

In Szymborska's "The Joy of Writing," the hunters easily forget "that what's here [on paper] isn't life." In Wang's "Becoming a Poet Anew," the "creation unknowingly leaks out." There is no impervious barrier dividing the interior and exterior of a poem. The text is also not a passive mirror in which the author sees herself. It is an active, independent entity which mimics, reenacts, or in its own specific way "remembers" (and sometimes may "forget," as in "The Joy") rather than directly reflects the one who wrote it, preserving the touch of their "mortal hand," the trace of their pen leaving a chain of signs on the paper surface of the textual cosmos.

When the poet Halina Poświatowska (1935–1967) passed away, Szymborska dedicated her beautiful poem "Autotomy" (Autotomia) to her memory.

Autotomy

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
 It abandons one self to a hungry world
 and with the other self it flees.

It violently divides into doom and salvation,
 retribution and reward, what has been and what will be.

An abyss appears in the middle of its body
 between what instantly become two foreign shores.

Life on one shore, death on the other.
 Here hope and there despair.

⁵¹ Ibidem: 14–17.

If there are scales, the pans don't
move. If there is justice, this is it.

To die just as required, without excess.
To grow back just what's needed from what's left.

We, too, can divide ourselves, it's true.
But only into flesh and a broken whisper.
Into flesh and poetry.

The throat on one side, laughter on the other,
quiet, quickly dying out.

Here the heavy heart, there non omnis moriar—
just three little words,
like a flight's three feathers.

The abyss doesn't divide us.
The abyss surrounds us.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH⁵²

Autotomia

W niebezpieczeństwie strzykwa dzieli się na dwoje:
jedną siebie oddaje na pożarcie światu,
drugą sobą ucieka.

Rozpada się gwałtownie na zgubę i ratunek,
na grzywnę i nagrodę, na co było i będzie.

W połowie ciała strzykwy roztwiera się przepaść
o dwóch natychmiast obcych sobie brzegach.

Na jednym brzegu śmierć, na drugim życie.
Tu rozpacz, tam otucha.

52 Szymborska 2016: 183.

Jeśli istnieje waga, szale się nie chwieją.
Jeśli jest sprawiedliwość, oto ona:

Umrzeć ile konieczne, nie przebrawszy miary.
Odrośnąć ile trzeba z ocalonej reszty.

Potrafimy się dzielić, och prawda, my także.
Ale tylko na ciało i urwany szept.
Na ciało i poezję.

Po jednej stronie gardło, śmiech po drugiej
lekki, szybko milknący.

Tu ciężkie serce, tam non omnis moriar.
trzy tylko słówka jak trzy piórka wzlotu.

Przepaść nas nie przecina.
Przepaść nas otacza.⁵³

Like in Wang's "Fear," in "Autotomy," too, poetry is something created in danger—in the constant danger of death—in which one divides oneself into flesh and poetic word, or poetic whisper. But the poetic part that remains after the perishing of the flesh carries in itself both life and death. One can split oneself endlessly, but each part will always remain bipolar, like a magnet, which after cutting in half does not change its structure or lose its qualities. Pure immortality does not exist, be it in nature or in culture. Existence is always sustained in that tension between being and nonbeing, and the poetic word preserves both poles, not just one.

Reading "Autotomy" in the comparative Polish-Chinese perspective, I am reminded of a passage from another Polish poet, Justyna Bargielska (b. 1977), in the work "For the Departure of All Animals" (*Na odejście wszystkich zwierząt*). The poem is built on an intertextual play with the biblical story of Noah's Ark and Zbigniew Herbert's "Elegy for the Departure of Pen, Ink, and Lamp" (*Elegia na odejście pióra, atramentu, lampy*), in which Herbert recalls the beginning of his poetry writing, when he believed

53 Szyborska 2007: 187.

that before the deluge it was necessary
 to save
 one
 thing
 small
 warm
 faithful

so it endures further
 with ourselves inside as in a shell

Translated by JOHN and BOGDANA CARPENTER

myślałem wtedy
 że trzeba przed potopem
 ocalić
 rzecz
 jedną
 małą
 ciepłą
 wierną

tak aby ona trwała dalej
 a my w niej jak w muszli⁵⁴

Bargielska writes with a similar feeling of disenchantment and acute awareness of the frailty of human lives and cares, which she illustrates with an image of faceless Chinese people dying in a deluge caused by irresponsible interventions in the environment. This passage may strike the reader as politically incorrect, but in Bargielska's poetry things rarely are what they appear to be. The deep existential irony which underlies her literary project is, first and foremost, directed against the poet/I-speaker herself and not toward the Other; one should arguably interpret it largely as a self-protective mechanism of an oversensitive mind. Her famously unceremonious verses present a distorted carnival-mirror reflection of reality as seen by the subject whose inner optical apparatus, which processes visual impulses, has been affected and significantly distorted by internal and external conditions, including traumatic personal experience. The bizarre, often seemingly inhuman images it produces become automatically framed in, very literally taken, *scare* quotes, and if the I-speaker

54 Herbert 2000: 178–179.

wants to say something that she hopes will be taken seriously, she has to additionally emphasize it, as in lines 3 and 4 of the below excerpt, which begin with the explicit declaration: “But what really interests me.”

For the Departure of All Animals

From American movies I know that policemen eat donuts and wear earmuffs. But what really interests me is: were there vultures flying over the ark? Do you still love me? Is inside a church like inside a candy drop? An old woman comes to me. She sits wearing her overcoat, teaches a cat to say “mom.” When it becomes really bad, which street will throw me happy crumbs? And when the dam collapses, a million of Chinese people will die. All the Chinese look the same, so I say hello to all. Look at the ocean when it is looking at you.

Na odejście wszystkich zwierząt

Z amerykańskich filmów wiem, że policjanci jedzą pączki i noszą nauszники. Ale co mnie ciekawi naprawdę, to: czy nad arką leciały sępy? Czy mnie jeszcze kochasz? Czy w kościele jest jak we wnętrzu landrynki? Przychodzi do mnie stara kobieta. Siedzi w palcie, uczy kota mówić “mamo”. Kiedy będzie naprawdę źle, która ulica rzuci mi wesołe okruszki? A gdy tama pęknie, zginie milion Chińczyków. Wszyscy Chińczycy wyglądają tak samo, więc wszystkim mówię dzień dobry. Popatrz na ocean, gdy patrzy na ciebie.⁵⁵

Szyborska’s poetry is like a huge vessel where several humans (poets and those whom they invite onboard, e.g., Poświatowska and Filipowicz) and various species of animals, plants, and other natural forms—as listed in “Birthday” (Urodziny): moraines, morays, morasses, mussels, and so forth⁵⁶—are saved from the worst, that is, from anonymous, collective death, from dissolving into

55 Bargielska 2016: 10, trans. J K.

56 Szyborska 2016: 178, translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak.

the surrounding floodwaters of nothingness. But it will not save them from their individual deaths which follow them like vultures over Noah's Ark in Bargielska's poem and will happen sooner or later, during or after the deluge, only temporarily suspended like the bullets in midair in "The Joy of Writing."

Art is not magic. This helplessness of a "mortal hand" in the confrontation with the force of gravity is perhaps best visible in the famous "Photograph from September 11" (Fotografia z 11 września), written after the attack on the World Trade Center and based on the famous photo of people jumping off the two towers.

Photograph from September 11

They jumped from the burning floors—
one, two, a few more,
higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,
and now keeps them
above the earth toward the earth.

Each is still complete,
with a particular face
and blood well hidden.

There's enough time
for hair to come loose,
for keys and coins
to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach,
within the compass of places
that have just now opened.
I can do only two things for them—
describe this flight
and not add a last line.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH and STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK⁵⁷

Fotografia z 11 września

Skoczyli z płonących pięter w dół —
jeden, dwóch, jeszcze kilku
wyżej, niżej.

Fotografia powstrzymała ich przy życiu,
a teraz przechowuje
nad ziemią ku ziemi.

Każdy to jeszcze całość
z osobistą twarzą
i krwią dobrze ukrytą.

Jest dosyć czasu,
żeby rozwiały się włosy,
a z kieszeni wypadły
klucze, drobne pieniądze.

Są ciągle jeszcze w zasięgu powietrza,
w obrębie miejsc,
które się właśnie otwarły.

Tylko dwie rzeczy mogę dla nich zrobić —
opisać ten lot
i nie dodawać ostatniego zdania.⁵⁸

In Szymborska's work we will not find the grandiose rhetoric of Romantic poetry that would promise the victims magnificent eternity and monuments more lasting than bronze. The poet may save their "particular faces" from melting into an anonymous ocean and ensure them an afterlife independent of physical laws in her safe and hospitable poetic world. But she cannot save their particular lives, amortize their fall with words, or even amortize the shock it causes in the hearts of their families and friends.

Wang Xiaoni, too, wrote a couple of poems in which the I-speaker is directly confronted with death, one of them being "Meeting Death's Envoy on a Winter Afternoon" (在冬天的下午遇到死神的使者). When Death's envoy sits at the opposite side of the table, "I" comes up with a similar way of escape as a

58 Szymborska 2002: 35.

holothurian in Szyborska's work—but instead of dividing herself, she has an idea to “tunnel out from [her] insides” (从我里面钻出去). Who knows, perhaps Wang had holothurian-style ideas as well, as one poem, “Half of Me Hurts” (半个我正在疼痛), may suggest. There, she considers the suffering (from toothache) left part of her body, which “also is me / another good woman” (那也是我 / 那是另一个好女人), as if already divided herself into two along the axis of pain.⁵⁹ In “Meeting Death's Envoy,” however, she finally decides that:

It's no good to run
 no good to struggle
 no good to leap away.
 The most I can do to try to move heaven and earth
 is to sit lazily in this listless afternoon
 Time has treated me badly
 all I can do is to shun him.

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN

跑也不行
 挣扎也不行
 纵身一跳也不行。
 我能做的最惊天动地的事情
 就是懒散地坐在这个用不上力气的下午。
 时间亏待了我
 我也只能冷落他了。⁶⁰

Consistently ignored, Death's messenger indeed goes away, at least for some time. Wang characterizes him as “nondescript” (不能形容), and only allows “silence behind the back of silence” (沉默在从沉默里) to speak, perhaps knowing that if she starts to indulge in descriptions, he will stay and feel at home in her poems. She, too, like Szyborska, builds her poetic Noah's Ark, much smaller than Szyborska's but more mobile, on board of which she takes those most dear to her, while those she does not know she does not want to know, to paraphrase the title of another poem in her oeuvre.⁶¹ She decides to love them “in [her] own way” (以我的方式) at a distance, without grand romantic gestures like when “someone pulls out his heart / and throws it into the crowd / it's

59 Wang Xiaoni 2005: 44–45, trans. J K.

60 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 78–79.

61 《不认识的人不想再》，translated by Eleanor Goodman as “Those I Don't Know I Don't Want to Know,” in Wang Xiaoni 2014: 12–13.

really too authentic too childish” (一个人掏出自己的心 / 实在太真实太幼稚). In her ark, “all the lofty vessels are empty. / For example me / for example this shiftless / last half of my life” (崇高的容器都空着。 / 比如我 / 比如我荡来荡去的 / 后一半命).⁶² Her favorite animal onboard is a cuckoo from an old-style clock, as she confesses in “That Cuckoo Clock” (那只布谷钟):

She announces the time,
throws an eye on us
to immediately withdraw to her tiny wooden house,
all of this takes less than a while.

Fearing the Great Craftsman may catch her
she spends her life in a pine-wood cage.
[...]
Now when I cast a proud glance on her,
and see this sister of darkness,
this poor wooden bird sharing her name with a combine
I'm ashamed of my pride.

它把时间报诵出来
它匆忙看了我们所有人一眼
立刻退回密闭的小木屋。
不多停留一刻。

它因为恐惧被巨大的工匠逮住
生活在松木造的牢笼
[...]
现在，我傲慢地瞄一眼布谷钟
我见到了暗处的同类
那个可怜的和播种机同名的木俑。
我再不敢傲慢了。⁶³

The atmosphere in Szyborska's ark could be described as the atmosphere of a secular temple. There is no God, but some everyday rituals are still performed, in the manner of Saint Francis, through asceticism and communion with nature, which constitutes her intimate source of amazement and inspiration.

62 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 12–13, translated by Eleanor Goodman.

63 Wang Xiaoni 2006: 15, trans. J K.

And sometimes in these simple rituals one can even summon a soul as in “A Few Words of the Soul” (Trochę o duszy), where we read that:

We have a soul at times.
No one's got it nonstop,
for keeps.

Day after day, year after year
may pass without it.
Sometimes it will settle for a while
only in childhood's fears and raptures.
Sometimes only in astonishment
that we are old.
[...]

It's picky:
it doesn't like seeing us in crowds,
our hustling for a dubious advantage
and creaky machinations make it sick.

Joy and sorrow
aren't two different feelings for it.
It attends us only when the two are joined.

We can count on it
when we're sure of nothing
and curious about everything.

Among the material objects
it favors clocks with pendulums
and mirrors, which keep on working
even when no one is looking.

Translated by CLARE CAVANAGH and STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK⁶⁴

Duszę się miewa.
Nikt nie ma jej bez przerwy
i na zawsze.

64 Szyborska 2016: 336–337.

Dzień za dniem,
rok za rokiem
może bez niej minąć.

Czasem tylko w zachwytach
i lękach dzieciństwa
zagnieżdża się na dłużej.
Czasem tylko w zdziwieniu,
że jesteśmy starzy.
[...]

Jest wybredna:
niechętnie widzi nas w tłumie,
mierzi ją nasza walka o byle przewagę
i terkot interesów.

Radość i smutek
to nie są dla niej dwa różne uczucia.
Tylko w ich połączeniu
jest przy nas obecna.

Możemy na nią liczyć,
kiedy niczego nie jesteśmy pewni,
a wszystko nas ciekawi.

Z przedmiotów materialnych
lubi zegary z wahadłem
i lustra, które pracują gorliwie,
nawet gdy nikt nie patrzy.⁶⁵

In Wang Xiaoni's poetic world, souls seem to have similar interests (e.g., old cuckoo clocks) and qualities. Especially in the moments of ultimate horror, one can feel the soul's exact weigh: 21 grams, that is, just a little bit more than a packet of instant coffee, as Wang notes in "Fear," referring to the famous experiment by Duncan MacDougall that inspired Alejandro González Iñárritu's movie *21 Grams*. From "A Person Singing in White Gloves" (戴白手套唱歌的人), we learn that the soul is transparent. And in "The One Sticking Close to the White Wall as He Leaves" (贴着白色墙壁走掉的人), we see it as it strives

65 Szyborska 2007: 337–338.

to follow a man who hurries on, “caring only for himself” (只顾自己) while the soul lags behind, “twisting and turning to follow close / as though terrified to lose its way / that poor helpless little orphan” (歪歪扭扭跟得紧 / 好像受够了迷失的痛苦 / 那个孤苦伶仃的弃儿).⁶⁶ The soul somehow managed to survive the deluge of civilization—though sacred places where one can nourish one’s spirit have long disappeared.

The poetic space in Wang’s work is not that of a secular temple like in Szyborska, but rather that of an antifeudal palace. The poet is a lonely emperor without subjects, precisely, as the author puts it in “Thinking That, Then Thinking This” (那样想, 然后这样想) with her signature self-mockery: the “emperor of dust” (灰尘之帝) wearing pajamas as imperial robes.⁶⁷ For this emperor, claims Wang in an interview, poetry is just a luxurious pastime, for which she tries not to sacrifice too much of her everyday activities, especially family life.⁶⁸ She does not admit it, but her readers, including her husband, insist that she has some spiritual powers exactly like those of ancient emperors, who were also considered leading priests. In “My Wife Poet Wang Xiaoni,” Xu Jingya recalls himself fortuitously falling prey to these powers:

To put it more exquisitely, in our fortuitous marriage, my own judgment became an accessory of her judgment, which was endowed with infinite gravitational force, and finally turned into another spiritual product captured by this apostlelike woman.⁶⁹

Likewise Szyborska. For all her declared antimetaphysical stance, Miłosz intuitively detects a metaphysical abyss underneath her poems. One of the most outstanding Polish philosophers, Cezary Wodziński, in his lecture on ontology cites two lines from “The Three Oddest Words” (Trzy słowa najdziwniejsze): “When I pronounce the word Nothing, / I make something no non-being can hold” (Kiedy wymawiam słowo Nic, / stwarzam coś, co nie mieści się w żadnym niebycie),⁷⁰ and sums up: “An old Krakow auntie joins our table and with just one sentence deals with the entirety of Heidegger. How the fuck is that possible?”⁷¹

Indeed. But moreover, how is it possible that these two “invisible” poets at some point materialized themselves on the galas of the most prestigious

66 Wang Xiaoni 2014: 82–83, translated by Eleanor Goodman.

67 Ibidem 2014: 8–9, translated by Eleanor Goodman.

68 Wang Xiaoni 2005: 17–24, trans. J K.

69 Xu Jingya 2008, trans. J K.

70 Szyborska 2016: 328, translated by Clare Cavanagh.

71 Quoted in Liszka 2012, trans. J K.

literary awards and miraculously distributed their books in bookstores around the world? This is a secret of poetry, which has proved more than once that it can speak for itself. And, frankly, I do not think we should try too hard to reveal this secret. Once revealed, it will almost certainly be turned by someone into a business plan or marketing strategy. Attempts are today being made, as we shall find out in the final chapter, to discover the code of poetry and implement it in intelligent machines, but thus far the awkwardness of these attempts makes one suppose that we are still far from creating the perfect poetic algorithm.

3 Submerging: Krystyna Miłobędzka and Zhai Yongming

Whereas the two poetics discussed in section 2 can be metaphorized as Noah's Arks, the two that will be brought into focus in this section would be perhaps most effectively visualized as submarines, an image borrowed from Zhai Yongming's poem "A Submarine's Sorrow" (潜水艇之悲伤). While Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni explore the possibilities of invisibility in the midst of the deluge of civilization, Krystyna Miłobędzka and Zhai Yongming regularly submerge themselves under the surface of floodwater to observe, diagnose, and fix what can be fixed in language and script, and—in the case of Zhai—in the cultural memory that is encoded in them.

The oeuvres of Miłobędzka and Zhai are worlds apart in terms of form and content and their respective poems do not enter into direct reactions with one another in the manner that Szymborska's and Wang's do. But they both very actively react with their specific discursive environments. Therefore, this section will take the form of two separate monologues that resonate on the conceptual level and strengthen each other's general message. The two authors' secret work in language and textual tissue creates conditions for other individual poetics to grow.

Miłobędzka, inspired by Zen Buddhism, among other things, explores the metaphysical dimension of invisibility. The operations she performs on the grammar and syntax of the Polish language are spiritual exercises par excellence in which she annihilates the self. Ironically, as she makes progress in *unbeing*, her work is becoming increasingly visible in mainstream literary discourse and represents one of the most significant transformative forces of national poetry today. Long underestimated by her own generation, she was discovered by the Brulioners in the 1990s, when she was already in her sixties, and hailed by them as "Queen Krystyna."⁷² The Brulion authors themselves did

72 Borowiec 2007.

not absorb much of Miłobędzka's language and style, but their popularization of her works contributed to her becoming a leading inspiration in the poetry of authors born in the 1970s.

Zhai's project builds on extensive literary-archeological research. She was the most visible female poet of the 1980s, and the initiator of the emancipation of women's poetry in China. After mixed success in this revolutionary undertaking, she became interested in invisibility as a strategic maneuver aimed at the evolutionary transformation of literary discourse toward a greater equality and inclusiveness. As she recuperates the silenced voices of ancient heroines and classical female poets, she discovers the strategic potential of invisibility as the preferred condition for her own work, which focuses on decoding, and sometimes secretly recoding, the DNA of Chinese language and script.

3.1 *Miłobędzka: Disappearing Oneself in Language*

Krystyna Miłobędzka was discovered when she started to disappear. Her artistic path was unusual from the outset. Majoring in Polish Language and Literature at Adam Mickiewicz University (BA) and Wrocław University (MA), in the 1950s she worked as an editor of a local technical journal published by the Poznań Institute for Wood Technology and coedited a scout magazine. It was around this time that she made her first literary attempts, initially not intended for publication, which were secretly "stolen" from her by her would-be husband, the philosopher and literary critic Andrzej Falkiewicz, and submitted for a poetry contest. Miłobędzka was awarded third prize and her debut cycle of short prose poems *Anaglyphs* (*Anaglify*) was published in *New Culture* (*Nowa Kultura*).

This handful of phenomenological poems—as Jacek Gutorow defined *Anaglyphs*, reading them in the context of the philosophy of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein⁷³—passed without a broader echo and only reached larger audiences in the 1990s with the publication of Miłobędzka's collected poems by a press associated with the *Brulion* magazine. Her first poetry book, *Of Kin* (*Pokrewne*), came out in 1970. In his review essay titled "In Statu Nascendi," Stanisław Barańczak, one of those who first recognized Miłobędzka's talent, wrote that her poetry "constitutes itself almost before the very eyes of the reader. Poetry that is far from any statistical perfection, apparently chaotic, running itself out of breath in pursuit of what begs to be named."⁷⁴

73 Gutorow 2012.

74 Barańczak 1973: 176, trans. J K.

This breathless pursuit continued in the following two collections *Home, Foods* (*Dom, pokarmy*, 1975) and *Register of Contents* (*Wykaz treści*, 1984). Andrzej Falkiewicz recalls that the Czytelnik (Reader) publishing house accepted the text only after soliciting five internal reviews from established poetry critics,⁷⁵ being unable to figure out whether Miłobędzka's "faulty" language should be considered childish naivety or a serious artistic proposition. In the poems included in these two collections Miłobędzka relearns language from children, based on her experience as a mother, playscript writer for children's theater, preschool teacher, and scholar with a doctoral degree obtained for a dissertation on the children's theater of Jan Dorman. Looking at everything through the eyes of a child, she constantly stumbles over conventional syntax, deliberately making holes and other impairments in it that expose the deep fissures between the world and human thought, human thought and human speech, and human speech and human writing—as in the below untitled poem "here a house ..." (*tu dom*), which illustrates this constant confusion:

here a house beside a house without "here is a house"
 here what connects will re connect here it knows that it runs up to "too
 late" and runs on
 thoughts about this thought
 wherever this thing this object I loses itself begins
 she'd love just here herself but where will the I dis connect from you
 she'd love to have something of her own here and soon to shout it out to
 chop it up empty-handed mother here she carried here she sang here
 she was dreamt about
 the dead stroke me on my head no longer shying from tenderness
 I dream that I live with equal difficulty a floor speech an extended hand
 occur to us
 there must be a reason why I dream that I am
 of the father of the mother featureless of day and night grey this will do
 her no good no wrong no
 she goes but why does she look at the trees will she add to their greenness
 here a high mountain now and forever I have to go fall go hang go hear go
 shout enough go?
 before she opens her mouth her eyes the whole will disperse the whole I
 separate in pain separate in tears separate itself

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

75 Sendecki, Miłobędzka, and Falkiewicz 2012: 688.

tu dom przy domu bez “tu dom”
 tu co łączy po łączy tu wie że biegnie do “za późno” i biegnie
 myśli o tej myśli
 gdziekolwiek ta rzecz ten przedmiot ja siebie traci zaczyna
 chciałaby o tu sobie ale gdzie ja się od dzieli od ty
 chciałaby tu coś mieć swojego i zaraz krzyżeć to drobić to matka z
 pustymi rękami tu niosła tu śpiewała tu ją śniło
 umarli głaszczą mnie po głowie oni się już nie wstydzą czułości
 śni mi się że żyję z równym trudem przychodzi nam podłoga mowa
 wyciągnięcie ręki
 po coś śnię że jestem
 z ojca matki nijaka z dnia nocy szara to jej nie wyjdzie na zdrowie na złe
 na dobre na nie
 idzie po co patrzy na drzewa czy im doda zieleni
 tu wielka góra teraz i zawsze mam iść spaść iść wisieć iść słyszeć iść
 krzyżeć dosyć iść?
 zanim odemknie usta oczy całe się rozpadnie ja osobno boli osobno
 płacz osobno się⁷⁶

Yet Miłobędzka never abandons her philosophical experiments. After all, even if language cannot *express* reality, it still remains an efficient cognitive tool: these moments of painful clash between the world and the word are moments when one most directly experiences the tough *thingness* of things in opposition to which one’s *humanness* is constructed. In the most-quoted essay on Miłobędzka, “Open Metaphor” (Metafora otwarta), Tymoteusz Karpowicz points out that the constitution of the metaphorical dimension of her work is a catallactic process in which the reader actively participates.⁷⁷ Her small collection *I Remember (Writings Under Martial Law)* (*Pamiętam (zapisy stanu wojennego)*, 1992) testifies to her attempts at constructing not only individual but also collective subjectivity through linguistic experiments in difficult political circumstances: the martial law introduced in Poland in 1981. But she is convinced of the futility of this enterprise; she summarizes these attempts with a sigh of resignation: “if only ... if only one good poem could emerge from this war” (gdyby ... gdyby z tej wojny został jeden dobry wiersz).⁷⁸ This time, fortunately, critics were of a different opinion and quite unanimously appreciated

76 Miłobędzka 2013: KL 599–622.

77 Karpowicz 2011.

78 Miłobędzka 2010: 202, trans. J.K.

her work, awarding Miłobędzka her first prestigious poetry award, Barbara Sadowska's Prize (Nagroda im. Barbary Sadowskiej) for the year 1992.⁷⁹

I Remember is the last collection in which the poet tries to construct something and expand the perspective, believing that strengthening one's own subjectivity and broadening its horizon may bring better understanding of the world. In the next book, *Before the Poem: Writings Old and New (Przed wierszem. Zapiski dawne i nowe, 1994)*, the course starts to change, and a long process of "disappearing herself" (*znikanie się*) begins that continues until today.

The volume was published in 1994 by the Foundation of Brulion (Fundacja Brulionu), whose authors were attracted by Miłobędzka's uncompromising artistic vision. Along with texts from earlier collections, it also contained some new poems, giving a foretaste of the collection *Participles (Imiastowy, 2000)*, which I consider the turning point in Miłobędzka's oeuvre. With *Participles* she starts to turn poetic grammar inside out, doing similar things to what Szyborska and Wang Xiaoni had done; that is, exploring the "passive voice" of existence. However, whereas in Szyborska and Wang participles are always anchored in some specific agent—usually in the nonhuman Other, for example the Old Turtle—Miłobędzka's participles lack any hard ontological anchorage, instead growing out of an undefined source. The I-speaker is "looked walked lived / been / shed in tears uttered in words" (*patrzona chodzona żyta*). Her activity boils down to contemplating "her is and her will-be / her written and her unwritten / these things and nothings" (*jej jest i jej będzie / jej pisane i jej niepisane / te coś i nicości*).⁸⁰ Or, at best, "merg[ing]" (*scala[nie]*) the vast "being-ing" (*jestnienie*) and "abridg[ing] [it] into existence" (*skraca[nie] do istnienia*).⁸¹

A more extensive explanation can be found in the opening lines of an untitled long poem placed as the second text in the collection. I quote these lines in multivariate translation, offering different renditions of some key phrases that are impossible to render literally:

Write down the run of the words in the running world. By/through/with/
using which I run, which runs by/through/with/using me.

Speak, not write. And yet write down. Make it on time.

79 Nyczek 2012: 121.

80 Miłobędzka 2013: KL 668–673, translated by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese.

81 Miłobędzka 2010: 224, trans. J K.

I don't think with words. I think with images. The world thinks itself to me by/through/with/using running animals plants humans. I better say: through me they run / because of me they run. The world runs through my head with/by/using things. [...]

Speak more runningly [*biegle*, lit. “fluently”; the Polish adverb is a derivative of the verb *biec* “to run”], run more runningly [*ibidem*]. (I speak is a loud leftover of what I silently think. I write is a leftover of that leftover).

Zapisać bieg myśli bieg słów w biegnącym świecie. Którym biegnę, który mną biegnie.

Mówić, nie pisać. A jednak zapisać. Zdążyć.

Nie myślę słowami. Myślę obrazkami. Świat myśli mi się biegnącymi zwierzętami roślinami ludźmi. Lepiej powiem: przeze mnie biegną. Świat biegnie mi przez głowę rzeczami. [...]

Bieglej mówić, bieglej bieć. (Mówię to głośna reszta tego co po cichu myślę. Piszę to resztką tej reszty).⁸²

The main problem with translating this poem into English lies in Miłobędzka's syntactic neologisms, which are even more difficult to recreate than her—though relatively few in her oeuvre—lexical neologisms. Polish syntax is much more flexible than English. It can be twisted almost at will without losing logical connections between words (even when located very far from one another in the sentence) which are determined by specific conjugational and declensional suffixes. Syntactic order often reflects the distribution of logical accents in a sentence, in which Polish is apparently a bit more similar to Chinese than to English. Also, the complex inflection of the Polish language allows for creating, for example, case government without a preposition or coverb. Sometimes the suffixes are the same for two or three verb/noun forms, but in general communicational practice they never cause misunderstandings. Decontextualized, as they are in Miłobędzka's poems, they produce new and unexpected meanings. For example, the phrase “[świat] Którym biegnę” in the first line may mean “[The world] through which I run” or “[the world] by which I run” (i.e., the world which I use to run, as if the earth were her shoe, or perhaps her foot).

82 Ibidem: 212, trans. J K.

Another grammatical feature of the Polish language that Miłobędzka plays with is the reflexive pronoun *się* (-self). *Się* is the only reflexive pronoun in Polish and has no specific forms for different grammatical persons (oneself, myself, yourself, her/him/itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves), but it is employed much more frequently than its counterparts in English. Miłobędzka persistently “overuses” *się*, as if to emphasize that everything in the world leads its own, self-driven existence and agency, and does not need a human subject to confirm this fact. Sometimes it even imposes itself on humans (“The world thinks itself to me”). We will observe a similar experiment with *się* in chapter 7 in the poetry of Maciej Taranek (b. 1986), discussed in the context of posthuman writing, for which Miłobędzka’s poetry laid arguably the earliest foundations in Poland.

Finally, the eponymous participles in Polish can be distinguished into four types, from which Miłobędzka is specifically interested in one: the passive adjectival participle, used to create passive voice constructions. Unlike in English, the passive adjectival participle has no other application in Polish. For instance, it is not used in the construction of active forms in past tenses; for example, the word *byta* (“been,” fem.), a passive adjectival participial form of the infinitive verb *być* (“to be”), is never used in normal communication and clearly stands out in poetry. Its uncanny effect is almost effaced in English without a broader grammatical context—as is the case in the above-quoted short poem: “looked walked lived been,” which should be read as: “I am looked at I am walked I am been [by someone/something else],” and not “I have looked I have walked I have been.” The high flexibility of syntax in Miłobędzka’s work translates directly into the high modality of its ontological substance. Her nuanced modifications of grammar reflect—and sometimes actually *project*—transformations of subjectivity in the extratextual world: “I” gradually pales and blurs with the surrounding objects. Like Szymborska and Wang, Miłobędzka sometimes disappears at home or hides “among the animals” (między zwierzętami), which give poetic camouflage, as we read in “I Am That I Can See That I Can See That I Go By” (Jestem że widzę że widzę że mijam) from *Home, Foods*.⁸³

Many commentators note that the crucial element of Miłobędzka’s poetic world is movement,⁸⁴ but unlike in Różewicz’s and Yu Jian’s poetics, it does not hinge on verbs (the Chinese “words-that-move” that we discussed earlier) but on nouns instead. Its dynamic stems from the poet’s restless pursuit of reality. In “Cobwebs, Dust ...” (Pajęczyny kurz ...) from *Home, Foods*, she expresses her yearning for a “language that would play a role of a prop (a word shaken

83 Miłobędzka 2013: KL 445–450, translated by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese.

84 See, e.g., Karpowicz 2011; Barańczak 1973; Łukasiewicz 1971; Suszek 2014.

instead of a hand)" (Język, który spełniałby rolę rekwizytu (słowo podane zamiast ręki)) and ends with a rhetorical question whether it is possible to "speak with/using/by/through trees" (drzewami mówić).⁸⁵ This postulate becomes foregrounded in her next collection after *Participles*, also published in 2000, *Omnipoems (Wszystkowiersze)*, in which texts become objects, and many of them take the form of calligrams, thus invoking Guillaume Apollinaire, who is sometimes listed among Miłobędzka's inspirations.⁸⁶ There is, for example, "Poem Rose" (Wiersz róża), which resembles a rose printed symmetrically on two pages as in a mirror reflection, or "Poem Bridge" (Wiersz most), leading, literally, from one page to another, which in Polish can be interpreted metaphysically due to the presence of the ambiguous word *strona*, meaning both a page and a side (as in this side and the other side in a metaphor of life and death). In a poem from *After a Shout (Po krzyku, 2004)*, Miłobędzka explains: "I lose verbs quickest, nouns, things remain" (najprędzej gubię czasowniki, zostają rzeczowniki, rzeczy).⁸⁷ Sometimes, verbs are simply transformed into nouns as in "Write down ..." where we encounter a construction "I speak is ..." or in another untitled piece from *lost (gubione, 2008)* where she writes about different *is-es*:

the is growing into a tree
 the is flowing
 the is running, the is flying
 the is from the beginning
 the is not what it should be
 the is not the one, the is to the end

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

jest rosnące drzewem
 jest płynące
 jest biegnące, jest latające
 jest od początku
 jest nie tak
 jest nie to, jest do końca⁸⁸

The various objects seem to stimulate the movement of the lyrical subject and of the author, who tries to catch things before they escape or evolve, like a

85 Miłobędzka 2010: 127, trans. J.K.

86 See, e.g., Karpowicz 2011; Smolka 2012.

87 Miłobędzka 2013: KL 854–890, translated by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese.

88 Ibidem: KL 971–981.

Heraclitean river. “[E]ven if I managed to quickly shout I am to this lowest cloud, you are will be already different, in a different place” (nawet gdybym zdążyła krzyknąć jestem tej najniższej chmurze, jesteś będzie już inne, w innym miejscu; the phrase “you are” in the English translation should be read as a noun), she sighs in the poem that follows after “Write down the run ...” in *Participles*.⁸⁹ The movement stimulated by nouns is navigated by prepositions which describe the subject’s spatiotemporal location vis-à-vis specific objects. Extreme examples of this phenomenon are “A Poem from the Train” (Wiersz z pociągu) from *Omnipoems*, which constitutes a variation of the nouns “field” (pole), “home” (dom), and “forest” (las), and the prepositions “before” (przed), “behind” (za), and “after” (po); and two lines of an earlier poem from *Register of Contents* composed exclusively from prepositions, which unfortunately blur in translation:

from from [z od], from from [z ode], from to, from toward, from in, from with, from behind, from beyond, from after, from before, from before before, from between, from up to, from then. All eternity

z od, z do, z ode, z ku, z w, z, z za, z zza, z spoza, z po, z przed, z poprzed, z między, z potąd, z potem. Cała wieczność⁹⁰

All in all, the (d)evolution of parts of speech in Miłobędzka’s work could be summarized as follows: verbs turn either into passive participles or into nouns, and nouns become gradually replaced by pronouns. The process that starts with “I lose verbs quickest, nouns, things remain” (najprędzej gubię czasowniki, zostają rzeczowniki, rzeczy) continues until

now only personal pronouns (lots of I, more and more I)
and names? lost, conjunctions lost
three words, two words
finally my—mine in me
mine with me—
world

I in the first and last person.

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

89 Ibidem: KL 650–651, translated by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese.

90 Miłobędzka 2010: 150, trans. J K.

już tylko zaimki osobowe (dużo ja, coraz więcej ja)
 a imiona? giną, spójniki giną
 trzy słowa, dwa słowa wreszcie mój, mój we mnie
 mój ze mną

świat

ja w pierwszej i ostatniej osobie⁹¹

The exposition of “I” is not a manifestation of empowerment; rather, it emphasizes the nakedness of the subject deprived even of a name to hide herself behind it. In another short poem from *After a Shout* this postulate is expressed as an imperative:

strip yourself of Krystyna
 of child mother woman
 lodger lover tourist wife

what’s left is undressing
 trails of discarded clothes
 light gestures, nothing more.

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

rozbierz się z Krystyny
 z dziecka matki kobiety
 lokatorki kochanki turystki żony

zostaje rozbieranie
 smugi zrzucanych ubrań
 lekkie ruchy, nic więcej⁹²

The next poem is even more radical:

I am for vanishing
 I want to give testimony
 with nothing to take
 nothing to have

91 Miłobędzka 2013: KL 849–858.

92 Ibidem: KL 934–940.

nothing nobody
to keep

and those God knows journeys
to make me more
to make me see a great deal

I am everything I have not
gate without its garden

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

jestem do znikania

chcę niczym świadczyć
niczego wziąć niczego mieć
nikogo zatrzymać

i te żal się Boże podróże
żeby mnie było więcej
żeby mi się dużo widziało
jestem wszystkim czego nie mam
furtką bez ogrodu⁹³

And three pages later another minimalist poem urges again:

write write on till you vanish in writing
look look on till you vanish in looking.

Translated by ELŻBIETA WÓJCIK-LEESE

pisz pisz aż w pisaniu znikniesz
patrz patrz aż znikniesz w patrzeniu⁹⁴

The ultimate experiment in vanishing takes place in Miłobędzka's last collection to date, *Twelve Poems in Colors* (*Dwanaście wierszy w kolorze*, 2012), published by the Literary Bureau on the occasion of her eightieth birthday. The work consists of twelve brief poems, including some as short as three or four words, printed on loose cards that resemble postcards placed in a white carton

93 Ibidem: KL 941–953.

94 Ibidem: KL 959–961.

box. In one of them, a semi-neologism *przejrzyścieję* (I'm becoming transparent) printed in a "transparent" (pale gray) font runs top-down like tears through the entire page of a micro-psalm: "my god / I'm becoming transparent / behind a vitreous cry" (mój boże / przejrzyścieję / za szklistym płaczem). Another poem consists of a question in the top right corner, in red font, underlined: "I?" (ja?) and a black-font line at the very bottom of the card: "I couldn't un-be more" (mnie już nie może bardziej nie być).⁹⁵

Among the most important inspirations behind what is sometimes termed her senile poetry, Miłobędzka points to Eastern mysticism, especially Zen Buddhism, and Japanese haiku,⁹⁶ where an individual strives to merge with the natural world. But she stops at the threshold, somewhere between Buddhist enlightenment and Christian epiphany of the personalist God. With a pinch of bitter self-mockery, she concludes: "broken twisted I-am [I-am printed in "transparent" font] / doesn't hold a candle to your you-are [red font]" (połamane poskręcane jestem / gdzie mi tam do ciebie, do twojego jesteś).⁹⁷



There is some irony in the fact that the moment of Miłobędzka's greatest public visibility was also the moment in which her poetic and existential project of invisibility entered the most intense phase. On the other hand, conceivably precisely because of her unobtrusive attitude and unostentatious independence, the Brulion authors, who brutally rejected all precursors and Old Masters, took her as their kindred spirit, and praised and promoted her work in the 1990s. In the 2000s, among authors and readers one could observe a "Miłobędzka fever" reflected in the number of publications of her work. Besides *Twelve Poems* (2012), the prestigious Literary Bureau published her collection *lost* (2008), a big volume of collected poems *collected lost* (*zbierane gubione*, 2010), a transcript of four poetry readings *I disappear I am* (*znikam jestem*, 2010), an edited volume with collected reviews, interviews, and essays on her work *Polyphony* (*Wielogłos*, 2012), a collection of her playscripts for children *Where a Country Woman Sowed Poppies* (*Gdzie baba siała mak*, 2012), and her and Falkiewicz's correspondence with Karpowicz *Two Conversations* (*Dwie rozmowy*, 2011). Literary-critical and academic publications include several

95 Miłobędzka 2012, trans. J K. Cf. Krenz 2012.

96 On Eastern inspirations in Miłobędzka's poetry, see, e.g., Suwiński 2012.

97 Miłobędzka 2012, trans. J K.

monographs, a number of PhD theses, and countless journal papers focused on various aspects of Miłobędzka's work.⁹⁸

Although the Brulioners considered Miłobędzka their most important ally, her dismembered language was not a particularly effective medium of the revolutionary postulates they raised, and thus one can hardly find echoes of her idiom in their own poetic output. But their efforts to popularize her work contributed to a very intimate relationship between Miłobędzka and the next generations of poets: authors born in the 1970s and 1980s who entered the poetry scene at the beginning of the new century. Her influence is visible especially in two distinct though mutually interconnected big threads that developed in the first two decades of the twenty-first century: language poetry and ecopoetry.

Since the early modernist avant-gardes, the poetry of language experiment has been quite commonly seen as an almost exclusively male domain requiring abstract, philosophical, “male” thinking; topics reserved for women rather included everyday life, love, and all sorts of somatopoetics.⁹⁹ Miłobędzka's work brought a breakthrough, showing that these two spheres of activity—in language and in everyday life—do not need to stand in contradiction but, conversely, can mutually enhance each other. Everyday life can actually be a key, and not an obstacle, in the explorations of the mysteries of language and probing its limits. Her work attracted to language poetry many Post-70 women authors, who became a driving force on the Polish new poetry scene. One example is Joanna Mueller (b. 1979), a cofounder of the Warsaw-based neolinguist (*neolingwiści*) school, who took up the theoretical initiative in the movement. In 2002, neolinguists made a splash on the poetry scene with their famous manifesto, which I will discuss in the final chapter as one of the first presages of cyberpoetry in Poland. After neolinguism, which proved to be a short-time collective project, Mueller developed her individual microparadigms: arche-linguism, biolinguism, anarchomysticism, and ecomysticism. Mueller, herself a literary scholar, critic, and a mother of four, points to Miłobędzka as the author who opened up many crucial questions in Polish poetry:

How to “write down the run of words in the running word. By which I run, which runs me”? How big is the “gap between I think and I speak? By what to run it through”? And how “to say something ultimately, beautifully, and unreservedly”?¹⁰⁰

98 The monographs include Suszek 2014; Bogalecki 2011; Żygowska 2018; Suwiński 2017; Zastępa 2016; Kałuża 2008.

99 Grądziel-Wójcik 2018b; cf. Legeżyńska 2012.

100 Mueller 2019.

Among other broadly recognized women authors whose poetics resonate with Miłobędzka's, we should add Maria Cyranowicz (b. 1974), also initially associated with neolinguism, and Joanna Roszak (b. 1981), who started her outstanding academic career with a doctoral thesis on the "synthesis of speech" (*synteza mowy*) in Miłobędzka's mentor and friend Tymoteusz Karpowicz.

Miłobędzka's significance for ecopoetry was comprehensively discussed by Jakub Skurtys in his paper "Instead of Szymborska?" (*Zamiast Szymborskiej?*, 2017). I find Skurtys's opposition between Szymborska and Miłobędzka rather artificial, for there is in fact much in common between the two poets in terms of their efforts to deanthropocentrize poetry, as the present chapter has illustrated, but it is true that it is Miłobędzka's organic idiom that more profoundly shaped ecopoetry. Among other poets indebted to Miłobędzka, Skurtys invokes Ilona Witkowska (b. 1987), Bianka Rolando (b. 1979), Julia Fiedorczuk (b. 1975), Natalia Malek (b. 1988), Małgorzata Lebda (b. 1985), Julia Szychowiak (b. 1986), and the aforementioned Joanna Mueller.¹⁰¹ In Mueller's work, like in Miłobędzka's, linguistic consciousness and ecopoetic consciousness are linked in a particularly close way. We will encounter some of these authors again in the final chapter, where I will discuss the explosion of ecopoetry in Poland in the 2010s in greater detail. Male voices are relatively rare in this newly emergent discourse and they gravitate, as Skurtys notes, toward anthropocentrism, but there are exceptions, such as Edward Pasewicz (b. 1971).

For Miłobędzka herself, the interest of young readers, poets, and academics in her writing since the mid-1990s came as a pleasant surprise, of which she speaks with a disarming frankness. Let me quote a longer excerpt from her conversation with Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, which tells us a lot about Miłobędzka's personality, her beautiful (non)understanding of poetry, and unbelievable carefulness with language, which she sometimes playfully calls "language hypochondria":

TM: Today, your work is extremely carefully read by younger and older readers. You've been awarded many prizes, conferences devoted to your poetry are held. How do you feel in this role? [...]

KM: First, I find it embarrassing, but also moving. When I look at my texts from near and far, I conclude that if I were them, I wouldn't be so much interested in this stuff. Perhaps there's some energy or the price of writing hidden inside. Well, that would be wonderful, if in those words that I couldn't write down, and those I felt were inapt and struck out,

101 Skurtys 2017: 216–218.

something interesting and important for those who read were concealed. A thing that they can grasp, and I don't know of.

TM: Do you sometimes find something new about yourself in texts written by critics?

KM: Definitely. I learn unexpected things about myself and my texts all the time. Actually, almost everything I read surprises me.

TM: The fact that in an environment and time that were unpredictable [or unknown] to you someone took to heart what you wrote—is that an important part of this surprise?

KM: This is very important for me. Of course, I'm too old to take the various things discovered by young people into account in my writing. I read it a little bit as if I were reading about another person. These are texts written about someone [else].

[...]

TM: The second edition of one's collected poems confirms that one has become a classic. Doctoral theses and master's dissertations appear.

KM: I wish I could understand this. Perhaps for people younger by two generations my texts are not entirely distant, not entirely obsolete. Perhaps there's something lively, something intimate in them. Perhaps there exists some aerial, extratextual communication between people of which we know very little.

TM: Young people who sometimes try to name their aerial, extratextual communication with your poetry say that for them it is important autonomous poetry. Would you agree that your poems are built with an effort of finding your own language?

KM: Exactly! When someone says: "There are no readymade words," this sounds ridiculous, because I use readymade words, but they are found at the moment of writing, and not devised over a sheet of paper to fit one topic or another, they come from somewhere. Perhaps they always arrive when they are necessary, because they are alive. When I'm talking to you, I don't know the next word I will say ... That's probably why I have to revise a lot.¹⁰²

Interviewed by the former Brulion poet Marcin Sendeki, who calls her *After a Shout* one of the most important books of the twentieth century, Miłobędzka admits that in the past she felt a bit upset that critics and readers did not give attention to her first books, but now,

102 Miłobędzka and Mizerkiewicz 2012: 676–677, trans. J K.

when one has written so much and is so old, almost eighty, one will not get involved that much, and care that much about this. Something was well received? Wonderful. I did not expect [it]. But there is certainly a number of people of whom I don't know and who think differently and believe that what I do is worthless and overrated. Well, fine. It doesn't particularly bother the me of today.¹⁰³

3.2 *Zhai Yongming: Geneticist in a Submarine*

The first and most intense period of Zhai Yongming's poetic career was in the mid-1980s when she was considered the leader of the emancipation of women poets. After a brief fascination with feminism followed by a pronounced rejection of its postulates, in 1990 Zhai, together with her husband, the painter He Duoling 何多苓, left China for the United States. In emigration she experienced an artistic crisis; only after returning to her hometown of Chengdu in 1991 did she again take up a pen and continue writing. The brief break, however, proved to have a refreshing effect on her poetry and her work entered a diametrically different phase with the long poem "The Song of the Café" (咖啡馆之歌), inspired by observations made by customers about her newly opened bar White Night (白夜) and usually considered the turning point in her oeuvre.¹⁰⁴

Part of her mature poetic project was to create a solid ground for women's poetry, which she had earlier brought, without warning, onto the (as it turned out) totally unprepared poetry scene in China. Even as late as thirteen years after the publication of the series "Women," in 1997, Tang Xiaodu, one of the most respected poetry critics in China, admitted in the essay "Who Is Zhai Yongming?" (谁是翟永明?) that he still could not answer the question in the title. All his attempts at solving this riddle, he said, boiled down to repeating debatable cultural patterns:

In fact, I made [women's writing] turn into a new tenor [of a metaphor]. In front of this new tenor, not only Zhai Yongming, but apparently all potential objects of discussion could be transformed into a certain "copy" or "footnote." This mistake was caused by my attempts to define "women's poetry" without deeper and more efficient reflection on poetics, and,

103 Sendecki et al. 2012: 690, trans. J K.

104 See, e.g., van Crevel 2003: 677; Luo Zhenya 2006; Tang Xiaodu 2005: 33–34; Tao Naikan 1999: 415. For Zhai's own view on the breakthroughness of the poem, see Zhai Yongming 2015: 307–308; Zhai Yongming and Yan Liang 2012.

what is more, taking into consideration only one perspective, namely that of a male. This is unforgivable.¹⁰⁵

Aware of the revolutionary character of her artistic proposition, in the mid-1990s, when her male fellow poets were busy with fratricidal battles, Zhai made attempts to trace (and fix) the root of the problem of the biased reception of women poetry in China. Instead of presenting it as a new development transplanted from Western culture, as was the case in the 1980s, she focused on embedding her and her fellow women authors' writing in Chinese indigenous tradition. This, however, required a complex archeological enterprise. Not only did she have to unearth the female threads of the (literary-)historical narrative but also to cleanse them of all the undesirable features that had stuck to them throughout the centuries in the annals written by the male hand, including unjustified accusations and condescending interpretations of their lives and works. Zhai "restores [women authors'] reputations," as Andrea Lingenfelter argues, smeared by "generations of Confucian historians as well as the unexamined contemporary cultural attitudes that have grown out of them."¹⁰⁶

Among the earliest artifacts excavated by Zhai the literary archeologist were four ancient myths whose protagonists are women sacrificing themselves for men. In 1996, she wrote "Three Beauties" (三个美人), a reinterpretation of three ancient legends: about Meng Jiang 孟姜, whose cry of grief after her husband's death made part of the Great Wall fall down; about the White Snake 白蛇, who transforms itself into a woman and falls deeply in love with a man, heroically fighting for him against dark powers, only to finally be imprisoned under the Leifeng pagoda; and about Butterfly Lovers, two "male mates," one of whom after long years of friendship turns out to be a woman disguised as a man to get access to an official education. In all these stories, Zhai concentrates on the nuances that enable her to reconstruct the women's psychology and emotional struggles, showing that the female characters are worth attention in themselves and not only as a background for, or an appendix to, male adventure. Two years later, in 1998, in "The Song of Weaving and Acting" (编织和行为之歌),¹⁰⁷ Zhai likewise rewrites the myth of Hua Mulan 花木兰, a young woman who disguises herself as a man to take her father's place in the army. Zhai selects the least heroic part of the legend: the moment when soldiers come to see their leader in "his" house and find "him" sitting at the looms as a woman. In this long poem, probably for the first time in Zhai's oeuvre, archeology is

105 Tang Xiaodu 2005: 26, trans. J K.

106 Zhai Yongming 2011: ix.

107 Zhai Yongming 2015: 185-188.

intertwined with the strategy Nancy Miller called “arachnology,”¹⁰⁸ which would later often reemerge in Zhai’s work. Mulan and other women in “The Song” weave “art, war, love” (艺术、战争、爱情); in their hands, the thread of language is transformed into a texture of poetry.

After “straightening” mythical memory, Zhai Yongming sets out to fix cultural memory. She focuses on women who have played not only symbolic but also actual roles in the history of Chinese literature and culture. Zhai tries to reconstruct a provisional lineage of women poets since antiquity, assuming the role of a continuator rather than “inventor” of the discourse of women poetry in China, to allude to Jeanne Hong Zhang’s study.¹⁰⁹ In 2005, she wrote “Ode to Yu Xuanji” (鱼玄机赋).¹¹⁰ Three years later, her essay “Female Consciousness, Wife’s Perspective, Female Voice” (女性意识, 妇人之见, 雌声) was published in *Today*. The piece discusses Yu and two other classical poets: Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1155) and Xue Tao 薛涛 (768–831).¹¹¹

The Tang dynasty poet Yu Xuanji was, in Zhai’s view, the poet with the most developed female consciousness among classical authors.¹¹² We do not know much about her life. Her surname Yu 鱼 (“fish”) is one of the least frequently seen in history. Her given name, Xuanji 玄机, means a secret, mysterious principle, or mystical religious truth. Yu was a Daoist nun who reportedly led what today seems to be a particularly un-nun-ly life, which however was not unusual in China at the time, and was sentenced to death at the age of twenty-six or twenty-eight for the alleged murder of her own maidservant. Yet Zhai does not trust the source of this information, Huang Fumei’s 皇甫枚 collection of “gossip stories,” *Little Tablets from Three Rivers* (三水小牋), suggesting that Huang’s account, like Yu’s death sentence, stemmed from the patriarchal society’s rejection of independent women, something that continues to bring bitter fruits to this day.¹¹³

Recalling the research she undertook before writing the ode, Zhai mentions that after entering the keyword “Yu Xuanji” in popular internet browsers, she would only get titles that resembled pornographic movies: “The Empress of Desires” (情欲世界的女皇), “From an Abandoned Wife to a Loose Woman” (从“弃妇”到“荡妇”), “Yu Xuanji Who Killed Out of Jealousy” (因妒折命的鱼玄机), “A Loose Nun” (风流女道士), and so forth. Her work offers an alternative history of Yu and her maiden. In the first part of the poem “No Human Knows a

108 Miller 1986: 270–296.

109 Zhang Jeanne Hong 2004.

110 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 74–81.

111 Zhai Yongming 2008b.

112 Ibidem.

113 Ibidem.

Secret Between One Fish and Another Fish” (一条鱼和另一条鱼的玄机无人知道), alluding to the semantics of the poet’s surname and invoking many motifs from her oeuvre intertwined with excerpts from Huang’s account, Zhai presents the baseline situation as follows:

This is a story about killing and the killed
 In the year 868
 Yu Xuanji wearing convict’s robes
 arrives at the execution ground her head in a pool of blood
 hitched by fresh flowers

So many ancient women in convict’s robes
 float in the sky one could connect them
 into a white kite they won’t ascend to heaven

[...]

Years still lash green but powerless
 flowers sometimes haunted by pain but fiery like flames
 clear sky after a spring rain that’s when they died
 “many officials advocated for her” but to no avail
 Yu Xuanji in white
 Lu Qiao in red
 sword raises head falls their fish scale
 pale and turn into snow that fills the sky
 Golden eyes keeping watch in front of the screen
 can’t see the hexagonal crystals of snowflakes
 the sky shooting out ink
 strips them of their colors
 fish and fish
 and thus their secret
 will never be revealed to people

这是关于被杀和杀人的故事
 公元 868 年
 鱼玄机 身穿着枷衣
 被送上刑场 躺在血泊中
 鲜花钩住了她的头发

很多古代女人身穿枷衣
 飘满天空 串起来
 可以成为白色风筝 她们升不上天

[...]

岁月固然青葱但如此无力
 花朵有时痛楚却强烈如焚
 春雨放晴 就是她们的死期
 “朝士多为言”那也无济于事
 鱼玄机着白衣
 绿翅穿红衣
 手起刀落 她们的鱼鳞
 褪下来 成为漫天大雪
 屏幕前守候的金属眼睛
 看不见雪花的六面晶体
 喷涂墨汁的天空
 剥夺了她们的颜色
 一条鱼和另一条鱼
 她们之间的玄机
 就这样 永远无人知道¹¹⁴

The second part of the long poem “Why Write Complaint Poetry?” (何必写怨诗?) tells of Yu’s night life after her separation from her husband. This “night life,” in Zhai’s interpretation, consisted in “practicing virtue” (清修)—used ironically to describe women’s self-restraint and their ability to stifle negative emotions and tears to conform to social convention—and reading poetry in secret. During the day, Yu enjoyed the company of her contemporary male poets, listed by name in the poem. “Yu Xuanji writes like a man / and socializes like a man” (鱼玄机 她像男人一样写作 / 像男人一样交游), imagines Zhai.¹¹⁵

Zhai elaborates on this idea in her essay, concluding not without regret that the degree of “male-ness” of women’s poetry still remains the main criterion of its quality in the eyes of critics who focus on assessing to what extent a woman author managed to get rid of the common (= stereotypical) characteristics of female writing; that is—we can roughly guess—infantility, cowardice, pettiness, lack of a broader perspective on things, and so forth. This is how the other two protagonists of the essay “Female Consciousness,” Li Qingzhao

¹¹⁴ Zhai Yongming 2008a: 74, trans. J.K.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem: 74–75, trans. J.K.

and Xue Tao, have been read. Their work, claims Zhai, was appreciated for its “male-ness,” and female traits have been consistently ignored or even intentionally effaced.¹¹⁶

In the third part of the ode, we finally hear the female voice of Yu Xuanji. It can fully resound only after her death, which liberates her from the chains of social biases. This part takes the form of a musical dialogue sung to a classical melody *huadio* 花调 and *yan'erluo* 雁儿落 between Yu and her maiden Lu Qiao 绿翘, the only person who can understand her sorrow. The ancient poet sighs:

Candles, incense, backgammon
dice, domino, gambling
if I were a man
after 360 moves it would be clear who's better

蜡烛、熏香、双陆
股子、骨牌、博戏
如果我是一个男子
三百六十棋路 便能见高低¹¹⁷

Lu Qiao tries to cheer Yu Xuanji up, but the only comfort she can offer is the promise of a peaceful, happy life after death, in which “you will provide mutilated poems / and I will compose music for you” (你为我搜残诗 / 我为你谱新曲).¹¹⁸ Besides breaking the stereotype of a submissive woman, another convention is overcome here, namely the feudal stratification of society. The aristocrat and the maidservant establish a covenant against the unfair male world of which they are both victims. On the other hand, one may note that the two lines pronounced by the maidservant echo a popular poem by the early modernist author Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931) entitled *Canshi* (残诗), a phrase which appears in Zhai’s text, translated by me as “mutilated poem[s].” Xu’s work begins with a rhetorical question: “To whom complain? / To whom complain?” (怨谁? 怨谁?), which corresponds with Yu Xuanji’s reflection on complaint poetry, and goes on to reflect on the fate of fish, namely precious long-tailed anchovies left in a sapphire aquarium to fend for themselves; in a couple of days “their bellies up eyes bulged / they will float dead on the surface let a piece of ice smash them flat” (翻着白肚鼓着眼, 不浮着死, / 也就让冰分儿压一个

116 Zhai Yongming 2008b.

117 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 77–78, trans. J.K.

118 Ibidem.

扁).¹¹⁹ Thus, Lu Qiao's words of comfort in fact conceal one more metaphorical complaint about the injustice suffered by women who are treated by men like specimens of expensive fish to enjoy and exhibit, and abandoned when the owner becomes bored or busy with other things. Ironically, even this silent protest against men is ciphered in the words that belong to a man: Xu Zhimo.

Part four, "Epitaph for Yu Xuanji" (鱼玄机的墓志铭) conveys a sad conclusion:

Here lies poet Yu Xuanji
 born and dead in the wrong time
 eight centuries too early
 [...]
 her womanhood obscured her talent
 looking at sages and masters far removed from everyday matters
 she will never admit defeat.

这里躺着诗人鱼玄机
 她生卒皆不逢时
 早生早死八百年
 [...]
 美女身份遮住了她的才华盖世
 望着那些高高在上的圣贤名师
 她用不服气¹²⁰

The final part, "Report of the Analysis of Yu Xuanji's Death" (关于鱼玄机之死的分析报告), elaborates on the question of whether now is finally the "the right time" to be born as a woman. Zhai reflects:

if the year 868 were the year 2005
 perhaps she would live until 85
 have a normal job as well as daughters and sons
 although her female consciousness would certainly raise doubts
 she wouldn't be taken to court for it and sentenced to death.

如果公元 868 变成了公元 2005
 她也许会从现在直活到 85
 有正当的职业 儿女不缺

119 Xu Zhimo 1925, trans. J.K.

120 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 79, trans. J.K.

她的女性意识 虽备受质疑
但不会给她吃官司 挨杖毙¹²¹

Yet this is only a half-optimistic statement about the contemporary reality, in which one can still hear undertones of the author's helplessness against deeply rooted patterns and stereotypes when Zhai realizes the impossibility of changing history by means of historical narrative, even the most noble one:

These guesses and imaginations
can't speak for her in court
it's just an analysis of an amateur textual researcher
in Autumn she had to die

Here lies Yu Xuanji recalling all those things
buried in the earth she will never admit defeat.

这些猜测和想象
都不能变为呈堂供证
只是一个业余考据者的分析
在秋天 他必须赴死

这里躺着鱼玄机 想起这些
在地下 她永不服气¹²²

One year after publishing "Ode to Yu Xuanji," Zhai started to look for other ways to rewrite history that would allow her to inject her archeological findings into the bloodstream of Chinese literary discourse. She moved further back along the timeline to Su Ruolan, a poet born five centuries before Yu, during the Six Dynasties period (222–589), whose work leads Zhai to turn to arachnology, tentatively tested earlier in "The Song of Weaving and Acting."

Like Arachne for Nancy Miller, Su Ruolan in Zhai Yongming's metaliterary reflection is an ancient prefiguration of literary postmodernism in its feminist incarnation. In her mature work, the model of text-as-a-web or text-as-texture whose threads are intertwined fibers of language and personal experience, and on which the author leaves her fingerprint,¹²³ is prominently foregrounded. In this model, writing is a kind of performative art, as Zhai proposes in the essay

121 Ibidem, trans. J K.

122 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 81, trans. J K.

123 Miller 1986: 288.

“Infinite Palindrome Is a Model of the Universe” (回文无尽是璇玑) devoted to Su.¹²⁴

The title of the essay invokes Su’s most famous “hyperpoem,” the great palindrome-calligram “Picture of the Turning Sphere” (璇玑图). The work is a visual composition shuttle-woven on brocade. It consists of a 29 × 29 grid filled with Chinese characters, which—read in different directions and starting from different places in the big square—form over three thousand poems ranging in length from several to several dozens of characters. The most popular version of its history is that Su created the “Picture” for her husband, a state official delegated to another province. Jealous of her husband’s relationship with his concubine, Su refused to accompany him. However, when her longing for her husband became unbearable, she created this unusual multipoem and sent it to him; and he reportedly returned.¹²⁵

According to an account ascribed to empress Wu Zetian 武则天, in a comment to her work Su noted that her husband is the only person who can understand the entire message ciphered in the text.¹²⁶ On the other hand, besides this mysterious microcosmos of the poet’s personal life, scholars point out its connections to the map of the macrocosm—a graphical representation of the knowledge and beliefs of her contemporaries about the functioning of the celestial spheres.¹²⁷ These two universes are additionally connected to a third universe—the universe of language, which in a sense determines the relationships between the elements of the other two, entangling individual words and notions into constellations of poems.

In “Infinite Palindrome” Zhai polemicizes the way of reading Su’s work as an example of the genre called boudoir complaint poetry (闺怨诗), one of few genres reserved exclusively for women, whose paradigm boils down to a series of stereotypes and biases. Like in “Ode to Yu Xuanji,” where the author consciously employs this genre to revalorize it, in “Female Consciousness” she freely plays with the commonly depreciated form. Nan Z. Da insightfully notes:

Women poets risk pigeonholing (and worse) when they write about women who aren’t loved, appreciated, counted, or understood, women who have lost youth or beauty or both. Zhai seems to take on that risk completely. Rather than write pronouncedly feminist verses about

124 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 136.

125 Ibidem: 131–132.

126 Yang Jeffrey 2017: xv.

127 For an incisive essay on the connections between Su Ruolan’s work and Chinese astral imagination, see Wang Eugene 2007.

pronouncedly feminist issues, Zhai rebrands feminism as a layered consciousness of the sinological world, and a lyrical reclamation of its past literary cultures. This type of consciousness indulges in the topos of love, separation, and their complaints in order to surveil alternative histories and futures: gender subjectivity, the formation of modern China, and the transversal impact of mediation.¹²⁸

Demonstrating the multidimensionality of “Picture,” Zhai treats it as a starting point for her own ethics, in which equality and justice are inscribed in the very structures of the language as a mechanism that regulates the transcription of cultural DNA. Juxtaposing the ancient palindrome-calligram with postmodern Western art, the poet argues:

Many contemporary artists use written text as a material, probing the limits of textuality. [...] “Picture of the Turning Sphere” [...] refers to the specific nature of the Chinese character in order to recode and reestablish the relation of legibility and order between the characters, examining and proving the infinite semantic potential of Chinese script. Conceivably, there exists no other script in the world that would evince a similar capacity of self-transformation and self-driven broadening of its own scope.¹²⁹

In the situation of the incompleteness and asymmetry (that is, dominance of the male point of view) of explicit cultural memory, perhaps the only way out is restoring the proper mechanisms of “genetic memory” to culture, responsible not for the transmission of specific content but for the transmission of certain structures along whose lines content is distributed, assessed, and valorized. “Picture,” in Zhai’s opinion, approximates the original structure of the Chinese language, which in its pure form “coded” the world according to the equitable principles of natural order. In the final part of the essay, she notes that modern technologies may facilitate the deciphering and activation of the diverse meanings of Su Ruolan’s masterpiece, for example by transforming “Picture” into an interactive application in which the user can click on the characters of their choice, creating multiple poetic sequences.

In Zhai Yongming’s reflection, the directions of development of modern technology and of modern literature are largely convergent. Both, in a sense, return to the most basic qualities and structures of the world, rediscovering

128 Da 2015: 690–91.

129 Zhai Yongming 2008a: 135–136, trans. J.K.

their primary potential, which so far, as civilization has progressed, has been gradually reduced to fit our narrow minds rather than expanded. Zhai's arachnology can be taken as a source of a new idea of archeology, which understands that the only hope for the past is the future—using more developed tools and methods, earlier history and deeper structures can be unearthed and reconstructed.

The third and last strategy of Zhai Yongming's therapy of Chinese cultural memory is an experimental blend of the other two and is located somewhere between science, art, and fantasy; hence my proposition to call it alchemy, justified by the fact that the poem in which it was introduced is situated in ancient reality and not in a contemporary laboratory of genetic engineering. The poem is called "A Letter from the Past Dynasty—from Qiu Yanxue, a Woman Poet Whose Existence Wasn't Documented" (前朝来信—无考女诗人邱研雪信札). Its lyrical subject is a fictitious persona created by Zhai, who "after finishing endless chores / write[s] a letter to scholars from the next epoch" (放下作不完的家事 / 我给后朝的书生写信). This statement returns several times throughout the poem as a chorus, between excerpts from the letter and an account of Qiu's writing process. Three different layers permeate the text and merge with one another in certain places: a narrative of Qiu's everyday life, from which she cuts out a shard of spacetime to write the letter; a metaliterary and metasemiotic narrative about the methods and techniques of writing employed by Qiu; and the proper content of the letter: a message addressed to future humanity.

In many places these three perspectives blur, co-occurring within a single stanza or a single line, as happens, for example, in the passage below:

Paper made from rice sprinkled with tears
 turns into a painting a drop of ink will do
 to grow there a bamboo branches and plantains
 [...]
 I write on a fan and on white silk
 and on xuan paper and on embroidered kerchief
 writing becomes so precious
 brush strokes breathe in my body
 [...]
 Silkworms spin silk threads from threads yarn is made
 when there is yarn silk can be weaved
 A thin brush and ink dancing in Autumn wind
 spreads squares of characters and I use them

米制成的纸滴上眼泪后
 就变成图画 用墨点染后
 就写意为竹子 折枝和芭蕉
 [...]
 在扇子上写字 也在白绢上写
 在宣纸上写字 也在罗帕上写
 写, 变得如此贵重
 一笔一划的气息 在身体中呼吸
 [...]
 桑蚕吐丝 就可以纺织成丝
 有丝 就有帛
 毛笔和水墨 随秋风扫过
 就有了小小的方块字 我使用它¹³⁰

The image of a silkworm in this context may be taken as strongly sexualized given a specific biological feature of female moths, namely producing pheromones that are strong enough to attract male moths from a distance as far as ten kilometers away. At the same time, it is also analogous to the figure, known from the Western discourse of women's writing, of a female spider; it conveys the notion of text as a texture, signaling the synthesis of existence (tears, breath), matter (silk, paper, ink), and sign (characters) into one work, which constitutes an independent and unique whole, a product of a fully formed, legitimate female artistic subject. This artistic subject is installed in history by Zhai as an implant of memory that is expected to take roots in its tissue. The belief that the operation will be successful and the implant will not be rejected is based on Zhai's trust in language and its ability to recode consciousness. Continuing the reflection of the "squares of characters," Qiu adds:

And I know that several centuries later you will use them as well
 I can control them to produce a feeling of pleasure in your mind
 like a beam of blue light attract your attention
 In this hallucinatory mist
 you will infinitely walk forward approaching [me]

知道 几百年后你们还是用它
 我控制它, 制作你大脑的欣快感
 如同一团蓝光 引起你注意

130 Zhai Yongming 2015: 227-228, trans. J K.

它 一团迷幻雾气
使你无限向前 靠近¹³¹

Even if one cannot change the “content” of history, reverse past events, perhaps one can repair the language, restoring its primary function so that the transmission and distribution of cultural genes follow fair mechanisms that are inclusive and not excluding. Zhai’s/Qiu’s poem is not just a symbolic literary monument or a collective grave raised to commemorate anonymous, invisible ancient women poets whose voices were silenced by *history*. It is a living poetic tissue produced by a female spider or silkworm. This tissue has to be reconnected to the bloodstream of the contemporary discourse that feeds its cells, at the same time drawing from it elements that are indispensable to the entire literary organism. Although the letter from the unknown poet cannot push out events that already happened from history, nor can it add new facts to the past, it still can become part of cultural memory, which is something more than a mere archive of documented facts from past eras. Rather, it is a collective, consensual, and dynamic picture of the past, which acquires new meanings in new contexts.

Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, the father of the term, cannot store the past as such; rather, it transforms the past into symbolic figures on which our idea of what came before hinges. Thus history becomes real; that is, it acquires normative and formative power.¹³² Cultural memory is not as much past-oriented as it is future-oriented; it breaks free from chronology and constitutes a foundation for a projection of timeless eternity in a given culture. Throughout the poem, Qiu expresses only one wish—to be remembered:

I want you to remember the writing of a poet whose existence has not
been confirmed
just as I want you to remember my death
I want you to know it
just as you know eternity—

我要你记住无考女诗人的写……
就像要你记住我的死
我要你认识它
就像你认识永恒——¹³³

131 Ibidem: 228, trans. J K.

132 Assmann 2009: 84.

133 Zhai Yongming 2015: 228, trans. J K.

The postulate to become accepted by the “community of memory,”¹³⁴ to use another term from Assmann’s lexicon, is not an indictment or a (female) beggar’s plea for a place in the (male) canon. It is rather a promise of what will happen if the female voice becomes included into literary discourse in its own right. Only then will the world unfurl in all its diversity and abundance in poetry. Akin to Zhai in the essay “Female Consciousness,” where the author expressed her hope in the future (including technical development) as a salvation of the past, Qiu predicts:

In the perspective of eternity
 you will start to know me, you will know my epoch
 its environment its climate
 its pastel landscapes
 its cool and quiet poetry
 its wars and beacon towers
 destroyed by climate destroyed by soil
 destroyed by uprisings

从永恒的透视点里
 你开始认识我，认识我的朝代
 它的水土 它的气候
 它的淡而清的山水
 它的冷而静的诗书
 它的战争和烽火台
 它亡于气候 亡于土壤
 亡于人民起义¹³⁵

The work of Zhai Yongming itself bears evidence that these are not just empty promises. If after hundreds of years people from the future wish to explore our epoch through poetry, Zhai’s oeuvre will be among the most valuable sources. It contains meticulously drawn pictures of “heavily wounded cities” (重伤的城市) inhabited by “lightly wounded people” (轻伤的人), to allude to the title of a poem from 2000.¹³⁶ There are portraits of these wounded people—realistic, psychological, lyrical, artistic, as well as grotesque and ironic—painted by a skilled and steady but also gentle and tender hand. There are loud conversations in the café and intimate inner monologues. Notes from media communications

134 Assmann 2009: 87.

135 Zhai Yongming 2015: 229, trans. J K.

136 Zhai Yongming 2014: 202.

and analyses of modern language. Quasi-religious psalms and commemorative poems dedicated to friends acquainted in a bar. Traditional myths and modern ads. And many other things. All of them add up to a wonderful testimony of a woman who in her poem “Submarine’s Sorrow” speaks of herself as the captain of the eponymous vehicle, assuring us that:

When necessary and when not necessary
my submarine is on duty
its lead gray body
hides under the surface of a shallow pond

有用或无用时
我的潜水艇都在值班
铅灰的身体
躲在风平的浅水塘¹³⁷

Every day she solemnly plans in which place “to submerge the submarine / and in whose veins to anchor” (在何处下水 / 在谁的血管里泊靠). “Fans, hipsters, heavy metal in discos” (追星族、酷组、迪厅的重金属) are not strange to her. She analyzes every single image that reaches her through the “periscope of writing” (写作的潜望镜) and adds to her poetic catalogue. And if the layer of events is too thin for her to submerge, she “generates water” (造水), adding depth to “the sadness of all those things” (每一件事物的悲伤),¹³⁸ subtly covering the world with soothing, “most tactful phrases.”

3.3 *Miłobędzka, Zhai, and Their Influence on Recent Poetry from Poland and China*

Zhai Yongming’s explorations open similar paths to Krystyna Miłobędzka’s radical experiments. By loosening poetic syntax, Miłobędzka makes the textual structures more flexible and adaptable to different conditions, topics, and media. This broadened the spectrum of Polish poetry and allowed it, on the one hand, to develop an intimate relationship with nature (ecopoetry), and on the other hand, to enter into a productive symbiosis with technology (cyberpoetry), two phenomena that flourished in the 2010s in Poland. It also encouraged further experiments with poetic language as such among neolinguists. Zhai’s theoretical reflection on language and script based on Su Ruolan’s “Picture of the Turning Sphere,” although not taken up in her later work, still carries

137 Zhai Yongming 2015: 195–197, trans. J.K.

138 All citations from Zhai Yongming 2015: 195–197, trans. J.K.

huge artistic potential, including inspiring ideas that might feed into language poetry and cyberpoetry. In 2008, Andrea Lingenfelter published a comparative paper on Zhai and Hsia Yü 夏宇 (b. 1956), an experimental woman poet from Taiwan, focusing mostly on their bold take on feminine themes.¹³⁹ This comparison, I believe, could go much further today. Hsia's creative postmodern play with language and text, often with the use of advanced technology—as in her famous collection *Pink Noise* (粉红色噪音), which employs machine techniques of translation, among other things—are much in line with Zhai's theoretical-philosophical reflections. In fact, Zhai laid the conceptual foundation for the development of technologically supported posthuman poetry in the PRC, which, however, thus far has made rather insignificant progress. The possible reasons why are discussed in chapter 7.

On the other hand, one can also observe how Zhai's lyrical "I" develops a growing environmental sensibility and perfectly synchronizes herself with the surrounding nature. This is beautifully shown in her book-length landscape poem "Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang" (随黄公望游富春山) from 2015, and many short poems that lend themselves to reading through the lens of ecocriticism. Justyna Jaguścik effectively does so in two recent studies, focusing on the texts' "gendered ecocritical edge."¹⁴⁰ Ecopoetry, which will be discussed in the final chapter, is one of the most promising and dynamically developing current trends in Chinese poetry, and Zhai, like Miłobędzka in Poland, with her well-deserved authority and position among Chinese authors, is among its most strategic pioneers.

The many linkages between this section and the final chapter of this book—which will be focused on the most recent phenomena in Polish and Chinese poetry and the intensified search for the Singularity located beyond the horizon of human language—testify to the transformative power and visionary character of the two authors' invisible laboratory work. Their writings teach new poets how to productively converse with the world to develop new grammars of creation and cognition.

139 Lingenfelter 2008.

140 Jaguścik 2018, 2019.

Making Names and Saving Names

In Poland and China alike, poets born in the 1970s were the first generation in the modern history of their respective countries to not define their identity along the lines of historical grand narratives or vis-à-vis spectacular historical events. Sometimes called in the Polish context Generation Nothing (*pokolenie nic*), they were not united by any specific common experience, goal, or battle. To many older authors, they were the lucky ones, who just got in on the act and could enjoy new and unprecedented freedom and the fruits of economic and technological development (as a result of democratic transition in Poland and the policy of “reform and opening up” led by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 in China). Nevertheless, while there was no distinct negative historical point of reference in the 1990s in either country, there was also no distinct positive standard around which young authors could orientate themselves. In Poland, those who had made their mark as “Solidarity” activists in the 1970s and 1980s proved to be awkward politicians and even worse diplomats in the 1990s. Today, three decades later, Poland’s integration into European structures still leaves much to be desired and the impression of its provinciality lingers among many Western Europeans. Religion, a pillar of freedom and national unity in the socialist period, apparently also lost its allure after 1989. In the eyes of many people, the Catholic Church has failed to convincingly formulate a *raison d’être* for faith in the newly emergent reality of a free, democratic country. The institution which for four decades had invested most of its energy into fighting totalitarianism, when real danger ceased, kept fighting imagined enemies such as “Western liberalism” or Western “spiritual corruption,” entering into strategic alliances with political parties and often neglecting its metaphysical mission. In China, unpopular decisions taken by state officials have been generally either glossed over or presented in glorious ways, even though it is almost impossible that the Chinese population never learned, for instance, about the Tiananmen massacre, for which their great reformer Deng Xiaoping was personally responsible and which certainly undermined his authority as a leader.

The world the Post-70 (70后) generation of poets in both countries remember from their youth and early adulthood is perhaps most aptly illustrated by Zhai Yongming’s 翟永明 (b. 1955) image in “Submarine’s Sorrow” of the submarine in the shallow pond and the grotesque prospect of having to generate more water in order to submerge it. It was a moment when poets, those

passionate explorers of the ocean floor, seemed to have had no alternative but to start rebranding themselves as hydrological engineers distributing H₂O over the spiritual desert to create new depths in which to submerge themselves. How to transform thin air into the Poetry Rivers and Lakes (诗江湖) enjoyed by the Third Generation? How to create a new quality in an era described by older poets as having no qualities? In the absence of historical tidal waves, the only pragmatic solution was to build from one's individual experiences, memories, observations, inner conflicts, struggles, imaginations, or from one's own body—particularly, as we will see from the discussion below, the lower part of one's body. Another, no less important thing is that readers had to learn how to read such poetry, and critics and scholars how to write about it, as the proven reception patterns—be it those mobilized to discuss great masters and classics or those that served to handle the major polemics of the 1990s—no longer sufficed to effectively approach and appreciate the work of the Post-70 poets.

As noted in the introductory chapter, each poem without exception to a greater or lesser extent contributes both to negotiating the shape of (national) poetry at large and to the picture of its author's singular poetics. Nevertheless, the distribution of interest between these two aspects of literary activity in local poetry discourses has significantly changed over time. The spectacular debuts of the first two protagonists of this chapter, Krzysztof Siwczyk (b. 1977) and Yin Lichuan 尹丽川 (b. 1973), are among the earliest manifestations of the process of shifting accents after the nationwide polemics—between the Barbarians and the Classicists in Poland and the Intellectual and the Popular poets in China—in which the very definition of poetry was at stake, toward the focus on individual poetics. In literary-critical practice, this implies a change of tone from declarative to descriptive: from what (national) poetry *should* be to what (individual) poetry *is*. In Poland this transitional process proved to be relatively fast, while in China it took more time and had an intermediary stage: between dualism and pluralism, there was what I call a dialectic period. This phase roughly overlapped with the period in which the Post-70 poets reached artistic maturity, but its echoes can still be heard today in various critical discussions and sometimes translate into personal relationships between authors. I will try to draw a panoramic picture of this evolving landscape in the final section of this chapter through the prism of the notion of imagination and its specific development as a literary-critical category in Polish and Chinese poetry.

Were we to generalize, we might say that with regard to the general topography and main focus of poetry-critical discourse, poets born in the 1980s in China at the time of their debuts were in a similar situation to poets born in

the 1970s in Poland at the initial stage of their careers. The two authors discussed in section 2, Tomasz Różycki (b. 1970) and Li Hao 李浩 (b. 1984), in spite of the notable difference in their dates of birth, developed their poetics against a roughly comparable background; their long poems on which my reflection will center, Różycki's *Twelve Stations* (*Dwanaście stacji*, 2004) and Li's "Homecoming" (还乡, 2017) were published when they were at almost the same age (thirty-four and thirty-three, respectively), like Tadeusz Różewicz and Yu Jian 于坚 when writing their "card indexes" (thirty-nine and thirty-eight). As there are between *The Card Index* (*Kartoteka*) and "File 0" (0 档案), there are many mutual resonances between *Twelve Stations* and "Homecoming." Some of these commonalities have a literary-historical explanation—that is, the poets' partly convergent inspirations from world literature—and others stem from the similarity of personal experience they address. Both long poems display the authors' uncompromising search for identity and individual voice in the evolving cultural, natural, social, and spiritual landscapes. Unlike Yin and Siwczyk, who made their names as "water engineers," generating poetry from seemingly unpoetic everyday matter, Różycki and Li strive to keep the dramatically lowering metaphysical "water level" above zero and save the names of others, especially those who live "underwater," in the collective and ritual memory of their local communities, nourished by drying ideals and spiritual values. This is symbolically shown in the opening scene of Li's "Homecoming," where the I-narrator drags the spirit of a suicide onto the riverbank.

1 Initiations: Krzysztof Siwczyk and Yin Lichuan

Krzysztof Siwczyk and Yin Lichuan appeared on the poetry scene almost out of nowhere. Before his spectacular debut, Siwczyk, then still a high school student, had for some time read and practiced poetry at home in one of the apparently lesser poetic regions of Poland, namely Silesia. Yin Lichuan, before writing her first poem, had studied French in Beijing and filmmaking in Paris and had not been interested in poetry at all. Both entered the stage without prejudices, expectations, and calculations, with similar concerns and themes to raise in their poems. Like in the case of "one dawn, two evenings" apropos Czesław Miłosz and Ai Qing 艾青, the different trajectories their literary paths assumed in the subsequent years largely reflect the increasingly divergent patterns of the field forces in Polish and Chinese poetry discourses at the time. Siwczyk was successful due to what was perceived as his impartiality in the ebbing nationwide polemic and the unpredictability of his writing, for which he invented a new formula with every released collection. Yin rose to fame as

a star of the emerging group called the Lower Body poets (下半身诗人), seen as a young hit squad of the Popular camp, and almost quit writing after several years of intense artistic and social activity.

In the following sections, after a brief reconstruction of Siwczyk's and Yin's artistic paths, we will witness what I playfully call an intertextual date, when the I-speakers from their respective poems exchange meaningful looks on the opposite sides of a sportsground's fence. I will take this unique opportunity to invite them for a longer man-woman intercultural conversation on the experience of initiation, coming of age, early adulthood, identity formation, the role of sacrum, and the complex interactions between local and global factors in the era of transformation, including the problem of perceived provinciality of their respective native places, which both authors had to cope with early on in their writing.

1.1 *First New Voices after the Polemics and What Happened to Them Later*

In Polish literature, seventeen-year-old Krzysztof Siwczyk's enter-the-dragon debut is comparable only with that of Rafał Wojaczek in 1965 (as Jakub Winiarski first pointed out¹) and perhaps with Dorota Masłowska's (b. 1983) cult hip-hop novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą białą-czerwoną* (lit. "Polish-Russian War under a White-and-Red Flag"²) of 2002 written when the author was a third-grade high school student.

Siwczyk's first poems appeared in 1994 in a poetic brochure published by the NaDziko ("GoWild" or "Wildly") group, established by his older friends based in his native Silesia district, the most industrial area of Poland. The same year, he won a one-poem competition organized by a local poetry club called Perełka ("little pearl") in his hometown of Gliwice. In 1995, he published the poetry collection *Wild Children (Dziki dzieci)*, which immediately drew the attention of critics. It won first prize in the Jacek Bierezin National Poetry Competition and received an award from *Culture Times (Czas Kultury)* magazine.

Commentators were struck by the maturity of his sincere (but not naive), simple (but not vulgar), and detabooized (but not desecrating) account of coming of age in a "depersonalizing stone world,"³ as Paweł Majerski described Silesia in his anthology of Silesian poets. Tomasz Majeran emphasized the ease with which Siwczyk overcame the dualism that marked the poetry scene, noting that the young author "on the one hand, skillfully operates with elements

1 Winiarski 1996.

2 Translated as *White and Red* in the UK and *Snow White and Russian Red* in the US.

3 Majerski 2000: 14, trans. J K.

of classicizing forms, and on the other, eagerly reaches for the colloquial idiom, purportedly typical of the ‘Barbarians.’”⁴ Karol Maliszewski, in turn, wrote that the I-speaker in Siwczyk’s collection “waits and strains his ears. His generation, too, is waiting for something,”⁵ taking Siwczyk’s debut as a portent of something new that was going to happen in Polish poetry.

Siwczyk did not disappoint those who pinned his hopes on him. In 2006, Piotr Śliwiński recalled Siwczyk’s debut book as a prelude to what in the mid-2000s already counted as an impressive and mature oeuvre:

Out of the banal, he extracted singular elements, initiatory motifs such as love, eroticism, the feeling of belonging to the surrounding world; at the same time [he showed] a growing indifference to this world, disbelief and the yearning for belief, [seeing] parents as both loved ones and strangers, and happenstance as the source of crucial choices in life. [...] This persistence in forcing his way toward himself, accompanied by the increasingly acute awareness of the difficulty of this task in the following years, remained a hallmark of his poetry.⁶

As Śliwiński and many others observe, “this persistence in forcing his way toward himself” has been the only unchanging characteristic throughout Siwczyk’s unbelievably dynamic and diverse oeuvre to date. His next collection after *Wild Children*, titled *Emil and We* (*Emil i my*, 1999), was written in the nihilist spirit of Emil Cioran. After that, in several books, the author meditated over what philosophers like to call the fall into language, consistently unmasking the slippages of its hidden mechanisms. In his recent collections, Siwczyk gradually regains his former trust in the written word as a medium for existential expression. This is visible in particular in the book-length nine-part (resembling the term of pregnancy) long poem *Where Either* (*Dokąd bądź*, 2014), written before the birth of his daughter. In a sense, in *Where Either* the poet returns to initiatory motifs, this time experiencing his initiation into fatherhood.

There are some uncanny poetic coincidences in Siwczyk’s life that stimulate readers’ and critics’ imagination alike, although the poet—unlike Świetlicki, who eagerly cites his quasi-mystical connections with Mickiewicz—is far from overemphasizing their importance. Siwczyk attended the same high school in Gliwice as Adam Zagajewski and Julian Kornhauser, leaders of the New

4 Majeran 1996: 7, trans. J K.

5 Maliszewski 1996: 193, trans. J K.

6 Śliwiński 2007: 291–292, trans. J K.

Wave. Unlike the Brulion poets, he avidly read the New Wave authors, and—as he recalls—was pleasantly surprised when a question about the New Wave appeared in his final high school oral examination. He also recalls fondly that Kornhauser’s visit to Gliwice once saved his skin in a mathematics class:

At grade four, shortly before the final high school exams, in a math class, I was asked a question about probability. I had no bloody idea how to answer. And then the door opened, and someone entered and said that Kornhauser was in Gliwice and had an author’s meeting in the city. As the school verse monger, I was delegated, and rescued. Later, I acquainted him. Today we are friends. And I’m in a very close relationship with his son Jakub, who is an outstanding poet as well, and almost a professor.⁷

In an essay describing the atmosphere of Gliwice during the period of transformation and the place of poetry in this reality, he adds:

Standing at the school bulletin board, I used to read poems written by graduates of this noble institution. The very way in which the surname “Kornhauser” sounds delighted me. There was something provocative, rough, and strange in it. In “Zagajewski,” in turn, a Parnassian undertone could be heard. For a young man attending a high school that was focused on the production of mathematical-physical brains, the school bulletin was *passé*, but it referred one to the distant, analogue era of *samizdat* and underground publications. This fact alone spoke in favor of the bulletin board heroes. It allowed them to be perceived as candidates for models with whom one can identify oneself, for a teenager who could thus set himself apart from the mass of colorless, mutually indistinguishable adolescents.

Reading poetry proved to be a challenge thrown in the face of the pragmatic majority of the would-be economists, informaticians, etc. Reading poetry also turned out to be a glove thrown to the city, which, after the transformation began in 1989, decided to put some technological makeup on its face.⁸

7 Siwczyk and Lichecka 2017, trans. J K. On that note, Julian Kornhauser is also the father of Agata Kornhauser-Duda, Poland’s current first lady, but it is well known that there is a wide gulf between Agata on the one hand and her father and younger brother on the other in terms of political views. In 2016, Jakub famously said that he would not be surprised if President Andrzej Duda would one day be brought before the State Tribunal.

8 Siwczyk 2016, trans. J K.

Gliwice, although seemingly anything but poetic, is also the city where Tadeusz Różewicz settled in 1949 to join his wife-to-be and stayed for almost twenty years; it is where he wrote his most important works. Siwczyk saw him once in a cemetery, at his mother's grave. The young poet expressed his admiration for Różewicz on many occasions, as the one who "reached the limits of what is expressible in literature."⁹ In a recent interview from April 2020, commenting on the Covid-19 pandemic and life in quarantine, Siwczyk invokes Różewicz as a "master of isolation" and a "prophet of apocalypses":

Isolation is something that needs to be learned. One of the masters of isolation was Tadeusz Różewicz. I don't know how many times in my life I've been reconfirmed in my belief that Różewicz was a prophet of apocalypse. Let's add in haste: a prophet without followers. For followers always deform and trivialize the ascetic rule of the apocalypse.¹⁰

Krzysztof Siwczyk's good friend, the poet Maciej Melecki, cofounder of the NaDziko group, was born in Mikołów, a small city in Silesia and the hometown too of Wojacek. When Lech Majewski, the director of the movie *Wojacek* (1999), first read Melecki's poems, he immediately decided that he wanted him to write the playscript, not knowing of his connections to Mikołów. When Majewski's team arrived in Mikołów for trial shots, Siwczyk happened to be in the city. Passing nearby, he stopped to observe the staff's work. The director asked him for help because he needed someone to walk in front of the camera to test some technicalities. As he did an old woman appeared, looked at Siwczyk, and exclaimed, "Oh, Rafuś!" (a diminutive of Rafał), mistaking him for Wojacek, who had died almost twenty years earlier.¹¹ And thus Siwczyk got the main role and subsequently won several prestigious prizes for his performance at various festivals in Poland. He was also nominated to the European Film Award, along with Richard Harris and Brunon Ganz, and was subsequently offered a role in a Wim Wenders movie. Yet he rejected this and other offers and continued his career as a poet. Only once did he make an exception. Ten years later, he agreed to take part in the production of a noncommercial film titled *Expelled* (*Wydalony*, 2010), based on Samuel Beckett's plays with a playscript written again by Melecki.

Instead of a career in the film industry, Siwczyk started to cooperate with the then niche Mikołów Institute located in Wojacek's old family house.

9 Siwczyk and Lichecka 2017, trans. J K.

10 Siwczyk and Lichecka 2020, trans. J K.

11 Niemczyńska 2014.

Today, the institute is a renowned cultural organization. Melecki is the director, and Siwczyk serves as the deputy director. They publish a literary journal, *Arkadia*, and a literary series, The Library of “Arkadia” (Biblioteka “Arkadii”), and undertake various initiatives promoting poetry.¹²



In 1999, the year when Siwczyk was taking his first steps in the film industry, Yin Lichuan, fed up with European life and cinematography, decided to go back to Beijing.¹³ Within a few months of her return, the twenty-six-year-old graduate of the Department of Western Languages of Beijing University and the Parisian College of Cinematography (École supérieure d'études cinématographiques) made her name as a poet, essayist, fiction writer, and charismatic organizer of poetry events. Unknown, with no experience of literary writing, and unaware of the growing animosities on the poetry scene, in August that year she surprised prominent poets in both camps with an invitation to a national poetry reading to commemorate Jorge Luis Borges. The event was dedicated to her friend, the emerging poet Hei Dachun 黑大春 (b. 1960), who had confessed to her over a beer that he “felt like having a poetry performance.”¹⁴ Curious of this “beautiful woman poet who has just returned from France,” as the director Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 recalls,¹⁵ and wondering “how come she knows so many poets,”¹⁶ as the poet and rock musician Yan Jun 颜峻 (b. 1973) admits, many artists accepted the invitation. Among them were renowned authors such as Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955), Che Qianzi 车前子 (b. 1963), and Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (b. 1956). Encouraged by the success of the event and by the poets she befriended, Yin too started writing.¹⁷

Yin's first published work was the essay “Patriotism, Sexual Suppression ... and Literature: Open Letter to Mr. Ge Hong ... bing” (爱国、性压抑……与文学——致葛红……兵先生的公开信). The text was written in late 1999 and appeared in January 2000 in the journal *Lotus* (芙蓉). It was a response to Ge Hongbing's 葛红兵 paper “Mourning Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature” (为二十世纪中国文学写一份悼词), in which the scholar attacked major

12 Skurtys 2019.

13 This section draws extensively on my biographical essay on Yin Lichuan included in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Krenz 2021b). I retain here the original references to primary sources.

14 Yin, Liu, and Qiao 2002: 276, trans. J K.

15 Shao 2012, trans. J K.

16 Yan Jun 2002: 235, trans. J K.

17 Yin and Zhao 2010: 182.

figures in Chinese literary history, including Lu Xun 鲁迅, for their allegedly immoral attitudes in personal life. Yin's piece—a combination of merciless irony targeted at Ge and deep understanding of, and sympathy toward, what is weak and impure in human nature—echoed widely in the literary environment and earned her the status of a vaunted columnist.

In 2000, Yin's short stories and poems started to appear in unofficial literary journals. One of them was *Lower Body Poets* (下半身诗人), established that year by Shen Haobo 沈浩波 (b. 1976) and several other authors born mostly in the 1970s, whom Yin joined, as she holds, because she was attracted by their provocative poetry.¹⁸ She also frequently published online, especially on a forum called *Shi Jianghu* (诗江湖, lit. "rivers and lakes of poetry," but also translated as Poetry Vagabonds)¹⁹ launched by the Lower Body group. The first issue of *Lower Body Poets* included the best-known poem in Yin's oeuvre, "Why Not Make It Feel Even Better" (为什么不再舒服一些), which includes a playful reference to the Intellectual-Popular polemic that appears, in Maghiel van Crevel's words, almost "as an afterthought"²⁰ following a not entirely satisfactory sexual act:

Why Not Make It Feel Even Better

ah a little higher a little lower a little to the left a little to the right
 this isn't making love this is hammering nails
 oh a little faster a little slower a little looser a little tighter
 this isn't making love this is anti-porn campaigning or tying your shoes
 ooh a little more a little less a little lighter a little heavier
 this isn't making love this is massage writing poetry washing your hair
 your feet

why not make it feel even better huh make it feel even better
 a little gentler a little ruder a little more Intellectual a little more Popular

why not make it feel even better

Translated by MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL²¹

18 Nanfang Dushibao 2012: 145.

19 See discussion of the term's translation in van Crevel 2017c, esp. pp. 47–48.

20 van Crevel 2008: 309.

21 Ibidem: 307.

《为什么不再舒服一些》

哎再往上一点再往下一点再往左一点再往右一点
 这不是做爱这是钉钉子
 噢 再快一点再慢一点再松一点再紧一点
 这不是做爱 这是扫黄或系鞋带
 喔 再深一点再浅一点再轻一点再重一点
 这不是做爱这是按摩、写诗、洗头或洗脚

为什么不再舒服一些呢 嗯 再舒服一些嘛
 再温柔一点再泼辣一点再知识分子一点再民间一点

为什么不再舒服一些²²

The first collection of Yin Lichuan's works, *Even Better* (再舒服一些), came out in 2001. Although it was titled after Yin's most famous poem, the latter was not among the twenty-eight poems included in the book. The volume also featured eleven short stories and eighteen essays representing a wide range of topics and styles. In the introduction to the collection, Shen Haobo refers to the opinions of users of the *Shi Jianghu* forum, who called Yin "Ku Ayi" (酷阿姨, "Cool Auntie"), and lists "seven kinds of weapon" she possesses, in his view: "coolness," "carnality," "female consciousness," "bright talent," "willfulness and wanton," and "reasonable thinking and adroitness."²³ He also quotes poems written by other members of the Lower Body troupe: Hou Ma's 侯马 "Rainy Night" (雨夜) and Duo Yu's 朵渔 "Yin Lichuan on a Lotus" (芙蓉上的尹丽川), both of which were dedicated to Yin and testify to her position as a new celebrity in poetry circles.²⁴ Nevertheless, as noted by Yan Jun in "Give Me Orgasm, Give Me Love" (给我高潮, 给我爱), scandalizing and "cool" as Yin's works were, at the deepest level they express the "suffering," "split," and "struggle" of the author. As a person who grew up with the ethos of intellectual work, Yan Jun argues, Yin must pay a high psychological price for her attempts to stay close to the common people, including the most debauched ones, such as rural workers, prostitutes, and criminals.²⁵ Hu Chuanji 胡传吉 calls her poetics "soft

22 Yin 2006a: 26.

23 Shen Haobo 2001: 2.

24 Ibidem: 4.

25 Yan Jun 2002: 284-285.

rock" (as distinct from "hard rock"), arguing that Yin's work reflects the modern experience of urban life with its moral confusion and spiritual disintegration.²⁶

The determination to explore the dark side of social life is manifest also in Yin's 2002 novel *Fuckers* (贱人), which gives an account of the life of city thieves and focuses on their psychological portraits, sketched in the course of a minimalist plot. In reviews posted on *Shi Jianghu*, Wu Ang 巫昂 points out that the novel "ridicules all the rules," and Li Shijiang 李师江 calls Yin an "extremist," arguing that *Fuckers* does not aim to give the pleasure and joy that permeates her early poetry, but instead invites the reader to experience first-hand the process of self-debauchment, to the point at which "under pressure, all meanings explode and disappear, and one is granted a certificate of debasement." Shen perceives the book as a turning point in Yin's career and "the first step on her way to become a truly influential author."²⁷ In 2003, Yin published a book of essays, *37.8°*, and a collection of short stories, *Thirteen Self-Sufficient* (十三不靠).

Yin's activity as a poet at the time centered on poetry websites and later also on her blog, which she launched in 2005. In the period 2003–2004, she was invited to international poetry festivals in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In 2006, her friend and former Lower Body poet Huang Lihai 黄礼孩 published all her works in verse to date in *Cause and Effect* (因果, also translated as *Karma*). The 167 poems featured in the book show the gradual shift of Yin's artistic interest from "lower-body" experiences to social concern, and the evolution of the general atmosphere of her poetry from provocative to increasingly melancholic.

The same year, on June 14, Yin posted on her blog: "From today on, I will play a director,"²⁸ and so she did successfully for several years. Her debut *The Park* (公园) won the FIPRESCI Prize at the 2007 Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival, and her second production, *Knitting* (牛郎织女), premiered at the 2008 Cannes Festival. In 2010, with A Mei 阿美 and Gu Xiaobai 顾小白 she wrote a screenplay of Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 famous drama *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (山楂树之恋), and the next year she directed the romantic comedy *Sleepless Fashion* (与时尚同居). In 2012, she became the mother of twin daughters.

Twenty poems Yin created at irregular intervals during her career in the film industry, along with a selection of her earlier works, are included in *The Doors* (大门, 2015). The title alludes to the famous rock group, while the eponymous poem, written in 2009, reflects on the early death of its vocalist Jim Morrison.

26 Hu Chuanji 2008.

27 Li Shijiang (undated), Wu Ang (undated), Shen Haobo (undated).

28 Yin 2006b.

The tone of most of these new poems is contemplative, their diction moderate. Many of them ponder on life in its physical, emotional, and philosophical dimensions, including Yin's own experience of parenthood described in "For My Babies" (给宝贝) from 2013, as well as nostalgic memories of past loves, as in "Missing" (思念) from 2014.

After many years of different artistic and personal choices, in the experience of parenthood Yin's and Siwczyk's literary paths come closer to each other again. The childhood and youth experiences that feature in their debut and early poems echo in their later work as they ponder on the future of their children and their relationship with them.

1.2 *Poems Dating Poems*

The intimate conversation between Krzysztof Siwczyk's and Yin Lichuan's poetry which I present in this section begins with an intertextual "love at the first sight," perpetuated in Siwczyk's "Warm-Up, Cooling Down" (Rozgrzewka—stygnięcie) and Yin's "Sportsground" (操场).

Krzysztof Siwczyk
Warm-Up, Cooling Down
 for Robert Adamczak

These are not even flashes It's not
 clear anymore Memory cools down
 like colorful disco pod lights after switching off

I only remember the smell of the asphalt covering the handball
 pitch on which after rain
 female students would go out for trainings

They were all horribly pale
 like lemon wafers I was eating
 when observing their warm-up

No one would come for their trainings
 except myself They were so meaningless Indistinguishable
 All wearing same washed-out shorts

Only once one of them—probably the fullback
 turned to me pulling up her tube socks
 We looked at each other

For the rest of the game she played great
 I know I was important to her It must have been so
 Next week the team was dissolved

Rozgrzewka—stygnięcie
 dla Roberta Adamczaka

To już nawet nie są przebłyksi To już nie
 jest wyraźne Pamięć stygnie
 jak wyłączony po dyskotecę kolorofon

Pamiętam tylko zapach asfaltowego boiska
 do piłki ręcznej na które po deszczu
 wybiegały trenować studentki

Wszystkie były tak strasznie blade
 jak cytrynowe wafle które jadłem
 przyglądając się rozgrzewce

Na ich treningi nie przychodził nikt
 oprócz mnie Były tak nieistotne Nierozpoznawalne
 Wszystkie w tak samo spranych spodenkach

Tylko raz jedna—chyba rozgrywająca
 odwróciła się do mnie podciągając getry
 Popatrzyliśmy na siebie

Już do końca meczu grała wspaniale
 Wiem że byłem dla niej ważny Musiało tak być
 Tydzień później rozwiązano sekcję²⁹

Yin Lichuan
Sportsground

On the other side of the wire mesh, snow, several kids playing
 I take out a cigarette, light a lighter
 behind me a row of single-story houses, inside
 there's a friend of mine, lying in a sickbed

29 Siwczyk 2006: 12, trans. J K.

it's the first time I've seen an IV
dripping little by little

I inhale a lot of cold air, the smoke I exhale
is cold too. How long it's been since I last saw
a piece of vast land, or sky
(this is but a matter of geography)
Day by day at home, facing a screen or a partner
or go out, to another house with
wine, friends, and lovers

For example, a sportsground, a good few years
or perhaps more? This word, this place
will soon vanish from my memory

Standing so close to the sportsground, I recall
something as if from childhood, something related to time
what is that, I want to speak out

but it increasingly resembles
a camera shot: a melancholic man
approaches the fencing, takes out a cigarette, lights up
kids making noise on the other side of the wire net

what was between me and that man
what finally happened on that sportsground?

《操场》

隔着铁丝网，一片雪，几个孩子
我掏出一根烟，点着火
身后是一排平房，里面有一个朋友，躺在病床上
我第一次看见打点滴
它是一点一滴的

吸起很多冰凉的空气，吐出的烟
也冷。有多久我没见过
一片广阔的地、或是天
(这仅仅是个地理问题)

我天天在家、面对屏幕和爱人
或是出门，另一间房子里
总有酒、朋友和情人

就说操场，大概好几年？
还是更久。这个词，这个地方
快从我的想象里消失了

站在操场边，我确实想起了
像童年一样的东西，跟时间有关
到底是什么，我很想说出来

但这越来越像
电影镜头：一个阴郁的男人
走向铁丝网，掏出一根烟，点着火
孩子们在远处，隔着铁丝网，尖叫

我跟这个男人，是什么关系
操场上到底，发生过什么³⁰

When I first observed the correspondence between these poems, my imagination produced a suggestive picture of a teenage Siwczyk staring at a slightly older Yin Lichuan as she plays with other girls. And another one: Siwczyk as the man with a cigarette from Yin's poem. After all, distance is "but a matter of geography," and imagination covers such distances in the blink of an eye.

Besides the obvious convergences in terms of the scenery and topic, this association came to me so quickly perhaps partly because of the direct juxtaposition of the themes of sport, disease, and a romantic thread in Yin's "Sportsground," which is present also, although in different configurations, in other poems by Siwczyk, most prominently in "A Fall: Playing a Doctor" (Upadek—zabawa w lekarza). There, "I" recalls a cycling accident from his childhood in which he broke his collarbone. A "friend from the fourth floor" (koleżanka z czwartego piętra) visited him at home every day as a "doctor"; she injected his teddy bear with ink, and "slightly touched my cheek with her lips to check / whether everything was fine with my eyes" (zahaczała wargami o policzek sprawdzając / czy wszystko w porządku z moimi oczami).³¹ So, who

30 Yin 2001: 200–201, trans. J K.

31 Siwczyk 2006: 10, trans. J K.

knows, perhaps Yin's and Siwczyk's textual avatars met already in earlier childhood, before that "date" on the sportsground.

One problem posed by Yin's "Sportsground" in a closer reading is that we do not know on which side of the wire net the I-speaker actually was in the scene recalled in the second part of the poem—that is, whether her contact with the man with the cigarette was just eye contact and she describes her childish infatuation that stimulated her imagination, as in the case of Siwczyk who remembers how he naively created a love story in his mind, or whether the experience was less innocent, to put it euphemistically. Taking into account that Yin basically has no problem with straightforward descriptions of sexual acts, one could assume that this might have indeed been some less tangible, elusive experience. One example of her straightforwardness is "Justice" (公平), written on September 15, 2000, which opens *Even Better*. The poem, a seemingly conventional account of the romantic love of "two divinely beautiful people" (一对璧人), ends with the image of "highly nutritious semen" (营养丰富的精液) which "spreads whitely on the ground" (白白地流在地上);³² this is probably a reminiscence of Yin's sexual intercourse with her "first man," with whom, as she reveals in "My University Life" (我的大学生活) from 37.8°, she made love on a square covered with snow.³³

Siwczyk is not always innocent in his poems either, but, in general, he tends to be much more subtle than Yin. In "Emptying" (Pustoszenie), he too describes what was likely his sexual initiation, but in much less extreme conditions than Yin's sex in the snow—at home, and carefully arranged beforehand:

Emptying

This will begin after some time
 which I still try to control
 petty activities concocted in haste: breakfast
 (fish from yesterday's supper or a cheese sandwich), winding
 the already smelling humid wool around the chopping board
 The only thing I found within hand's reach
 Everything out of spite escapes from me It's almost

after I've reached the limit of my imagination The doorbell
 rings I try to wait out I surrender She
 enters Takes off her gray sweater Her sweating body

32 Yin 2001: 181, trans. J K.

33 Yin 2003: 48–49.

emits vapor as if taken from a butcher's and put in the freezing cold
outside

We make love so quietly that one can hear how our mouths swell
We are two mimes who forgot the alphabet
of scream We finish unable to recall when we started She leaves

On the table an unfinished slice of cheese
already shrunk and dried and sweated too Several real
hours passed Now it's already after
No movements Changes of speed No
falls convalescence and recoveries Only
regular slow emptying I'm sitting living the rest of my life
deprived of foundations like a fillet

Pustoszenie

To zacznie się za jakiś czas
który próbuję jeszcze sam ustalać
Pospiesznie wymyślane zajęcia: śniadanie
(ryba z kolacji albo chleb z serem) nawijanie
już zalatującej wilgotnej wełny na deskę do krojenia
Niczego więcej nie znajduję pod ręką
Wszystko złośliwie umyka Już prawie

po Na więcej nie starcza wyobraźni Dzwonek
do drzwi Próbuję przeczekać Kapituluję Ona
wchodzi Rozbiera szary szetland Jej spocone ciało
paruje jakby wystawione z masarni na mróz
Kochamy się tak cicho że słyhać jak puchną usta
Jesteśmy dwójką mimów którzy zapomnieli alfabetu
krzyku Kończymy nie pamiętając kiedy zaczęliśmy Wychodzi

Na stole nie dojedzony plasterek sera
zdążył skurczyć się wyschnąć i spocić się Minęło
parę prawdziwych godzin Teraz jest już po
Żadnych ruchliwości Zmian tempa Żadnych
upadków rekonwalescencji i ozdowień Tylko
regularne powolne pustoszenie Siedzę Dożywam
pozbawiony podstaw jaki filet³⁴

34 Siwczyk 2006: 22, trans. J. K.

The above text sheds yet a different light on Yin's "Sportsground." In light of "Emptying," "Sportsground" might indeed be read as a narrative of sexual initiation. *Before*, sexual experience had appeared to the I-narrator to be something mysterious and magical, but when the imaginations turned into reality, only some strange void remained that one cannot verbalize and explain: a mixture of satisfaction, disenchantment, and disbelief, accompanied by a weird feeling of the unreality of everything ("What was between me and that man?").

This kind of elusive experience of derealization echoes in another poem from the same collection: "Bed" (床). There, Yin constructs a fifteen-line-long argument proving the realness of the bed to herself, having caught herself with awkward phrasing: "On a real bed ... / Have you ever slept on an unreal bed?" (在一张真正的穿上…… / 你睡过一张虚假的床吗?). The monologue ends with: "So / please lie down on the real bed ... / Without liquid and speed. / You lie and lie and finally close your eyes" (请躺在一张真正的床上…… / 没有液体和速度。 / 你醒着醒着就闭上了眼).³⁵ Again, we do not know what the function of the bed in that particular situation was, nor whether sleeping means sleeping or rather "sleeping," but it is exactly this teasing, sometimes waggish ambiguousness where Yin's poetic flair manifests itself, and not necessarily in her openly "pornographic" poems.

Yin sometimes acts as if she is afraid to show her more sensitive side. Especially in her early poems, when it comes to socially engaged topics, she writes in a way that resembles Yu Jian's and Han Dong's laconic idiom, as van Crevel noted,³⁶ but at the same time, she clearly subverts or even derides it. In *Even Better*, we find two texts that encourage associations with Yu's "Luo Jiasheng" (罗家生), discussed in chapter 3, namely "Retired Worker Old Zhang" (退休工人老张) and "A Woman I Know" (我所知道的一个女人), the last poem in the collection. The former text tells an absurd story of Zhang, a retired worker who spends long hours looking at a nail in the ceiling. One day, the nail loosens and pierces Zhang's left eye. Yin concludes:

In the ceiling, there's a hole now, like his left eye
in which now there's a hole too. So he can see the hole in the ceiling
only with his right eye. Only after looking for a long time
does the alarm clock sound and the day starts

天花板上，有一个洞，就像他的左眼
是一个洞。所以天花板上的洞

35 Yin 2001: 192, trans. J.K.

36 van Crevel 2008: 328.

他是用右眼看见的。他要看上老半天
闹钟才会响，天刚蒙蒙亮了³⁷

One may venture that in this poem Yin, intentionally or otherwise, sets Yu Jian against Han Dong, in whose poem “A and B” (甲乙) the two protagonists take different positions on the bed, trying various perspectives and angles to look at the branches through the window, closing one eye or the other. The combination of Yu’s quasi-plot and technique of writing with Han’s experimental optics produces a parodistic effect.

“A Woman I Know” begins with an elliptic description of a car accident: a woman rides a bike with one hand while fixing her hair is hit by a truck. Yin comments:

Perhaps this is the first time I've seen this woman
and obviously the last
(except in dreams)
She was fixing her hair at the time
there was no wind
perhaps she just loved beauty
I think I already know her very well
her attitude to life and her fate
but I don't want to speak of her
this poem wants to say that:
1. It's snowing in Beijing today.
2. The snow is going to freeze.

我可能是第一次
当然也是最后一次
(梦除外)
看见这个女人
当时，她正用手捋了捋头发
当时也没什么风
可能出于爱美
我觉得我已经很了解她了
她的人生态度和她的命
不过我不想再说她了
其实这首诗说的是：

37 Yin 2001: 182, trans. J.K.

1. 北京在下雪
2. 雪会结成冰。³⁸

This poem, although more dramatic, bordering on cruelty, is also more complex than “Retired Worker” and contains a hue of self-mockery. The author ridicules her own automatic assumption that she knows everything about people she encounters, and her tendency to pass judgment based on appearances. It also smuggles in some emotional content, if only in parentheses, as a brief digression which suggests that the scene of the accident will long haunt the witness.

Similarly, the high-and-mighty, excessively self-confident attitude, specific to some of the Brulion Generation poets, is something that Siwczyk tries to deal with in his early work. In the poem that opens *Wild Children* entitled “My Youthful Narcissism” (Mój młodzińczy narcyzm), the I-speaker recollects his friendship with an old woman:

My youthful narcissism went off the rails this year
 I'm already a big, old boy
 I don't go for pornographic movies and don't ride a mountain bike
 I prefer to visit an old lady
 drink together raspberry tea and eat cheesecake

We discuss whether it still makes sense for her
 to put a new bathtub instead of the old one
 Whether they will deliver coal for winter
 and who will throw it to the basement

[...]

Only my friends in sleeveless shirts
 under which one can see their freshly pink nipples
 say that I'm a fart
 and that I shouldn't care about this old bag

Mój młodzińczy narcyzm wykoleił się w tym roku
 Jestem już dużym starym chłopcem
 Nie chodzę na filmy porno ani nie jeżdżę na rowerze górskim
 Wolę odwiedzać starszą panią
 pić z nią herbatę z malin i jeść sernik

38 Ibidem: 205–206, trans. J.K.

Rozmawiamy o tym czy warto jeszcze
 wstawić nową wannę w miejsce starej
 Czy przywiozą ze składu węgiel na zimę
 i kto go zrzuci do piwnicy
 Przeglądamy także kartki pocztowe od wnuków z wakacji

[...]

Tylko koledzy w podkoszulkach na ramiączkach
 spod których świecą ich świeżo-różowe sutki
 mówią że jestem pierdoła
 i nie powinienem zajmować się tym starym próchnem.³⁹

Siwczyk, unlike many of Yin's male friends from the Popular camp, apparently has no ambitions to be a tough macho. He is almost religiously solemn in reconstructing his adolescence, with all its mixed emotions, naiveties, expectations, discoveries, and concerns.

In contrast to Siwczyk, in *Even Better* Yin Lichuan opens up perhaps only in one poem, namely "Mom" (妈妈), in which she recalls how she, as a thirteen-year-old girl, wondered why and for what or whom her mother lived, "how it is possible that one woman / becomes the mother / of another woman" (一个女人 / 怎么会是另一个女人 / 的妈妈), and whether motherhood is worth the sacrifice. Her mother strikes her as the most familiar and at the same time the strangest person in the world:

On my way home I saw
 the back of an old woman carrying a basket of vegetables
 Mom, is there anybody stranger than you

当我回家的路上瞥见
 一个老年妇女提着菜篮的背影
 妈妈，还有谁比你更陌生⁴⁰

The observation that one's parents are getting old can be one of the most shocking discoveries of adolescence, one which sparks an acute awareness of the passing of time. It also marks one's symbolic psychological disconnection from one's parents, a moment in which one no longer feels organically linked

39 Siwczyk 2006: 5, trans. J.K.

40 Yin Lichuan 2001: 190, trans. J.K.

to them, and instead starts to perceive them as strangers and look at them with a new critical distance. Some children strive to intuitively protect themselves from this experience, trying to push this inconvenient and disturbing knowledge out of their consciousness. Siwczyk as a fourteen-year-old boy has similar thoughts to Yin. In “Parents Sleep in the Afternoon: I’m 14” (Rodzice śpią po południu—mam 14 lat), he imagines his parents in their bedroom and compares his mother after her last diet first to Jesus Christ on the cross and then to a woman painted on a match box (the latter image is, in his opinion, more beautiful).⁴¹ In another poem, “Hurraaay! A Sparrow Is Dying, My Mother Sleeps Safely” (Hurraaa!—Wróbel zdycha—matka śpi spokojnie), he recollects how he would monitor his mom’s afternoon naps, checking every now and then that she is still breathing.⁴²

Besides the vicarious experience of the inevitability of time, which they realize observing the bodies of their parents, the subjects of Siwczyk’s and Yin’s poems face the necessity to consciously define their relationship with the surrounding space. The two authors share the painful awareness of provinciality of their native cities, but finally come to embrace the “provincial” atmosphere and “provincial” aesthetics.

Yin was not born in Beijing but in Chongqing, some 1,500 km away from the capital. She was the third child and only daughter in her family of five. Both her parents were teachers, her father at a university and her mother at a high school. When Yin was one year old, her dad was assigned to work at Guizhou University, and the whole family moved to Guiyang, where the poet spent her early childhood. In 1980, when she was seven, after many failed attempts her father managed to obtain permission for the family to relocate to Beijing. He was convinced that only in the capital city could they live a decent life and give the kids a chance at a better future. As recalled by Yin in the essay “Commemorating Beijing” (为北京的纪念) from 37.8°, their entire luggage consisted of some “broken utensils and one hundred kilograms of rice,” because “reportedly, rice in Beijing was expensive.”⁴³ Yin and her mother lived in a nine-square-meter room, while her father and two brothers stayed in a dormitory, so the Beijing of her childhood conceivably bore little resemblance to the hypermodern cityscape of a world-class metropolis. Only after ten years did the family get a new apartment in a residential area in Fengtai District in the then suburbs of Beijing. It took Yin many years to integrate into the city. She recalls that the further from the city center her family moved,

41 Siwczyk 2006: 13.

42 Ibidem: 33.

43 Yin 2003: 4–5.

the more Beijingsese she felt.⁴⁴ A similar paradoxical mechanism was at work when she left China for Paris. Her emigrant experience allowed her to look at Beijing from a critical distance but also with a greater sense of sentiment than before her studies in Paris. It is only after her return that she started to consider Beijing her home.⁴⁵

In the poem “For This One Glance” (为这一眼), she ridicules what we might identify as mechanisms of the (self-)Orientalization of China vis-à-vis Western culture. She also observes an analogous problematic dynamic within Chinese society as such—between cities and the countryside, and between poets and so-called common people. The work in question is a reflection of a train traveler who enjoys the landscape when crossing less developed areas:

I am on the train, they live in my window
 I pass them by, they pass by
 my look of a Beijinger, for this one glance
 I hope they would continue living like this, the style of the Southern
 Kingdom
 is so plain and modest. You should never build
 skyscrapers here, kids should never play
 Transformers, women should never use Chanel perfumes,
 rice should be always planted by hand,
 if house roofs don't leak, how can poets
 write out poetry?
 [...]
 For one glance of a foreigner,
 I had to denounce the high building where I lived
 and every now and then ingratiatingly smile to flies in the streets,
 so for my glance from the train
 I wish village kids to love trash, and grow up amid trash,
 and give birth to other kids, and pass the ballad of the native soul on
 them

我在火车上，他们活在我的车窗
 我路过他们，他们路过
 我来自京城的一眼，为了这一眼
 希望他们继续这样生活，南国的风情
 多么朴素。千万不要盖起

44 Ibidem: 20.

45 Cf. Krenz 2018: 61–62; 2020b.

高楼大厦，孩子们千万不要玩
 变形金刚，女人们更不要用夏奈尔香水，
 水稻将永远是人工播种，
 房子若不漏雨，诗人还怎么
 写得出诗歌
 [...]
 为了外国朋友的这一眼，
 我不得不痛斥我所住的高楼，
 并时常对街边的苍蝇们谄笑
 所以为了我火车上的这一眼
 祝福农村孩子们热爱垃圾，在垃圾中长大，
 生出另一些孩子，传唱民族灵魂的歌谣。⁴⁶

Yin's reconciliation with her native country and the city of her youth, despite the many absurdities she detects in the way they function, is an important stage in the process of self-identification. It is no longer the city that describes her and determines her actions; instead, she starts to describe the city and gives meaning to its various locales, associating them with different experiences from her life.

In the final poem from *Wild Children*, "Alright" (*Wszystko dobrze*), Siwczyk likewise meditates on the debatable aesthetics of his surroundings. His window view consists of "trash container car park empty carousel blocks of flats skyscraper / trash container / blocks of flats skyscraper nothing blocks of flats road sign" (*śmiećnik parking pusta karuzela bloki wieżowiec / bloki wieżowiec przerwa bloki i znak drogowy*)—all of this makes for a "living zone of death" (*strefa zamieszkania śmierci*). But "it's alright" (*wszystko dobrze*), concludes the I-speaker, "I have nested in the place / where the bed sags a bit I also tamed // the cold tape along the edge of my blanket" (*Zagnieździłem się w tym miejscu / gdzie nieco zapadł się tapczan / Oswoiłem także // zimną tasiemkę obszywającą koc*).⁴⁷ Poetry can exist without a special landscape, be it the leaking roofs of village cottages (like in Yin's "For This One Glance") or the stunning cutting-edge architecture of modern cities, which was nowhere to be found in Siwczyk's Gliwice in the 1990s.

Moreover, unlike many other seedy cities in Poland that required modernization but might at least exhibit some remnants of their former glory, such as picturesque old markets and churches, Gliwice has never been particularly famous for its sightseeing value. The complicated history of the city and the

46 Yin 2001: 197–198, trans. J K.

47 Siwczyk 2006: 39, trans. J K.

entire Upper Silesia is a central problem of many of Adam Zagajewski's poems and one book-length essay, *Two Cities (Dwa Miasta, 1991)*, referring to Gliwice and Lvov, where the poet was born. It is also important in understanding Tomasz Różycki's work, to which we will turn in the next section. Situated on the borders of Poland, Czechia, and Germany, for many decades,

the region [of Upper Silesia] used to be a genuine melting-pot. This is where Polish, German, Jewish, Silesian, Czech, and also Ukrainian and Belarusian elements met and clashed, creating a new form of borderland culture. The trajectory of this historically Germanic region describes a centuries-long battle for ownership, in which Poland and Germany were the main contestants.⁴⁸

After World War II, Silesia, together with several other regions known as the Recovered Territories (*Ziemie Odzyskane*), was detached from Germany and incorporated into Poland. The German population of the city was forced to return to their homeland, and their houses were assigned to Poles who had been relocated from Eastern borderland territories which, in turn, become part of the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Yet this multiculturalism was never acknowledged by the Polish communist government, which carried out the politics of homogenization, more or less actively destroying all manifestations of heterogeneity. Thus Gliwice became a city that could boast neither national tradition nor multiethnic diversity on which rich local culture could be built. In a place like this, conceives the young Siwczyk, there is no material for poetry. Therefore, a poem must come from inside and must be carried to term in the poet's body, not lower body, not upper body, but exactly in the middle, in the womb, under one's heart. "Alright" ends with the lines:

Now I must
carry this anxiety and this poem to term like a fetus which is so difficult
to release and even more so to abort.

Teraz muszę
donosić ten lęk i wiersz jak płód który tak trudno
uwolnić a tym bardziej usunąć⁵⁰

48 Stańczyk 2009: 53–54.

49 Ibidem.

50 Siwczyk 2006: 39, trans. J.K.

There is one more resonance between the work of Krzysztof Siwczyk and Yin Lichuan worth highlighting, one that surprised me when I reread their oeuvres with a comparative eye since I had tacitly assumed that this is not a topic that might be of any significance to Yin. Siwczyk is very much concerned with the question of God. In roughly half his poems in *Wild Children*, he makes explicit allusions to the Christian faith or its symbols, which constitute an inextricable part of the landscape of everyday life in Poland, as the reader may remember from my discussion of Lei Pingyang's 雷平阳 trip to Poland in chapter 2. In "A Poem for Anne Sexton" (Wiersz dla Anne Sexton) and "For" (Dla), both located in the first part of his debut collection, Siwczyk writes of God as his rival, against whom he has to compete for his girlfriend—who, as we may guess, is a well-behaved young woman that obeys the conservative Catholic ban on premarital sex. He naively assures her that his breath is more fragrant than her old pope's (John Paul II's, that is) and that he can perform similar rituals as she can see in the church on her body. He even declares that he can play God for her if she gives herself to him.⁵¹ In the texts belonging in subsequent parts of the collection, he is increasingly annoyed with the indifference of God and finally loses faith altogether. In the eponymous poem "Wild Children," he captures the moment of disillusionment, constructing a peculiar scene in a church. Two scruffy kids approach Jesus hanging on the cross. A girl starts to tickle Jesus's feet and a boy reports on His facial expressions. The narrator joins them:

I don't know why but I approach them and
 now we tickle together using various techniques
 the frozen God We wait a while and then start again
 We decide to continue until
 something changes

We wait without a word
 strain our ears

I am waiting
 I am straining my ears

Nie wiem dlaczego ale podchodzę do nich i
 już razem łaskoczemy różnymi technikami
 zmarzniętego Boga Odczekujemy chwilę i dalej

51 Siwczyk 2006: 20.

Postanawiamy robić to tak długo
aż coś się zmieni

Czekamy nie mówiąc do siebie
Nasłuchujemy

Czekam
Nasłuchuję⁵²

There is one poem in Yin Lichuan's oeuvre, "In a Little Town" (在小镇), written in 2002 and included in *Cause and Effect*, a reminiscence of her stay in France, where she too reports an intriguing clash of spontaneous childishness with the daunting seriousness of Christian sacrum. She leaves the church early before the end of some unidentified religious ceremony and waits for her friends outside. When they appear, they walk ahead together through the anonymous town. As they stroll, on the way

a blond-hair blue-eyed little girl
sucks my finger
staring blankly as we slowly pass in front of her
without a word

一个金发碧眼的小女孩
吮着我的手指头
呆呆看我们从街心缓缓经过
不发出一点声响⁵³

Strictly speaking, this is a physically impossible scene, but the preceding lines shed some light on it. "Then too I had nothing to do / with myself" (那时候我和我自己 / 也没有什么关系了), writes Yin, recalling how she felt in Paris three years before, when she almost married a Frenchman, as we learn from her autobiographical essays and interviews.⁵⁴ The feeling of estrangement in a foreign country likely escalated in the gloomy church and prompted her to leave the building to take some fresh air and soothe her eyes by looking at the natural landscape and observing an ant climbing on her shoe. This estrangement finally becomes internalized and turns into self-estrangement. It disturbs

52 Ibidem: 23, trans. J K.

53 Yin 2006: 81–82, trans. J K.

54 See, e.g., Yin et al. 2002.

the connection between her mind and body, which seems to receive physical impulses from other objects and people rather than from its own brain. Or, maybe, she is reminded of her own childhood and these memories at some point are transformed into a sensory experience of the foreign girl sucking her (Yin's) fingers? At any rate, some deep split had appeared in her consciousness in reaction to these contrastive images: the unnatural sacred space of the church that provoked repulsion, on the one hand, and the innocent child in the street, on the other, a split that remains still unhealed after three years.

1.3 *Siwczykfication of Yin Lichuan? Affordance and Concordance in Comparative Reading*

Yin Lichuan's poetry does not hinge on ostentatious blasphemy and cheap exhibitionism, as some critics tend to see it. Instead, I posit, it stems from a specific mental disposition, which makes the poet feel overwhelmed with, and thus unreceptive to, many forms of transcendence and metaphysics in art and in life alike. This type of sensibility, even if often disguised as irony that borders on cynicism, by no means should be perceived as inferior to, or taken less seriously than, the sensibility of those who feel comfortable among elevated ideals and metaphysical visions. Disentangling Yin from the Chinese literary-historical context of her writings, which I have attempted by bringing out resonances between her poems and those of Krzysztof Siwczyk, allows one to see those features of her work that have been effaced in the local Chinese discourse but which were felicitously recognized and appreciated from the very beginning in Siwczyk's oeuvre by its Polish commentators.

The fact that Siwczyk's work was approached within a clearly different paradigm of reading, although it shares many features with Yin's poetry, resulted arguably from several factors. The first and most general reason is that Polish poetry discourse at the time was entering a different phase than the Chinese one. This phase was aimed at the increase of pluralism: authors who maximally constricted the spatiotemporal horizon of their poetics, and filtered the world through their subjective consciousness and body, like Siwczyk, were particularly welcomed. Second, Siwczyk's poetry did not need to break any taboos, as most of the taboos had been already broken by the Brulioners and the "cursed poets"; therefore his work did not shock anybody and was received with a greater attention to detail. Last but not least, Siwczyk is a man. Many lines of his poetry that were considered neutral in terms of their compliance with social conventions, or even taken as a manifestation of the author's tenderness and delicacy of feelings, might have incited scandal rather than encourage incisive, nuanced reading had they been written by a woman.

It is not my intention to question Yin's choice to join Shen Haobo and others in the Lower Body group, particularly since had it not been for their influence, she may have never started writing poetry. But it is true that by so doing, she automatically made herself a particularly easy—much easier than her male friends—target of superficial criticism based on stereotypical, biased readings. A double label stuck to her poetry. On the one hand, like the entire output of the Lower Body group, her work was inscribed into what we may term as an after-polemic; that is, a still distinct dichotomy inherited from the older generation, gradually evolving toward a dialectic phase. In this configuration, Lower Body was located on the opposite pole to Academic(ized) Writing (学院派), represented by young university-employed poets who continued the Intellectual line, such as Jiang Tao 姜涛 (b. 1970), Jiang Hao 蒋浩 (b. 1971), and Hu Xudong 胡续冬 (1974–2021). On the other hand, Yin became a subject of another dispute, namely the discussion around the phenomenon known as *meinü wenxue* 美女文学, literally “beautiful women's literature,” usually rendered as “glamlit.” Although the term refers mostly to fiction writers, it was nevertheless mobilized by Yin's critics against her. In 2005, she was attacked in Ta Ai's 他爱 book of essays *Criticizing Ten Glamlit Authors* (十美女作家批判书), which follows a formula reminiscent of Yi Sha's *Criticizing Ten Poets* (十诗人批判书). Along with Yin, Ta Ai discusses Sheng Keyi 盛可以, Chun Shu 椿树, Wei Hui 卫慧, Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝, Jiu Dan 九丹, Hong Ying 虹影, Mian Mian 棉棉, Zhao Ning 赵凝, and Mu Zimei (also rendered as Muzi Mei) 木子美. In the chapter devoted to Yin, the author justifies her decision to count the poet among glamlit writers as follows:

Yin Lichuan's poetry collection *Even Better* is not very poetic; her novel *Fuckers* also appears rather mediocre. Were it not for her identity as an ideologist of the great Lower Body poetry, based on her writing alone she wouldn't have gained the recognition she enjoys now. As far as the superficial glamlit authors are concerned, their performance is more important and more attractive than their writing. Yin Lichuan didn't avoid this trap either.⁵⁵

In the following part of the essay, Ta Ai substantiates her statement, arguing, among other things, that during poetry readings Yin performed her poetry in a way that provoked sexual reactions in male audiences and that her writing boils down to “selling sex” (卖性). On that occasion, she cites Duo Yu 朵渔,

55 Ta Ai 2005: 95, trans. J K.

a member of the Lower Body “circus” (Ta Ai’s term) who withdrew from the group in 2003, claiming that their poetry’s selling point (买点) is sex:

In his essay “The End of the ‘Lower Body,’” Duo Yu finally admitted their mistake, and said the movement shouldn’t be continued. He explained: “This is a double-edged sword. Emphasizing the importance of the body will always be crucial and ingenious. The problem is that in our focus on the body we should emphasize ‘body writing’ and not ‘writing body.’ We should allow body to write itself, and not try to achieve a provocative effect by writing about body.”⁵⁶

Van Crevel showed that Lower Body has little to do with glamlit, if only because, unlike the fiction of Mian Mian or Wei Hui, their poetry could hardly generate any financial benefits,⁵⁷ and I entirely subscribe to his argument. But if it was not a market-oriented enterprise, perhaps indeed, as Duo Yu suggests, it was a provocation for provocation’s sake? And if that was the case, then what does it mean?

I submit that if Yin really did aim purely to provoke, this would mean, first and foremost, that she was not a very good and determined provocateur. She either did not want, or perhaps was not able to, fully control the confessional undercurrent that at times surfaces in her verse; especially in poems written roughly since 2003, this happens increasingly often, and in the newest works included in *The Doors* there is virtually only confession. Yin-mother, Yin-director who produces movies like *The Park*, where she tries to rethink her relationship with her father, and Yin-essayist who produces long pieces about her childhood included in 37.8^o—these are still the same as Yin the author of *Even Better*, even if the distribution of emotional and rhetorical accents is different. Shen Haobo put it very clearly introducing her debut book, alluding to the famous “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” (长恨歌) by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846):

The lucky Yin Lichuan on whom alone the emperor’s love of three thousand beauties was placed, without that pain and the force that pulls her down, wouldn’t her “Fly” [the word is provided in English in the original] change into a balloon’s “Fly” [ibidem]? And wouldn’t the hollow balloon fly too high and bang?⁵⁸

56 Ibidem: 98, trans. J K.

57 van Crevel 2008: 320–321.

58 Shen 2001: 4, trans. J K.

As the old polemics gradually faded away, Chinese critics and scholars since the 2010s have started to interpret Yin's early work differently. She has been read more carefully and not only as part of a general phenomenon that played a specific role in negotiating the definition of national poetry. Many readers have attempted interpretations that show Yin's contribution to the reflection on more universal social, ethical, and philosophical problems, mostly through the prism of feminist thought; for example, "Mom," as Bao Yuqi 鲍宇琪 notes, has been read as a challenge to the traditional model of motherhood based on lifelong self-denial, or, in Jiang Lili's 姜藜藜 essay, as an accusation thrown in the face of the patriarchal system and traditional family ethics.⁵⁹ Other examples include a deconstructionist reading of "Why Not Make It Feel Even Better" by Zhao Bin 赵彬 and a reading of "Roses and Itching" (玫瑰与痒) within the framework of New Criticism by Zhou Xiaoxiang 周小香.⁶⁰ The slight shift in the dominant paradigm of reading Yin's poetry might be taken as a signal that the evolution of poetry discourse in China has entered a new stage. After some two decades of a general focus on defining central notions, drawing boundaries, and fencing off territories, the questions of *poetry* and *poethood*, although they still sometimes raise emotions, more and more frequently give way to considerations of actual *poems* and *poets*, whose propositions are revisited with the use of various theories and methodologies designed to tap into the artistic and conceptual potential of the texts.

In any event, it is interesting that Yin Lichuan's and Krzysztof Siewczyk's early poetics seem to interact with one another more dynamically and productively than with their respective local contexts. I believe in the power and importance of such cross-cultural readings because they help look at poems in a way that is free from bias and essentially disinterested. They allow one to distance oneself from the specific hierarchical structures of the source discourse and focus on a given text's multiple affordances more than on its concordance with locally dominant trends, hierarchies, or expectations. This is one reason why I chose Li Hao for a protagonist of the next section, a young poet whose collection *Homecoming* (还乡) I translated into Polish shortly after its publication in China. At roughly the same time, some of his poems were also translated into English by Eleanor Goodman, and soon after that *Homecoming* was banned in the PRC. On December 17, 2020, Li was awarded the second prize of the 2020 Yage Prize for Literature, established by the Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts to promote the production of excellent Chinese Christian literature, music, and visual arts. With major adjustments, *Homecoming* was published

59 Bao Yuqi 2011: 143; Jiang Lili 2009: 60.

60 Zhao Bin 2008; Zhou Xiaoxiang 2017.

in Taiwan in 2021 as *Pangolin, Republic* (穿山甲, 共和国), and his selected poems will appear in English, Spanish, and Japanese in the coming years.

Thus Li's poetry started to circulate in foreign literary discourse before it was actually absorbed and "managed" (i.e., pigeonholed or compartmentalized) by broader audiences and literary-critical discourse in China. One can therefore attempt a reading that is virtually free of poetry-political baggage and its affordances have not yet been reduced to concordances. I will undertake such an attempt by comparing Li Hao's long poem "Homecoming" with Tomasz Różycki's book-length poem *Twelve Stations*. This is certainly not to say that the context from which the texts *emerge* should be ignored. Rather, the operation consists in suspending the immediate context into which they *fall* after being created in order to see how they behave in a different force field, con-versing on the comparative stage.

2 Solastalgia: Tomasz Różycki and Li Hao Saving Singularity of Names

Whereas Krzysztof Siwczyk and Yin Lichuan finally managed to nest in their native places, Tomasz Różycki and Li Hao never experience the comfort of self-identification with/through a place. On the one hand, they cannot fully accept their here and now in modern, rootless cities; on the other, they are aware that the roots that some older authors have persistently searched for no longer exist other than in narratives passed on by former generations, in vicarious, increasingly mythicized (post)memories. Even the places they recall from their childhood, have during their years-long absence been transformed to the point of being nearly unrecognizable. This arouses the feeling of what ecopsychologists call solastalgia, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht drawing on the Latin word *solacium* ("comfort") and the Greek root *algia* ("pain, suffering, sickness"). The notion, as Kimberly Skye Richards explains,

convey[s] the anxiety caused by the inability to derive solace from one's home in the face of distressing events. It is part and parcel of a new abnormal of the Anthropocene, characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, chaos, relentless change, and deep distress caused by a changing climate, erratic weather, and species extinction. Solastalgia might be precipitated by the dwindling numbers of salmon in a river; the eradication of buffalo on the plains; the hyperextraction of natural resources through logging, mining, and tar sands development; or urbanization, through the construction of condos, ski hills, and golf courses.⁶¹

61 Richards 2019: KL 5212.

The two poets share the experience of estrangement from a place caused by its irrevocable transformation, a disturbing awareness of being homeless at home. But they do not turn their back on their homelands. Instead, their attitude might be described with a metaphor proposed by Naomi Klein:

When I think of the land as my mother or if I think of it as a familial relation, I don't hate my mother because she's sick, or because she's been abused. I don't stop visiting her because she's been in an abusive relationship and she has scars and bruises. If anything, you need to intensify that relationship because it's a relationship of nurturing and caring.⁶²

Różycki and Li, too, try to save and rebuild as much of their homes and their personal histories as possible through literature, even if they do realize that the obtained image will always be pitifully defective.

2.1 *Homeless at Home*

Różycki's hometown Opole has a similar history to Siwczyk and Zagajewski's Gliwice. Its industrial landscape is a legacy of two centuries of Prussian and German rule over the city. The multiethnic population, in its turn, reflects the complexities of postwar European territorial policies. Like the Zagajewski family, Różycki's grandparents had experienced a belle époque era in Lvov's history, that is, the interwar period, and its dramatic fate during World War II. After the war, when Lvov was incorporated into the territories of what is today Ukraine, they were forced to leave. The city functions in the family memory as a traumatic but sentimental narrative, which Różycki has regularly taken up in his works since his debut collection under the self-suggestive German-language title *Vaterland* (1997). The modern epic, or mock-epic (*poemat heroikomiczny*), as critics frequently call *Twelve Stations*,⁶³ is his most extensive attempt to deal with this mythical infernal paradise and utopian hell.

In *Twelve Stations*, Różycki describes a family pilgrimage to a little town called Gliniany near Lvov. The narrator, Grandson, is assigned a mission to gather the family, from its oldest generation to its youngest, divided by conflicts and animosities and scattered throughout Poland, in order to travel together to their native place and rebuild a local church. The oldest family members claim that they can remember where golden ritual utensils were buried before the war and volunteer to help excavate them. Once the squad is ready, they board the train at Opole, heading to Lvov, but the expedition never reaches its

62 Quoted in Richards 2019: KL 5279.

63 See, e.g., Kudyba 2010; Maryjka 2016; Dobrzyńska 2019; Johnston 2019.

destination and the train itself turns out to be a ghost train, driven by the narrator's late Grandfather. Meanwhile, as they set out to fulfill their mission, their Silesian homes and gardens face destruction.

The structure of Różycki's work is reminiscent of the twelve books of Adam Mickiewicz's national epic *Pan Tadeusz*, while the invocation of Opole that precedes the narrative proper is a pastiche of the most famous lines of Mickiewicz's masterpiece, that is, the invocation of Lithuania. The family saga, sketched against the historical background of the country, is an immediately obvious play on the saga of the aristocratic Soplica family in *Pan Tadeusz*. On the train, however, where the living family members are accompanied by those who had died long ago, the story arguably resembles more Mickiewicz's Romantic-patriotic drama *Forefathers' Eve (Dziady)*, whose title refers to an ancient Slavic feast commemorating the dead, a context that might be an interesting interpretive perspective also for Li Hao's "Homecoming."

"Homecoming" develops around a similar concept of traveling to a non-existent place. In the opening lines of the text, when the I-speaker crosses the river approaching his native village, a soul of a suicide whom he used to know in childhood emerges from the water. The wanderer offers to lead the man's soul to his old family home, knowing that he would not be able to find his own way because since his death everything had changed in the neighborhood; housing developments had reached the countryside, a railroad had been built, old houses had been relocated. Like *Twelve Stations*, "Homecoming" crowns the years-long process of the author's self-identification both as a person and as a poet.

In the eponymous poem and in the entire collection alike, besides Miłosz and Gu Zhun 顾准, whom I mentioned in the introduction, one may hear the echoes of several Western modernists, including T. S. Eliot's criticism of civilization, or Rainer Maria Rilke's metaphysical connections with nature and attempts to find an antidote to the spiritual void of the wasteland, or Robinson Jeffers's fascination with indigenous culture and pagan rites. One might also trace Li's affinities further back to Romanticism, whose legacy shaped the development of modernism in Chinese poetry. Hölderlin's fusion of Greek antiquity, Christianity, and paganism, Novalis's magical idealism, and Schiller's Christianized idea of enchanted nature may all come to mind when reading *Homecoming* and "Homecoming." However, in Li's oeuvre one can see how this Romantic-to-modernist trajectory crumples when confronted with the contemporary world. In hypermodern reality, signs and symbols, abundantly present in Romantic and modernist works, have largely lost their signifieds as the transcendental dimension which they once indicated has now shrunk to the size of a frog "endowed with a heart of a crane liberated in the weeds in the

waving pope” (在起伏的教皇中，得到苇间获释的鹤心), to borrow a hallmark image from “Going to Hengshui” (去衡水途中).⁶⁴ On the one hand, Li’s vivid descriptions may evoke associations with, for example, neoexpressionist catastrophism, as Li Jianchun 李建春 notes, listing painters such as Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, and Jörg Immendorff.⁶⁵ On the other hand, like in Różycki, there is also a lot of intimacy, timidly wrapped in occasionally playful but bitter irony.

2.2 *In Search of Lost Spacetime*

In her essay on Zagajewski and Różycki, Ewa Stańczyk, following Mary Louise Pratt, refers to Upper Silesia as a “contact zone.”⁶⁶ This contact zone, however, is a place not only of intercultural but also interepochal encounter. Those who moved there come from not just a different space but also from a different time—and they continue living this foreign time in their new homeland. One of Grandson’s tasks before the expedition is to save, and fix, an old pendulum clock from Babcia’s (Grandma’s)⁶⁷ house before one of his uncles comes up with the idea of selling it and spending the money on alcohol. There is a telling scene in which the oldest members of the family try to carry the big and heavy clock down the stairs, only for it to be permanently wedged in the door, blocking the staircase. It is as if time itself has got stuck in this narrow, unfamiliar space, an unsightly industrial landscape.

History left an indelible imprint on the Różycki family. They could not agree on their attitude to Ukraine—a country which centuries ago had been brutally colonized by Poland but yet waged a massacre of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943 known as the Volhynian slaughter, officially recognized by the Polish parliament in 2016 as a genocide.⁶⁸ These family conflicts are a microcosm of Poland’s public discourse today, particularly the messy official politics of memory that continues to hamper the development of a modern,

64 Li Hao 2017: 106–107, trans. J K.

65 Quoted in Li Hao 2017: 192–193.

66 Stańczyk 2009.

67 Babcia means “grandma” and is normally used by kids to refer to the mother of one of their parents. Bill Johnston decided to leave the word untranslated in its original form perhaps in order to emphasize the Polishness of the woman. Traditional Polish babcias are very specific personas: unconditionally, though perhaps embarrassingly, loving of their grandchildren, for example overfeeding them with *bigos* and other simple dishes from Polish cuisine or secretly smuggling food into their belongings (in *Twelve Stations*, Grandson, in a most inopportune moment, discovers a piece of stinking rotten fish in his backpack!).

68 On the interactions between poetry and the Różycki family history, see Grudzińska-Gross 2012.

democratic, and tolerant society. One of the many manifestations of this collective disease of memory is the emergence of the All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszechpolska*). This ultranationalist organization of young people, which carry out mass “patriotic” demonstrations and marches, for instance against homosexuals, refugees, Jews, people of color, and many others, and which shout slogans such as “Poland for Poles,” is parodied in the below scene of a family fight:

As he [Grandson] did so, he listened to gruesome tales from the last war:
of monstrous murders by a neighbor’s hand, often even brother’s;
of people killed in the most savage ways because they spoke Polish,
or simply had a Polish given name; of the killing of women and children
and elderly folks, and of the deep sorrow they felt
when they had to leave those lands; of hatred between relatives, of tears
shed
and of the conviction that the sea of blood spilled between the two
nations
could never be parted. Some of those speaking immediately formed
a local branch of the Union of All-Polish Youth,
which two of the seventy-year-olds signed up for right away,
and which presented demands for land to be taken away from the
Ukrainians,
for the defense of Polishness and of the Mother Country against barbarity,
for the restitution of property to estate owners in the East
and the return to servitude of the local population. But then Antoni
Major,
suddenly recovering clarity of diction, roared in their ears in Ukrainian:
“Goddamn you, go take a shit in the corn!” then whacked someone in the
head
with his saber, though he unintentionally used the hilt end,
such that no loss of life ensued. There were also other acts
of social intercourse and interpersonal communication,
to the sounds of choral singing and toasts

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Wysłuchał przy tym [Wnuk] strasznych opowieści o czasach wojny
ostatniej,
o potwornych mordach z ręki sąsiedzkiej, często nawet bratniej,
kiedy zabijano w najdziksze sposoby za to, że ktoś mówił po polsku,
albo że polskie nosił imię, o mordach na kobietach, dzieciach,

starcach i o ogromnym żalu, kiedy trzeba było te ziemie zostawiać,
o nienawiści pomiędzy bliskimi, o łzach wylanych
i o przeświadczeniu, że morze krwi przelanej między narodami
nigdy się już nie może rozstać. Zaraz się zawiązał pośród
mówiących Związek Wszechpolskiej Młodzieży,
w który wstąpiło dwóch siedemdziesięciolatek
i wysunęło żądania zabrania ziem Ukraincom,
obrony polskości oraz Macierzy przed barbarzyństwem,
przywrócenia majątków dziedzicom na Wschodzie
i powrocie do ucisku ludu tamtejszego, lecz Tośku Major,
nagle odzyskawszy przytomność mowy, huknął im do ucha
“A idy ty w kukurudzu sraty!” i grzmotnął jednego w łeb
swoją szablicą, lecz nieszczęśliwie stroną rękocyfry,
więc się obyło bez ofiar śmiertelnych. Doszło też do innych aktów
społecznej komunikacji i interpersonalnych angażmętów,
przy wspólnych śpiewach i toastach⁶⁹

Eventually, the family arrives at a consensus, mostly thanks to the irreplaceable mediation of vodka. No one expects that the worst is yet to come. Returning to their roots, they discover that the peaceful landscape they had left behind has since been annihilated. The narrator paints an apocalyptic vision of allotment gardens deserted not just by humans but by all living things. His detailed description spans two pages, from which I shall quote but a brief excerpt.

Meanwhile, on the same night destruction came to all the creatures
that inhabited the allotment garden by the tracks, to all the mementos
there,
and the ideal world was given over to the mercy of the allotment world.
The new owners
had sold the place, taking advantage of a decent price
offered by the municipality [...]
At this commotion the alarm was instantly raised
in all the various provinces, in the vegetable patches, in trees, in the brush,
and under bushes hordes of residents began to gather
in consternation: ants, beetles, peelle bugs,
honeybees, bumblebees, and also snails of a kind hitherto unknown
among the local fauna, raised in the darkness of currant bushes,
beneath wilting leaves, in labyrinths of underground passageways

69 Różycki 2015: 182–185.

never seen by human eye, hatched from mimesis
 and solitude, dreamed up out of squalor, filth—out of freedom.
 The day of judgment was come, a day of trembling and despair. The first
 machines
 rumbled over the rusty old fence that put up little resistance.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Tymczasem tej nocy przyszła zagłada na wszelkie stworzenie
 zamieszkujące działkę tuż przy torach, na wszelkie pamiątki
 i wydany temu światu na pastwę świat idealny. Nowi właściciele
 sprzedali ten teren po dość dobrej cenie, korzystając z okazji,
 jaką dało miasto [...]

Na ten dźwięk natychmiast ogłoszono alarm we wszystkich
 prowincjach, na grządkach, drzewach, w chaszczach,
 pod krzakami zaczęły gromadzić się strwożone tłumy
 mieszkańców wioski: mrówek, skórkojadów, chrabąszczy,
 trzmieli, pszczół oraz ślimaków, stworzeń nieznanych
 do tej pory faunie, wyhodowanych w ciemnicach porzeczek,
 pod zwietrzałymi liśćmi, w labiryntach podziemnych korytarzy,
 nigdy nie widzianych ludzkim okiem, wyklutych z mimikry
 i samotności, wyrojonych z nędzy, z brudu, z wolności [...]
 Nadszedł dzień sądu, trwogi i rozpacz. Pierwsze maszyny
 rozjechały starą, zardzewiałą i niewiele wartą dla obrony siatkę.⁷⁰

This is followed by the plunder of the family home:

Soon the local winos started coming into the apartments
 and removing chairs and drinking glasses, armchairs, apparel,
 lamps and tables, mattresses and shoes. All that was left were books
 strewn about the room, but soon they too were read through by fire.
 [...]

Nothingness was taking possession of that place,
 entropy was entering a site of order and concentration,
 distraction reigned over existence in that moment,
 and the world was entering a zone of nonbeing, into bacterias of the
 atom,
 resolving into oxygen and carbon, beginning to create
 other entirely new phantasms in the dense air, to lead a life after life,

70 Różycki 2015: 216–217.

uncanny, quantumesque, and to penetrate everywhere, to gather anew in respiratory passages, in digestive systems, on tongues, on shelves, in pots and on trash heaps, by fences and along curbsides. Molecules expanding in the sun and the heat created spectral images over the road and the town that dazzled even when you watched through dark glasses. The dust irritated the eyes, making them red; the air changed and roared, celebrating without cease. In it you could see joy, dance, freedom from any kind of form, you could see possibility.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Niebawem też zaczęli wchodzić do środka miejscowi żule i wyciągać po kolei krzesła i szklanki, fotele i ubrania, lampy i stoły, materace i buty. Zostały tylko książki, rozrzucone na środku pokoju, ale i je wnet przeczytał ogień.
[...]

Nicość ogarniała to miejsce, entropia wchodziła w miejsce porządku i skupienia, rozproszenie królowało w tej chwili nad bytem, świat powoli przechodził w sferę nieistnienia, w sferę snu, całość zamieniała się w drobnutkie cząstki, w bakterie atomu, rozkładała się w tlen i węgiel, zaczynała tworzyć w gęstym już powietrzu inne, zupełnie nowe urojenia, prowadzić życie po życiu, upiorne, kwantowe, i wnikać wszędzie, gromadzić się znowu w drogach oddechowych, w układach trawiennych, na językach, na półkach, w garnkach i na wysypiskach, pod płotami i wzdłuż krawężników. Rozszerzone w słońcu i ciepłe drobiny tworzyły widmowe obrazy ponad drogą i miastem, migotały i unosiły się pomimo ciemnych okularów. Kurz drażnił spojówki, zaczerwieniał białka, powietrze brzęczało, huczało, świętowało bez przerwy. Było w nim widać radość, taniec, wolność od wszelkiej formy, było widać możliwość.⁷¹

Decomposition of spacetime in Różycki's poetry results in the decomposition of the subject. The "I" in *Twelve Stations*, argues Justyna Tabaszewska,

on the one hand, is immersed in what constitutes construction material of cultural memory; on the other hand, he fights in vain to disentangle

71 Ibidem: 224–227.

from the clichés of memory, to recreate memory that is free from patterns imposed from outside. The disintegration of the subject is directly linked to the loss of trust in cultural and collective memory. The subject, losing the possibility of self-definition through identification (or just simple negation), is doomed to tracking the traces of the past that may allow him to confront both individual and cultural memory.⁷²

Różycki helplessly tries to distinguish some consistent patterns in the “entropic,” “uncanny,” “quantum-esque” tangle of these traces of the past. But the longer he seeks, the more complex the map becomes. He wants to escape, discover new lands on which human feet have never left an imprint, but there is no way out. The poet’s next collection *Colonies* (*Kolonie*) from 2006 opens two perspectives signaled in the title. In Polish, the word *kolonia* may mean a summer camp for kids; so one perspective may be the poet’s return to childhood, to the very beginning of the process of self-identification and replaying this process in an alternative way, blocking the historical element. The second meaning of *kolonia* brings to mind expeditions to unknown, exotic places, and filling in gaps on the map with a narrative of one’s own, as in colonization. Neither of these two solutions, however, proves effective.

In 2013, Różycki published *Tomi: Notes from the Stopping Place* (*Tomi. Notatki z miejsca postoju*), in which he rereads his personal history, the history of poetry, and the history of modern Europe through the history of Ovid’s exile, as an “archetypal and universal image of the condition of the artist in a society which does not understand him,”⁷³ and also of the condition of every human being thrown into history. In his sojourns across Europe, the author meditates on the impossibility of refuge from the hell of memory. The following fragment may be taken as the final break with the illusions and hopes he entertained in *Twelve Stations*:

The history of the fall does not end with the hell of the camps, because later comes the entire eternity of existence after and in spite of it. How long shall the memory last? How capacious is it? Century by century, we add new stories of slaughters and crimes. Hell is a place where all damned souls atone forever. Isn’t memory a hell, then? I’m drinking Zweigelt in Café Westend and I’m thinking about it. If the human fall is a result of the contravention of the laws [Różycki doesn’t specify *what* laws] and reaching for God’s “qualifications” to gain knowledge of good and evil, then

72 Tabaszewska 2013: 114, trans. J K.

73 Różycki 2014b: 15, trans. J K.

consciousness is a manifestation of it. We are banished from paradise, consigned instead to this other place, one that is densely covered with the traces of memory. We are alive, but we've lost our illusions forever.

How was the blood mixed? Or perhaps a more essential question is, where does the need of separating it come from, the necessity of checking, the necessity of asking such questions? Blood separated from blood—this must hurt a hell of a lot.⁷⁴

Li Hao's village, too, is a cross-generational and cross-cultural contact zone, and a very specific one, where the blood of grassroots Chineseness and Catholicism has been mixed for two centuries and now is being brutally separated by the government. It is quite common for elements of Judeo-Christian culture to permeate the poems of poet-academics who like to manifest their familiarity with world literature and the Western tradition. In their work, religion functions as part of intellectual rather than spiritual heritage of humanity, a text of culture that enters into dynamic interplay with other texts growing out from the local Chinese soil. Yet one hardly ever comes across images of Chinese communities for which Christianity is an integral part of everyday spiritual life or indeed any individual Chinese poet whose identity has been (co)shaped since early childhood by the Christian ethos and doctrine. Li comments on this when discussing his poem "Lord's Siren" (主人的塞壬), which lays out three levels of "chaos" that emerge from the interaction between Christianity and Chinese society and culture:

I believe this poem emerged directly from a triple axiological chaos: first, Chinese people's experience of the Christian God and faith; second, the impact of Christian culture on the Chinese, the way it molds their personalities; third, the process of mutual blending, rejection, and fission of the traditional Chinese countryside (influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) with Christianity.⁷⁵

The author sees these three levels of chaos from three perspectives: that of a villager, that of a wanderer in the city, and that of a university student. The three perspectives most clearly intersect in the poem "A Village Cemetery" (乡村坟场) from 2006, not included in *Homecoming*, which Li considers the beginning of his mature poetry writing. Discussing this poem, he speaks of the tortuous process of self-identification and painful search for his poetic idiom:

74 Ibidem: 154, trans. J K.

75 Li Hao 2017: 208, trans. J K.

They [the countryside and the city] produced an irreducible tension in my mind; these two forces accompanied me along the way to self-identification, toward my own self which begged to be completed but was constantly torn asunder by the hand of the epoch. Increasingly powerful and complex, they would often throw me alone onto a bridge or lock me behind some door. In this stage of my writing, as a young poet who was looking for language, trying to internalize various experiences, and pondering existence, I felt these forces traversing my body and soul, trying to contribute to the formation of my (or, the entire generation's) intellect; but at the same time, they also brought a strange blend of pain, despair, struggle, ideals, and violence.⁷⁶

The poet knows that for a person with such a diverse and ambiguous life experience, whose identity, consciousness, and language are marked by a profound split, the village will never be home again; "pure countryside poetry is not possible," his "throat will never be a virgin throat and [his] voice will never be a natural voice."⁷⁷ So, why does he want to return? Or, rather, why does he *have to* return?

2.3 *Saving Names*

I think at least part of the answer can be found in the final scene of Li Hao's "Homecoming." The poem closes with an image of an angel with a catheter projected onto the landscape of a cemetery where the souls of the narrator and of a girl dance a frantic *danse macabre* on a grave.

Your hand in mine on top of a grave we sing and dance all around wheat fields wave like a vast sea in our waists like your long dress flying in the wind grabbed by its stream

We tightly embrace each other's body we kiss each other among broken gravestones and burial mounds we roll about in the dance of a white bowl and red bowl

We take off each other's clothes we make love like crazy we tenderly touch each other's genitals like we used to touch the sky in our lifetime like when we stood out of God's sight watching after the angel with a catheter closing the gate in the fence

76 Ibidem: 187–188, trans. J. K.

77 Ibidem: 191.

我牵着你的手我们站在坟顶上喜乐地唱歌跳舞四周随之而起的麦芒浩如烟海一阵又一阵滚动的麦浪在我们的腰间如同你那飞入风中被风卷起的长裙

我们紧紧地拥抱着彼此的身体我们亲吻我们在到处都是断碑到处都是土坟的墓地上打滚我们在一只白碗和一只黑碗的舞蹈中

解开彼此的內衣我们疯狂地做爱我们温柔地抚摸着彼此的性器就像我们在生命里抚摩过的天空就像我们站在天父之外目送着戴尿管的天使关上篱笆之⁷⁸

This final image was inspired by a real person: a girl Li Hao met in Beijing, who attempted suicide by throwing herself off the eighth floor of a building. She lived but her urinary system has since remained dysfunctional. Li took care of her for three years until she was able to continue living on her own.⁷⁹ At the same time, however, it also brings to mind Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* and Walter Benjamin's signature essay "On the Concept of History" inspired by the painting, with the famous passage:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.

Translated by EDMUND JEPHCOTT and HOWARD EILAND⁸⁰

Benjamin's essay offers a messianic historiosophy, crowned with the image of *Angelus Novus*, a postspiritual angel. This messianism, however, is not to be confused with the messianism as part of the Romantic paradigm in the work of Mickiewicz and other nineteenth-century Polish poets, whose echoes are found in World War II poetry as well as in New Wave authors and the Classicists

78 Li Hao 2017: 171–172, trans. J.K.

79 Li Hao, personal communication with the author, May 26, 2020.

80 Benjamin 2006: 392.

of the Brulion Generation. It is a historical-materialist messianism which proceeds from the assumption of the impossibility of salvation in the religious sense of the word and takes this very impossibility as an ethical imperative to set a new, human-made metaphysics in motion. Parts II and III of the essay explicate the philosophical premises and their practical implications:

II

[...] The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.

III

The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation a l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day.

Translated by EDMUND JEPHCOTT and HOWARD EILAND⁸¹

Li Hao might be considered an epitome of a chronicler in the Benjaminian understanding of the word. He does not disguise himself as a priest, as some poets do. Instead, he just solemnly observes the secret protocol which binds the dead and the living and gives a detailed report of the perpetual ceremony of the guard change between generations, with all its serious, cruel, surreal, embarrassing, frivolous, and grotesque moments. The power that rests in the chronicler's hands is a manifestation of the same weak messianic power as the one that rests, for instance, in the hands of the translator in Benjamin "Translator's Task"; the relationship between the dead and the living is analogous to that between the original and its translation, metaphorized by Benjamin in the image of "a tangent [which] touches a circle fleetingly and at

81 Ibidem: 390.

only a single point, and just as this contact, not the point, prescribes the law in accord with which the tangent pursues its path into the infinite.”⁸²

This is the law of “fidelity in the freedom of linguistic development,” as Benjamin calls it.⁸³ But it can also be extended to personal and artistic development as a continuation of the work of others, which yet does not limit one’s imagination and creativity. Moreover, as Adam Lipszyc shows in his study *Justice on the Tip of the Tongue* (*Sprawiedliwość na końcu języka*, 2012), this is also the same mechanism that Benjamin detects in his analyses of Bertolt Brecht’s theater and of Karl Kraus’s criticism, where the idea of citation, mentioned in passing in “On the Concept of History,” is explicated. Citation creates ruptures in the structure of what Benjamin calls the “myth,” and helps save the singularity of the “name,” another important notion in his philosophy. The name is, says Lipszyc, “a connector between the world of language and the ethical order.”⁸⁴ It constitutes an epitome of a messianic act, characterized by Lipszyc as follows:

The messianic act is perfectly actual, perfectly ephemeral, perfectly contemporary, but exactly for this reason it is also the most substantial, meaningful, eternal. This actuality is a form of existence of eternity, because it is performed through repetition—not so much a mythical repetition as a destructive repetition: the logic of the “source-at-the-destination” [*źródło-u-celu*] broken by the act of destruction, the logic of citation as retributive and redemptive repetition of the word entangled in the myth; this destructive repetition brings out the name.⁸⁵

The issue of “names” blurred in the all-encompassing mythical element is crucial in “Homecoming.” Consider, for instance, the opening episode, where the narrator encounters the spirit of a suicide. He calls the specter by his name, Yuan Baomin 袁保民, and encourages him to get onto the shore, which might be read symbolically, as saving his singularity from the anonymous apeiron. The poet extracts the man’s individual history from the mythical (in Benjamin’s sense), faceless narration of History. The scene from the year 1959 mentioned in the poem is a citation (again, in Benjamin’s sense, as citation of a gesture taken out from its primary context) from Gu Zhun’s diary. This citation mobilizes a chain of messianic actions, including a sort of lay confession and a “last

82 Benjamin 1997: 163, translated by Steven Rendall.

83 Ibidem.

84 Lipszyc Adam 2012: 343, trans. J.K.

85 Ibidem: 348, trans. J.K.

judgment” in which the living absolves the dead from his past crimes (“you are a good spirit”) and vice versa. The I-narrator also reflects on the importance of the toponyms. The change of the place names disturbs the relationship between this and the other world. The opening scene reads:

A friend I know, his face surfaced and then disappeared again at the bottom.

Waves and whirlpools arouse on the lake, and churn like radish chicken cooked in an earthenware jar in 1959

I betrayed myself, sold out my parents, and Third Uncle who hanged himself from a beam.

Come out, there’s no point in hiding. I recognize you,
you are the one who, when I was nine, in the summer, drowned himself
in the rising waters of the Huai River in Nandabao.

And then in the afternoon, obediently, without offending anyone,
no longer wrestling with yourself, you frankly and squarely drifted carried
by Jinhe
only you and the vastness of the landscape

until you reached the stone bridge near southern rice paddies, there you
stopped,
you are Yuan Baomin. Your son said
you left at dawn without breakfast with a spade, trampling on dewdrops

and went to Nandabao to work on opening up wasteland. Your wife called
you with her golden voice her scream penetrating paulownias
but you didn’t answer. Your son ran around like crazy and didn’t find you
either.

You don’t need to thank me that I called people to dredge you up,

yes, I did steal tomatoes and sweet potatoes from your garden,
I don’t remember whether you threatened to scalp me.
So many years, and you’re still living in the water, seems that

you are a good spirit.

Is it because Ting bridge turned into Jin bridge Xing village turned into
Xin village

Liweizi and Jianweizi were moved and the old houses that remained were knocked down and only a muddy pond left and even mud was sold to Xining Railway Are you afraid you won't find your way home You heard the sound of whetting a knife and the roar of pigs you must be hungry climb up sit by my side I will light a cigarette for you and promise to show you the way

一个我熟悉的故人，刚刚将头露出水面就藏入了水底。
湖面上溅起的水花和旋涡，像瓦罐里
炖在五九年的萝卜土鸡，直溜溜地勾住

我背叛自己、出卖父母、悬梁自尽的三爷。
你还是出来吧，藏也没用，我认得你，
你 不就是我九岁那年的夏天，溺死在淮水涨潮
的南大包，

然后到了晌午，你是那样地听话不再咒人，
也不跟自己执拗，老老实实在顺着现在的金河，
孤独地漂在水上亲历渺茫，

从 南河头一直渺茫到南稻场下的石桥，你就不走了，
你是袁保民。你的儿子说，
天刚浑亮你没吃饭就扛着铁锹踏着露珠，

跑到南大包去开荒。你的媳妇以穿透泡桐的金嗓子喊你，
你也没回应。你的儿子跑断了腿也找你不着。
你不用感谢我叫人把你从冰凉的河水里捞上来，

我的确偷过你家菜园里的茄子和红薯吃，
我已经不记得你说过要剥我的皮抽我的筋。
这么多年了，你依然生活在水里，可以看得出

你是个有良心的好鬼。

你 是不是因为汀桥变成了金桥辛庄变成了新庄李围孜和犍围孜都搬走了而剩下的老宅子被挖成了水塘连泥土也卖给了西宁铁路你很担心再也找不到回家的路还是你听到磨刀和猪吼就会无比饥饿你上来吧坐在我身边我给你点支烟暖和暖和和我保证给你指路⁸⁶

86 Li Hao 2017: 155-157, trans. J.K.

Thus the narrator and Yuan Baomin's spirit travel together through the forest until they approach a pond where Yuan Changhui 袁常慧, "a student from our village" (我们村的大学生), is fishing. They part in front of the bridge where in the past a woman and a child lost their lives. In the woman's story we can observe the most dramatic intersection of the religious narrative of Christianity, the historical-political narrative dictated by the communist government (in particular the one-child policy), and the trajectory of modern technological development. Their contamination induces a catastrophe. Distorted religion, corrupted political power, and inhuman technology lead her to a certain death, described in bloodcurdling detail:

Between parallel rails a woman and a baby cry aloud.
I recognize this woman, she is my aunt.
When she married my father's brother, she and her mother-in-law
believed in God.

She had a son and a daughter. Together with my cousin
they worked day and night, letting blood of newly bought pigs,
irrigating paddies. My uncle was a cleric,

he and the secretary always wore shorts. For thirty years, rain or shine
late at night he would visit the households of turtle-hearted officials
with best cigarettes and meat to register his grandchildren,

to save them from under the butcher's knife of family planning. Jehovah
whom
they worshiped didn't accept anything. Instead, the newly repaired
railroad
all day long stretched its iron arms like a womb filled with magnet.

Divine speed oh divine speed sucked my aunt's heart and skin,
a train rolled over her sleep and her dreams, her blood and brain,
and fragmented limbs like broken bread

were scattered by the wind on the rails built together by bulldozers, excavators, and trucks.

我听得两条平行的钢轨里，有女人和婴儿在嚎啕大哭。
我听得那哭泣的女人，是我二爹的媳妇，我大嫂。
她，嫁到我二爹家时，就跟她婆婆信主。

她生了一个儿子，一个女儿。和我堂哥一起，从来没有放过任何一个夏夜，给买回来的家猪放血，为稻田抢水。我二爹在村里干了一辈子文书，

和支书穿了一辈子短裤。他三十多年来风雨不倒，三更半夜村里的那些老鳖户，为了给自己的孙男孙女求一张户口，为了在计划生育的屠刀下留后，

使劲地向他家送烟送酒送肉的送肉。他们赞美的耶和华，什么也没有收。倒是刚刚修好的铁路，夜以继日地伸展着钢臂，如同装满了磁铁的怀抱。

神速嗜神速吸住我大嫂的心脑和皮毛，货车从她的沉睡与酣梦之中碾过，她的鲜血和脑浆，以及成块成块的肢体，如同掰开的面饼，

被风撒在推土机、挖掘机、卡车共同筑起的铁轨上。⁸⁷

By dint of traditional folk beliefs, the woman's story is linked with the story of a girl, someone else's daughter, who fell from the bridge some time earlier:

And thus a family tie was bound between her and a baby girl who fell from the bridge. Villagers said she was lucky

to have company on her way, not going alone.

因此她和那个从铁路的高架桥上掉下来摔死的女婴成了一家人。村里人都说她命好，

在路上有人陪，不孤独。⁸⁸

Then, we learn about a heartless official who took land from peasants to build estates which "grew like bellies of pregnant women" (如约上涨，雷同孕妇). But as he was celebrating his success, he got a phone call in which he was informed that his daughter-in-law "had a miscarriage again" (又是死胎).⁸⁹ This

87 Ibidem: 160-162, trans. J K.

88 Ibidem: 162, trans. J K.

89 Ibidem: 163-164, trans. J K.

reflects a simple folk concept of justice as a direct connection between crime and punishment.

In a ruined cottage nearby, the narrator sees the shadow of a boy who died from rat poison. A few steps away there is a pond into which the traveler jumps naked to catch fish as in his childhood, but the fish he catches proves aggressive and hits him in the nose. Thus, “through blood [he] returns to [his] previous incarnation” (我从血中跑回自己的前生).⁹⁰ He meets Ma Dagon 麻大棍, who was famous for his two not-so-shining hobbies: throwing broken glass around the village so that kids running barefoot hurt their feet, and beating his wife. The I-speaker recalls how as a child he once saw a scene of violence in their house after which, as his mother said, his soul left his body out of shock:

My mom said my soul left the body, while I was lying in fever, she would
go to Xihekan to call my soul back every evening. I remember how you
and I swayed on tree branches
like two monks. Villagers would say: “Ma Dagon won’t die a good death,
he hanged his wife on a tree. He won’t die a good death.”

I was happy when I heard it. You too were. You and I whirled to our hearts’
content
in the echo of my mother’s scream. And then the sudden wind hit,
black clouds covered the sky, and we were blown down the tree on a vast
graveyard.

我妈说我的魂掉了，在我高烧期间，她每个晚上都到

西河坎，给我喊魂。我记得我和你在树梢上飘飘荡荡的，好像一对仙侣。村里人都说，“麻大棍，将不得好死，他在树上，活活地吊死了，自己的女人。他不得好死”。

我听了很高兴，你也很高兴。你和我，在我母亲喊出的回音里，转啊转啊转。忽然，一阵狂风押运着一团乌云，呼啸而来，把我们从树梢吹送到一块一望无际的墓地里。⁹¹

We do not know the identity of “you” with whom the narrator sways on a tree branch and later dances on a grave in the following, final scene in the poem

90 Ibidem: 167, trans. J K.

91 Ibidem: 171–172, trans. J K.

in which Eros and Thanatos unite in a sexual act “beyond Father’s sight.” In this ecstatic sexual intercourse between bodiless spirits, again, the Christian notion of an omnipotent and omnipresent God is “adjusted” to the framework of human imagination shaped by the vitalism of indigenous beliefs and natural cosmogony. The closing image of the sick angel with a catheter who approaches the gate may be read as a negative of the biblical scene of Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden. The angel, a spiritual being, banished and humiliated in the experience of carnality, approaches the gate, perhaps—as Benjamin wants—carried by the storm of History, to leave the garden, while the humans remain inside it, under the tree, which is reminiscent of the Tree of Knowledge, and celebrate the conquering of Eden. But this victory is just an illusion. What is left of the paradise is in fact a vast, ruined graveyard, a domain of death.

Messianism so understood, whose spirit permeates Li Hao’s poetry, may also prove an effective interpretational perspective for Tomasz Różycki’s *Twelve Stations*. Różycki, too, sketches detailed portraits of people and places, although he does so in a much more humorous way, and his descriptions are fictionalized to a larger extent than Li’s. Below I cite one example of such a portrayal of Babcia’s neighbor, Mr. Antonów, whom Grandson and his friend visit to ask him to fix the broken clock which got stuck in the door:

At this point a neighbor, Mr. Antonów,
 said that if they only wanted, in two shakes he could turn a new leg
 on his lathe at home. [...]
 They walked upstairs
 to the apartment above, where Mr. Antonów lived and had his workshop—
 alone, since his wife had passed away the previous year.
 They followed him into the kitchen, which was furnished in the old style,
 which is to say, with a white dresser, a table and chairs,
 and everything was exactly as it had been just after the war.
 Mr. Antonów at once had them try some of his wine
 from last year, and it was indeed quite excellent.
 In the living room, though, they beheld an array of ever so strange devices
 that filled the space, making it hard to find a way through. Now Grandson
 understood the sound that could sometimes be heard all night long
 coming from upstairs, and the barely perceptible trembling felt through-
 out the building.
 Most of the machines were old-fashioned and pedal-driven.
 A number of them, though, joined together in some unfathomable way,
 could function

virtually without a pause thanks to certain cunning secret tricks known to their operator. Here, then, were created all sorts of products for domestic use: small bags, house slippers, wallets, sun hats, stools and other objects of as yet unknown nature or function. The machines rumbled and whirred every night like perpetuum mobiles, eventually becoming an inseparable color and base of life.

The residents of the building, for their part, became so used to it that when the noises fell silent one night, everyone woke up gripped by a sudden anxiety, as if the world had all at once ceased to turn in its regular pathways and the motor that drove everything had stopped working forever. The ensuing stillness was so terrifying that Babcia ran to Uncle for help, asking him to go upstairs to see what have happened there; for there was universal consensus that Antonów must have died, the more so since the silence that had fallen

rang in the ears like the loudest bells in the entire province.

So they climbed the stairs at once and unheeding of the dignity proper to old age, they stood all night listening at his door for the slightest rustle, which in these dreadful circumstances would have been the best sign of all, since it would have indicated life.

It was only in the morning, having almost lost hope, that they finally heard

the pitter of the breadcrumbs on the windowsill that Antonów threw daily from his window into Babcia's garden to feed the sleepy pigeons.

This action, which hitherto had elicited nothing but ill feelings and complaints,

was now greeted with a cry of joy, for it meant that the occupant was alive and well, and that the break in work had been occasioned by a short snooze, to which he was perfectly entitled having attained the age of eighty-eight or ninety years since his birth (this figure had always been subject to dispute).

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Wtedy się zgłosił sąsiad,
pan Antonów, że przecież, jeśli tylko zechcą, to on taką nóżkę
w trymiga wytoczy u siebie w domu. [...]
Poszli więc na górę

schodami do mieszkania wyżej, w którym mieszkał i tworzył sąsiad pan Antonów, sam, odkąd w zeszłym roku umarła mu żona. Weszli więc za nim do kuchni, urządzonej w zgodzie z dawnym zwyczajem, znaczony kredensem białym, stołem i krzesłami, wszystko zaś było tak jak już po wojnie. Pan Antonów zaraz dał kosztować swojego wina z tamtego roku i owszem, było bardzo dobre. W pokoju zobaczyli jednak cały zestaw najdziwniejszych maszyn, stojących wszędzie, tak, że było trudno przejście odnaleźć. Teraz Wnuk rozumiał, co nieraz grało na górze całymi nocami i skąd się brało ledwie wyczuwalne drzenie w tej kamienicy. Większość tych maszyn była starej mody i poruszana na pedały. Część zaś sposobem jakimś połączona mogła pracować nieomal bez przerwy, za sprawą sprytnych i tajemnych sztuczek ich operatora. Tutaj więc tworzono wszelkie wyroby domowej potrzeby, najpierw torebki, papacie, polaresy, słoneczne kapelusze, stołki oraz inne, nieznaney dotąd próby i użycia. Maszyna, niby perpetuum mobile, warczała i szumiała każdej nocy, w końcu się stając życia nieodłącznym kolorem i zasadą. Mieszkańcy zaś do tego stopnia już przywykli, że gdy którejs tam nocy hałasy zamilkły, wszyscy się obudzili zdjęci nagłą trwogą, jakby świat przestał się nagle toczyć po wyznaczonych ścieżkach i jakby zgasł na zawsze motor poruszający wszelkim urządzeniem. Cisza nastąpiła tak przerażająca, że Babcia biegła wołać na ratunek Wujka, by zobaczył, co też tam na górze mogło się wydarzyć. Powszechne bowiem było przekonanie, że Antonów umarł, tym bardziej, że cisza, która nastąpiła, tak dzwoniła w uszach, jak najgłośniejsze dzwony w całym województwie. Wspięli się zaraz też po schodach w górę i mimo powagi wiekowi należnej podsłuchiwali cały czas pod drzwiami, czy aby nie usłyszą jakiegoś szelestu, który by był w tej strasznej sytuacji przecież najlepszą, bo żywą nowiną. Dopiero rano dość zrezygnowani, usłyszeli jak bębnią o parapet okrychy chleba codziennie rzucające przez Antonowa z okna na babcin ogródek, aby je zjadły zaspane gołębie. Czynność ta do tej pory same prowokująca żale oraz narzekania, teraz przyjęta była okrzykiem radości, znaczyła bowiem, że gospodarz żyje i ma się dobrze, a przerwa w pracy była wywołana przez krótką drzemkę, do której miał prawo

w wieku osiemdziesięciu ósmiu czy dziewięciu
(co do tej liczby zawsze były spory) lat od narodzin.⁹²

Other heroes and locales are treated in a likewise vivid, extensive, digressive, playful but tender way. Every single life counts in this simple and profoundly noble world and when someone's time runs out, it is like the entire universe has collapsed. Thus the simple story stretches across one hundred pages, on which Różycki one by one saves the singularity of names from the catastrophe. The last one to be rescued is his late Grandfather, together with his beloved locomotive Basia, in the closing scene:

For where on earth he [Grandson] was going, and why had he found himself all alone
amid these apparitions, which seemed so real? He kept moving forward till he reached the locomotive; he climbed a rickety ladder and there, in the atrocious rattle and roar, he recognized the inside of the engine
just as he remembered it from the times when Grandfather would take him to the station and show him his own locomotive, Basia, which he had driven since the war.
There were many gauges there, dials, knobs, as one would expect. At knee-height was the familiar door of the firebox, where the fire lived, buzzing
and roaring. He saw the fireman leaning against the side, shovel in hand, black from head to foot; and he saw his grandfather in uniform, in his cap with the eagle.
He it was who had been driving the train these last moments; now he gave a smile
and, pulling a lever, began gently braking. When the train had slowed down,
he pointed to a house in the distance that stood alone in a small yard, just a house,
nothing special; it was very familiar but quite different,
and he said loud enough that Grandson heard despite the screech of the brakes:
"This is the place, this is where we're going to live now, we're not going any further".
The air at that moment was calm and bitter,

92 Różycki 2015: 102–105.

and the chasing particles it contained gradually formed
 into specters and images, a respite for the eyes in every possible color
 and in changing shapes. If you stooped down,
 amid blades of green grass you could see a long procession
 of ants that were bearing large white bundles
 on their backs. Sauternes, Bingen, Bingen and Sauternes.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Gdzież bowiem [Wnuk] jechał, i dlaczego znalazł się sam pośród
 wszystkich tych zjaw, tak prawdziwych? Przeszedł do przodu,
 aż do lokomotywy, po chybotliwym trapie
 i tam w straszliwym huku i łomocie rozpoznał wnętrze parowozu,
 takiego, jaki zapamiętał z czasów, kiedy dziadek
 zabierał go na stację, aby mu pokazać swoją lokomotywę,
 nazywaną “Bašką”, którą prowadził jeszcze w czasach wojny.
 I było tam mnóstwo wskaźników, zegarów, pokręteł, tak jak zwykle.
 W dole znane drzwiczki paleniska, w którym mieszkał ogień
 i szumiał, i huczał, i zobaczył palacza z łopata, opartego o burłę,
 całego czarnego, i dziadka w mundurze, w swojej czapce z orłem.
 On to prowadził pociąg przez ostatnie chwile, teraz zaś się uśmiechnął
 i z pomocą dźwigni zaczął hamować powoli. Kiedy zaś pociąg zwolnił,
 powiedział, wskazując dom w oddali, osobny, z ogródkiem, niczego sobie,
 nic nadzwyczajnego, bardzo znajomy, ale całkiem inny,
 powiedział tak głośno, że wnuk usłyszał mimo pisku hamulców:
 “To tutaj, dalej nie jedziemy”. Powietrze wtedy było ciche i gorzkie,
 a rozpedzone w nim cząsteczki układały się z wolna
 w widma i obrazy, odpoczynek dla wzroku w dowolnej barwie
 i zmiennej postaci. Między zielonymi źdźbłami trawy
 widać było, gdyby się pochylić, przeciągający sznurem
 pochód mrówek, niosących z sobą na plecach wielkie,
 białe tobołki. Sauternes, Bingen, Bingen i Sauternes.⁹³

The imagery in these final lines of *Twelve Stations* resonates with the imagery in the final lines of “Homecoming”: here, too, a strange atmospheric phenomenon works like a portal between physical and metaphysical worlds, throwing the narrator back into reality, in which only some scattered pieces of transcendence remain. Sauternes and Bingen are nonexistent cities, or perhaps not even cities but other unidentified locales or objects, whose names Grandson

93 Ibidem: 244–247.

read in Mr. Antonów's notebook during the aforementioned visit to his apartment and repeated every now and then like a magical password to another dimension. In "Homecoming," the devastated Eden is abandoned by an angel; in *Twelve Stations* also other living creatures evacuate themselves, and humans are left alone suspended between life and death. At roughly the same time, Różycki wrote a poem titled "Scorched Maps" (*Spalone mapy*) in which he recalls his trip to Lvov in 2004, reconfirming the apocalyptic intuition:

Scorched Maps

I took a trip to Ukraine. It was June.
I waded in the fields, all full of dust
and pollen in the air. I searched, but those
I loved had disappeared below the ground,

deeper than decades of ants. I asked
about them everywhere, but grass and leaves
have been growing, bees swarming. So I lay down,
face to the ground, and said this incantation—

you can come out, it's over. And the ground,
and moles and earthworms in it, shifted, shook,
kingdoms of ants came crawling, bees began
to fly from everywhere. I said come out,

I spoke directly to the ground and felt
the field grow vast and wild around my head.

Translated by MIRA ROSENTHAL

Spalone mapy

Pojechałem na Ukrainę, to był czerwiec
i szedłem po kolana w trawach, ziola i pyłki
wirowały w powietrzu. Szukałem, lecz bliscy
schowali się pod ziemią, zamieszkali głębiej

niż pokolenia mrówek. Pytałem się wszędzie
o ślady po nich, ale rosły trawy, liście,
i pszczoły wirowały. Kładłem się więc blisko,
twarzą na ziemi i mówiłem to zaklęcie—

możecie wyjść, już jest po wszystkim. I ruszała się ziemia, a w niej krety i dżdżownice, i drżała ziemia i państwa mrówek roiły się, pszczoły latały ponad wszystkim, mówiłem wychodźcie,

mówiłem tak do ziemi i czułem, jak rośnie trawa ogromna, dzika, wokół mojej głowy.⁹⁴

In yet another poem, “Entropy” (Entropia), from the debut collection *Vaterland*, he sighs that Lvov has become such a burden for people that it would have been better for everybody if it had been burned down.⁹⁵

Finally, for all their doubts and fears, both Różycki and Li Hao muster up their courage and creative energies to attempt a messianic gesture, in the Benjaminian sense, that is, to save the dead from oblivion and eternal homelessness, but they feel that what they can offer is but a pitiful, grotesque ersatz of a true salvation in religious understanding of the word: a derailed ghost train, an angel with a catheter—a contingency plan in case God does not exist or has no better option in reserve. At the same time, in this “secret generational agreement,” saving the singularity of others’ names is necessary to define one’s own singularity, “on which the past has a claim,” to use Benjamin’s phrase, and which is likewise always doomed to incompleteness and perhaps will only be consolidated by the generations to come.

Różycki tries to counter the transitiveness of existence with the aesthetic form which in his short lyric poems is always highly refined and disciplined, drawing on traditional canons of poetic beauty. On the one hand, as Irena Grudzińska-Gross suggests, this is “one of the ways in which Różycki expresses loyalty to the past.”⁹⁶ On the other hand, this is also a way to keep his singular self in one piece, and a symbolic investment in his literary afterlife. The trajectory of Li Hao’s poetry since 2017, when the *Homecoming* collection was released, is difficult to trace, for he was not permitted to publish anything else after the ban on the book in question, but from my own personal communication with the poet and the several manuscripts I had the privilege to read, I can tell that he tends to go further into metaphysics, and his messianism takes on an increasingly religious—though certainly not naively religious—dimension. To my knowledge, the contemporary Chinese poetry scene has not yet birthed

94 Różycki 2013: 106–107.

95 Cf. Grudzińska-Gross 2012: 5.

96 Grudzińska-Gross 2012: 98.

any metaphysical poet, or minimally one who would gain some broader recognition, so Li Hao's artistic path is certainly worth further attention.

3 Singularity vs. Generation

Each of the four authors discussed in this chapter has her/his specific poetic diction, interests, and ambitions. One thing that connects all of them, and at the same time distinguishes them from most of the authors born in the 1950s and 1960s—that is, the Third Generation in China and the Brulion Generation in Poland—is what might be provisionally described as a (literary-)historically neutral starting point for their writing. From the beginning, they took to poetry with the aim to find their own voice rather than to reform poetry as such. Their artistic singularity was not defined against one poetic tradition or another, be it in a diachronic or synchronic dimension, nor was it defined in relation to mainstream poetry discourse through self-positioning on stage or backstage.

Yin Lichuan, although she started from a position that could be perceived as neutral, with little knowledge of the local poetry scene, ready to host Popular and Intellectual authors alike in her poetry gigs, was quickly drawn into the dialectics of the local Chinese poetry field force, which at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was so active that it was really difficult not to be sucked in by it; Yin, with her rebellious character, was particularly prone to the influences of the vagabonds of Poetry Rivers and Lakes. While this certainly does not imply that she betrayed or sold out her singular talent, as a result of her choice it appeared almost impossible for Chinese critics to read her poetry otherwise than in connection to the Lower Body group and against the background of the earlier Intellectual-Popular polemic. Interestingly, comembers of the troupe, including Shen Haobo, who wrote the introduction to *Even Better*, from the beginning saw much richer and more ambiguous meanings in her poetry than external observers and were not so quick to identify her work as obscene provocation. In any event, it is only when she actually stopped writing and withdrew from the poetry scene altogether that alternative interpretations of her work began to pop up in literary-critical discourse. Starting his career some ten years later than Yin, Li Hao found himself already in an entirely different situation—one that would probably be considered normal to poets in most Western countries—experiencing all the advantages and disadvantages of being left alone by society, albeit, unfortunately, not by censorship.

Różycki and Siwczyk, debuting in the mid-1990s, soon after the most intense phase of the polemic between the Classicists and the Barbarians had passed, were spared the doubtful privilege of being counted as members or allies of

one camp or the other, although, theoretically, based on a superficial identification of the themes and style of their debut collections, Siwczyk might have ended up among the Barbarians and Różycki the Classicists. Polish literary-critical discourse indeed very quickly reoriented itself and started inventing, and importing, new “reading tools” that would better fit the multitude of individual singularities. This shift to pluralism manifested itself in, and was facilitated by, a great abundance of literary-critical scholarship devoted to the work of single living authors. Literary-critical discourse in Poland moved, in a surprisingly short period of time, from principally studying literary cohorts, movements, and great debates, to principally studying individual authors and their works.

In China, one can come across dozens of mutually competing poetry series and anthologies, including the monumental two-volume *Selected Poems by the Post-70 Authors* (70后诗选编, 2016) edited by Lü Ye 吕叶, and panoramic studies on new phenomena on the literary scene, including Luo Qi's 罗麒 *Research on New Phenomena in Twenty-First-Century Chinese Poetry* (21世纪中国诗歌现象研究, 2019). But, unlike in Poland, it is difficult to find a solid book on one active poet. Since the mid-2010s, this trend seems to be changing to some extent, as evidenced, for example, by Zhang Taozhou's 张桃洲 (b. 1971) edited volume *Collected Studies on Wang Jiaxin's Poetry* (王家新诗歌研究评论文集, 2017) featuring essays by Chinese and foreign critics, Yang Zhao's 杨昭 *Mapping a Poet's Soul Road: On Lei Pingyang* (诗人的魂路图——雷平阳论, 2014), Huo Junming's 霍俊明 (b. 1975) *On Yu Jian* (于坚论, 2019), and—perhaps most surprisingly—Huang Hai's 黄海 collection of literary-critical essays on the Post-90 author Gao Can 高璨 (b. 1995) titled in English *Can Gao: A Young Girl in the Literary Realm* (文学的高璨, lit. “The Literary Gao Can,” 2010). In Poland, some authors have been the subject of several books, not only the Old Masters and Young Martyrs, but also the New Wave and Brulion poets, and those who do not fit in any of these categories. The many examples include Stanisław Barańczak, Adam Zagajewski, Marcin Świetlicki, Jacek Podsiadło, Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, Bohdan Zadura, Piotr Sommer, and Andrzej Sosnowski. One may expect that books on the Post-70 authors will soon mushroom as well. The first, and for now only, such publication is the edited volume *The Revolutions of Letters: On the Work of Tomasz Różycki (Obroty liter. O twórczości Tomasza Różyckiego)* released in 2019, but one may safely bet that, for example, Roman Honet or Julia Fiedorczuk will soon become “research objects” in a similar fashion. Since roughly the early 2000s, such studies have already become a regular, and arguably very positive, practice in Polish literary-critical discourse. Especially edited volumes that collect a plethora of diverse interpretations constitute a unique opportunity to trace the reception of an

author's poetics in the evolving literary-historical and social-political context, and of course allow us to see that author as a singular phenomenon and not just part of one group or another, or a representative of one poetics or another. Thus, I posit, poets who published their first books in the late 1990s and early 2000s found themselves in a relatively comfortable situation in terms of critical attention to their individual artistic propositions.

In China, the "generational" thinking remained quite distinct not only among critics but also to some extent among poets who tried to define their specific role in the development of national poetry. As Zhang Qinghua 张清华 and Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 put it in their discussion of the relationship between the Third Generation and the Post-70 authors: "Apparently, peacefully and cautiously making one's way into poetry world is to a certain degree dramatic too."⁹⁷ In a similar spirit, Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义 describes the aesthetics of the Post-70 poets as an "aesthetics of hesitation" (犹豫的美学) marked with an irresolvable conflict between constraint and liberation and between the anxiety of influence and the desire for succession.⁹⁸ The most vivid and precise account of their situation can be found in an essay by a representative of the generation, Huo Junming, who metaphorizes this hesitant aesthetic as the "poetics of the square" (广场诗学). Comparing the representations of the square in the poetry of the Post-70 authors with the older generation, especially in the works of Bei Dao 北岛 and Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, Huo notes:

The square of the Post-70 poets is more interested in postindustrialism and in the urban context; it enquires into the awkward existence and spiritual experience of one generation. [...] Since the asceticism of the epoch of collectivism started to inevitably disintegrate, social trends have been increasingly shaped by commerce, money, material desire, and utilitarianism. The "red" revolutionary education and traditional rural life instilled the spirit of sacrifice and pure ideals in them, yet growing up in the ever more complicated social environment, they became a conscious but confused, idealistic but utilitarian, conservative but rebellious, silent but ostentatious generation.⁹⁹

He Guangshun 何光顺, another Post-70 poet and critic, makes similar observations:

97 Zhang and Meng 2016: 22.

98 Chen Zhongyi 2008.

99 Huo Junming 2011: 2, trans. J K.

Obviously, they still share the desire of classical poets or those representing the generations of the post-50 and post-60 to enter the history of literature, the anxiety of waiting, the unsettled consciousness of time, as well as the sense of mission and of their own prophetic role inherited from the ancient classics and traditional literati. At the same time, they also share the anxiety of competition and the anxiety of immersion in new media that is characteristic of the generations of the post-80 and post-90. Between the inherited historical mission and the anxieties of modernity, they have developed their own specific understanding of history. Their work extends as a bridge of communication or as a chasm of fracture between the ancient times and the modern and future time.¹⁰⁰

In this light, an interesting proposition is that of the poet-cum-scholar Chen Chao 陈超 (1958–2014) in whose studies on poetic imagination the constant tensions in the poetry of the Post-70 generation and their “in-betweenness” is treated as a way toward a sort of dialectical synthesis, a step forward after the years of dominance of the two mutually antithetical visions of poetry: Intellectual and Popular.

4 Toward Poetic Imaginations

Different modes of the evolution of poetry discourse in Poland and China at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are very clearly reflected in the different trajectories of the evolution of poetic imagination. In 2009, Chen Chao published an essay titled “Twenty Years of Avant-Garde Poetry: A Transformation of the Forms of Imagination” (先锋诗歌20年:想象力方式的转换) in which he summarizes the two decades of Chinese poetry between 1989 and 2009 as a dialectical process of gradual merging of two opposite types of imagination—“everyday-life imagination” (日常生活想象力) represented mostly by Popular poets and “spiritual-transcendence imagination” (灵魂超越想象力) prevailing among Intellectuals—into one dialectical category he terms “individualized historical imagination” (个人化历史想象力).¹⁰¹ To illustrate this transformation, in the essay in question and later in his monograph *The Birth of Individualized Historical Imagination* (个人化历史想象力的生成, 2014),¹⁰² Chen discusses transformations of dominant modes of imagination

100 He Guangshun 2017: 42, trans. J.K.

101 Chen Chao 2009.

102 Chen Chao 2014.

among such Third Generation authors as Yu Jian, Wang Jiabin, Xi Chuan 西川, and Zhai Yongming, but also among younger poets representing different groups and poetics. His list includes: Jiang Tao 姜涛 (b. 1970), Hu Xudong 胡续冬 (1974–2021), Shen Wei 沈苇 (b. 1965), Yang Jian 杨键 (b. 1967), Yin Lichuan, Jing Wendong 敬文东 (b. 1968), Zhou Zan 周瓚 (b. 1968), Leng Shuang 冷霜 (b. 1973), Liu Jiemin 刘洁岷 (b. 1964), Zhang Taozhou 张桃洲 (b. 1971), Hou Ma 侯马 (b. 1967), Xu Jiang 徐江 (b. 1967), Ye Kuangzheng 叶匡政 (b. 1969), Ma Yongbo 马永波 (b. 1964), Song Xiaoxian 宋晓贤 (b. 1966), Sang Ke 桑克 (b. 1967), Tang Xin 唐欣 (b. 1962), Zhuzhu 朱朱 (b. 1969), Tan Kexiu 谭克修 (b. 1971), Shen Haobo 沈浩波 (b. 1976), and Huo Junming. The register of authors is accompanied by the below comment, followed by an analysis of Yin Lichuan's poem "Family Relationships on the Weekend" (周末天伦):

All of them, although from different angles, observe complex relationships between history and reality, history and culture, history and language, history and power. In their eyes, poetry is not just an obsessive pursuit of beauty or emotion (嗜美遣兴) but an exploration of concrete modes of life, existence, and historical context. They use a simpler and more direct style to express their critical attitude toward contemporary culture and language, in a discursive, circuitous, dialogical, or ironic way. In terms of literary taste, there are poets among them whom I not necessarily acclaim, and some to whose writing I feel I am not yet used to, but I can recognize their serious approach to writing and trust their talents. Each of them has the awareness of "bearing responsibility," be it with regard to historical existence or to the art of poetry itself, although the way in which this awareness is manifested differs from the older generations; they write in a more natural, unrestrained, and concretized manner, grinning mischievously, heedless of waves and storms.¹⁰³

Chen Chao's much-needed efforts to bridge the gaps and reunite the poetry scene, reconciling various standpoints without detracting from the singularity of individual poets, are worth appreciation; the author's suicide two weeks before the publication of the abovementioned monograph was an irreparable loss to Chinese verse. But his initiative was continued by other scholars. For example, in 2016, Zhang Weidong 张伟栋 published the incisive essay "Correction and Repositioning of 'Individualized Historical Imagination'" (对“个人化历史想象力”的校对与重置) revisiting and nuancing Chen's concept, and Jiang Tao wrote "Individualized Historical Imagination: In the

103 Chen Chao 2009: 36, trans. J.K.

Structures of Contemporary History of the Spirit” (个人化历史想象力:在当代精神史的构造中) in which he pushes the “individualized historical imagination” further to a metaphysical level. In 2018, Yang Shangchen 杨汤琛 and Li Luyan 李璐延 reread contemporary women’s poetry through the concept of historical imagination in their essay “Historical Imagination, Female Experience, Aesthetics of the Everyday: Several Directions of the Evolution of Women’s Writing in China” (历史想象力、女性经验、日常美学—新世纪中国女性诗歌嬗变的几种向度). The same year, a master’s thesis was defended at Jilin University titled *Individualized Historical Imagination: The Live Scenes and the Possibility of Breakthrough in the Poetry of the 1990s* (个人化历史想象力:九十年代诗歌现场与突围的可能性) by He Xuefeng 何雪峰, which testifies to the interest in Chen’s idea also among young researchers.¹⁰⁴

If we look at the Polish poetry scene from the angle proposed by Chen Chao, we may note that for some time its evolution took an exactly opposite direction. “Individualized historical imagination”—albeit to my knowledge the term itself has never been used in Poland—was the dominant mode of reading and writing poetry until the second half of the 1980s and the emergence of Brulion authors; in the late 1980s, it was polarized and evolved into two distinct strands: the “everyday-life imagination” and “spiritual-transcendence imagination,” to use Chen’s notions, of the Barbarians and the Classicists, respectively. In the mid-1990s, instead of a dialectical (re)synthesis, which happened in China according to Chen, the two modes of imagination further split into a pluralist mosaic, which Marian Stala described using the notion of “emboldened imagination” (*ośmielona wyobraźnia*) coined in 1999.¹⁰⁵

Unlike Chen Chao’s relatively precise term, which determines a concrete mode of imagination, namely, one that processes historical reality, Stala’s proposition emphasizes imagination’s intensity without referring to any specific function or form in which it is presented. His coinage gained great popularity in poetry discourse in Poland. First used to characterize the work of Roman Honet (b. 1974), since the 2010s it has returned regularly in critical studies and appeared in the titles of doctoral theses also in reference to other authors, especially Radosław Kobierski (b. 1971) and Bartłomiej Majzel (b. 1974). Poets as different as Tomasz Różycki (b. 1974), Justyna Bargielska (b. 1977), Konrad Ciok (b. 1987), Juliusz Gabryel (1979–2018), Łukasz Jarosz (b. 1978), Iwona Kacperska (b. 1976), Piotr Kuśmirek (b. 1978), Joanna Lech (b. 1984), Maciej Melecki (b. 1969), Joanna Mueller (b. 1979), Przemysław Owczarek (b. 1975), Tomasz Pułka (1988–2012), Robert Rybicki (b. 1976), Robert Miniak (b. 1969)

104 Zhang Weidong 2016; Jiang Tao 2016; Yang Shangchen and Li Luyan 2018; He Xuefeng 2018.

105 Stala and Marecki 2000.

and Małgorzata Lebda (b. 1985) have from time to time been mentioned in this discussion as well.¹⁰⁶ On top of that, many older or late poets have been reread through the concept of imagination, for example Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014) by Jacek Łukasiewicz¹⁰⁷ or Bolesław Leśmian (1877–1937), Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński (1921–1944), Tadeusz Nowak (1930–1991), and Józef Czechowicz (1903–1939) by Anita Jarzyna.¹⁰⁸ This illustrates a significant, overall, and almost immediate shift from the focus on defining (national) poetry toward the focus on individual singularity, not just in Polish poetry as such but also in Polish poetry criticism.

If I were to distinguish a dominant trend in the variety of “emboldened imaginations” in Polish poetry, I would say that most of them have been oscillating around what might be called cognitive imagination, oriented toward the epistemological discovery of a certain truth, be it intellectual or spiritual. Two texts that may suggest this type of cognitive imagination are Charles Baudelaire’s ecstatic praise of imagination as “the Queen of Faculties” from the *Salon of 1859* and Gaston Bachelard’s “Copernican Revolution of Imagination.” Baudelaire writes:

How mysterious is Imagination, that Queen of the Faculties! It touches all the others; it rouses them and sends them into combat. [...]

It is both analysis and synthesis [...]. It decomposes all creation, and with the raw materials accumulated and disposed in accordance with rules whose origins one cannot find save in the furthest depths of the soul, it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of newness. As it has created the world (so much can be said, I think, even in a religious sense), it is proper that it should govern it. What would be said of a warrior without imagination? [...] The case could be compared to that of a poet or a novelist who took away the command of his faculties from the imagination to give it, for example, to his knowledge of language or to his observation of facts. What would be said of a diplomat without imagination? [...] Of a scholar without imagination? [...] Imagination is the queen of truth, and the possible is one of the provinces of truth. It has a positive relationship with the infinite.¹⁰⁹

106 Orliński 2012.

107 See, e.g., Łukasiewicz’s speech on the occasion of Barańczak winning the 2009 Silesius Poetry Award; quoted in Nurek 2009.

108 Jarzyna 2017.

109 Baudelaire 2014: 91–92.

Bachelard seconds him:

[a] man is a man insofar as he is a superman. A man must be defined by the tendencies that impel him to go beyond the human condition. [...] The imagination invents more than things and actions, it invents new life, new spirit; it opens eyes to new types of vision.¹¹⁰

It is to the author's imagination that poetry owes its "bipolar" quality, to which Colette Gaudin refers, in the introduction to her edition of Bachelard's *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, saying that "every work of art has two poles: the presence of a singular being and the ideality of communicable meanings. Poetry is that zone of language in which originality is impregnated with potential universality."¹¹¹

The interest in cognitive imagination might be taken as another example—along with the continuations of female androgyny—of the long life of modernism in Poland, in line with the simple, but in my view most convincing, distinction made by Brian McHale between modernist writing as writing characterized by the epistemological dominant and postmodernist writing as leaning toward the ontological dominant.¹¹² Joanna Mueller, endowed with perhaps the most original and self-conscious language imagination among Polish living poets, in her essay "Stratigraphies" (*Stratygrafie*) strengthens the connection between the author's epistemological activity and the development of individual singularity invoking George Steiner's *Grammars of Creation*. Steiner makes a case that Western literature conforms to a set of what we might generally call epiphanic grammars, taken as secular reinterpretations of religious structures of Christian thought and ritual:

At every significant point, western philosophies of art and western poetics draw their secular idiom from the substratum of Christological debate. Like no other event in our mental history, the postulate of God's kenosis through Jesus and of the never-ending availability of the Saviour in the wafer and wine of the eucharist conditions not only the development of western art and rhetoric itself, but also, at a much deeper level, that of our understanding and reception of the truth of art—a truth antithetical to the condemnation of the fictive in Plato.¹¹³

110 Bachelard 2014: KL 1258.

111 Ibidem: KL 651–652.

112 McHale 2004: xii.

113 Steiner 2001: 55.

Mueller accepts Steiner's perspective, bringing one particular element of inexhaustible epiphany-through-art into focus. She draws attention to the fact that while the creation process abounds in various epiphanies, for each word transmits numerous meanings that stem from its participation in various discourses, it is the author who ultimately sieves these meanings, deciding which of them to foreground and which to efface.

The term *stratygrafie*, in Mueller's paramorphological rendition of the word, carries a double meaning. One is based on the interpretation of *strata* as a Latin word for "layers"; in this sense, a text understood as a product of stratigraphy is a palimpsest in which different levels of content can be distinguished. The other is based on the interpretation of *strata* as a Slavic word that is homophonous and homographic with the Latin *strata*, meaning "loss"; thus "stratigraphy" can alternatively be explicated as "writing loss(es)." Mueller explains:

Each poem, painting, or sculpture is a sort of stratigraphic system, in which from under the layers on the surface (to which the author says "yes") emerge "strata/losses" marked with negation, doomed to nonexistence.

Steiner doesn't position himself among the advocates of genetic, psychoanalytical, or deconstructionist methods of exploration of artistic works. He is not particularly interested in the author's unconsciousness and its role in the process of precipitation of semantic sediment negated by consciousness. *Grammars of Creation* are located on the side of the author's consciousness, which in the final shape of their work embraces its rejected versions not by a Freudian mistake, but with full awareness and premeditation.¹¹⁴

The "precipitation of semantic sediment" requires some explanation. It is part of a bigger signature metaphor coined by Mueller, which reemerges in many of her critical writings. The author visualizes poetic works as chemical solutions characterized by various degrees of saturation of meaning. A language poem is a supersaturated solution whose creator aims at dissolving "maximum in minimum." Oversaturation with ambiguity leads to incomprehensibility of a text, or—as some say—hermeticness. But,

fortunately, as the history of the linguistic laboratory shows, the notion of supersaturation is relative and changes with the broadening of readerly expectations. The surplus that yesterday couldn't be dissolved and was precipitated [...], tomorrow may prove to be a precious crystal. What

114 Mueller 2010: 96, trans. J.K.

yesterday's readers rejected as cocky mumbling, grammatic eccentricity, or impossible utopia, today turns out to be an underappreciated experiment: Khlebnikov's *zaimny* [trans-sense] language, Białoszewski's speech-centric grammaturgy, or the "impossible poetry" achieved by Karpowicz.¹¹⁵

Mueller's striving for what she terms the maximal saturation of poetry with meaning illustrates Steiner's argument that both science and art have always sought—and should always seek—the understanding of the greatest mysteries of the world, and that, in this joint search, the languages developed by science and art are getting ever closer to each other:

In our age of transition to new mappings, to new ways of telling the story, the natural and the "human" sciences (sciences humaines) present a spiralling motion. [...] Knowledge proceeds forward technically, in its methods, in the ground it covers. But it seeks out origins. It would identify and grasp the source. In this movement towards "primacy", different sciences, different bodies of systematic inquiry draw strikingly close to each other. [...]

Though the conditions of "strangeness" and "singularity"—terms that reach as probingly into metaphysics or poetics as they do into the physics of cosmology—during the initial particle of time may still escape our computations, late twentieth-century science is now "within three seconds" of the start of this universe. The creation-story can be told as never before.¹¹⁶

Steiner's reflection brings us to the threshold of the issues that will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7, which are focused on poetry's search for what I referred to as capital-S Singularity; that is, to the limits of language, and, in practice, to the limits of the modernist paradigm.

That said, it is of course not true that phenomena that might be considered products of "emboldened imagination" in China did not exist at all. In fact, they had appeared there some twenty years earlier than in Poland, and in the mid-1980s there was a moment in which it might seem that Chinese poetry discourse would develop exactly in this direction. But it was brutally reoriented by history. A symptomatic case is that of Zhou Lunyou 周伦佑 (b. 1952), the leader of the Sichuan-based Not-Not (非非) group, known as an

115 Ibidem: 94, trans. J K.

116 Steiner 2001: 9–11.

intellectualist among Popular poets and as a populist poet among Intellectual poets, or, optionally, as the Chinese Derrida. In his literary and metaliterary work one can trace the process of historicization of imagination. As early as in the mid-1980s Zhou proposed a theory of imagination as the compensation for the various limitations of the human senses, language, and logic.¹¹⁷ From his laconic notes prepared before a series of “mobile lectures” promoting New Poetry at different universities in China, we can learn, among other things, that he referred to Immanuel Kant’s and Albert Einstein’s take on imagination, which suggests that his focus was very much on the cognitive dimension of the Queen of Faculties. In his later philosophical-theoretical writings, he went further. Imagination was to become the first step to freeing oneself from what he called “internal models” by a triple escape: escaping knowledge (逃避知识), escaping meaning (逃避意义), and escaping grammar (逃避语法). Zhou’s poetry, including works such as “A Man with an Owl” (带着猫头鹰的男人) and “Wolves’ Valley” (狼谷), was treated largely as a field for experimental testing of his theoretical hypotheses. The notion of escaping was constructed on the same intuitions that were crucial for the development of postmodernism in the West, and Zhou was on his way to transcending the imaginative epistemology associated with modernism and moving toward the ontological transformation of poetic matter and approaching Singularity that is beyond language. But the trajectory of his writing was unexpectedly curved.

In 1989, after June Fourth, Zhou was imprisoned and transferred to a reeducation-through-labor camp where he spent two years. His prison poems, for example “Imagining a Big Bird” (想象大鸟) or “From a Concrete Bird to an Abstract Bird” (从具体到抽象的鸟), propose a fundamentally different understanding of imagination, one much closer to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Sartre’s famous claim that imagination is the foundation of freedom:

[I]magination is not an empirical power added to consciousness, but is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom; every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as a surpassing of the real. It does not follow that all perception of the real must be reversed in imagination, but as consciousness is always “in situation” because it is always free, there is always and at every moment the concrete possibility for it to produce the unreal. There are various motivations that decide at each instant if consciousness will be only realizing or if it will imagine. The unreal is

117 Zhou Lunyou 1999: 109–110.

produced outside the world by a consciousness that remains in the world and it is because we are transcendently free that we can imagine.¹¹⁸

Subsequently, in the early 1990s, Zhou developed the concept of “red writing” (红色写作), acknowledging poets’ social responsibility and the necessity of poetry’s involvement (介入) in external reality instead of “escaping” its structures. Unlike his early poetry, which might be read in the framework of Stala’s “emboldened imagination,” his works from the early 2000s such as “Protean Egg” (变形蛋) and “Pictorial Tiger” (象形虎), which contain sharp criticism of totalitarianism, are most effectively read in line with Chen Chao’s postulates of “individualized historical imagination.” The evolution of Zhou’s oeuvre shows how difficult it is to uphold certain visions of poetics, even if underlain with a solid theoretical foundation, in unfavorable social-political circumstances that pull the “abstract bird” down to earth. This also at least partly explains why the “emboldened imagination” has never dominated in Chinese poetry as it did in Poland in the most stable and relaxed period since 1989, that is, at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when the Post-70 authors marked their presence on the poetry stage. Ten years later, in the repoliticized reality of the 2010s, it would be unlikely to explode so spectacularly. The situation in recent years has prompted the emergence of what we might tentatively describe as a social-ethical imagination related to the rise of leftist sensibilities in the new poetry, to which I will briefly return in the final chapter.

118 Sartre 2004: 186–187.

Resetting Poetry

The connection between language and game/play is an old and intuitive concept. Moreover, it is not detached from everyday life. All of us have played various word games at our leisure or experienced the questionable pleasure of listening someone playing with words when we expected serious declarations. Some readers are perhaps also familiar with Wittgenstein's notion of language *as* a game. But have you ever thought about the possible ends of the language game? What happens if one completes all the levels and plays through all the possible scenarios? Is there a reward? A mystery that will be revealed to us? Will an endgame screen be displayed like in a video game? What will appear on it? "Game over"? Or perhaps we will be thrown into a realm of raw data or unreadable programming code?

In the present chapter, we will explore the poetics of Andrzej Sosnowski (b. 1959) and Che Qianzi 车前子 (b. 1963), whose works, although increasingly widely read and commented on, still remain an unresolved riddle to readers and critics. They inquire into what I have called capital-S Singularity, borrowing the concept from discourses in STEM fields. In the most general sense, Singularity is a hypothetical moment in the sphere of interests of a given discipline where all paradigms that have been developed and all rules established break down. The discipline's epistemological methods predict the existence of Singularity but can neither prove that it does exist nor, all the more, describe it. We will not know it until we reach it, that is, until we step across an "event horizon," a point of ultimate knowledge and of no return. The focus of Singularity seekers is therefore not so much on cognizing Singularity (which is, by definition, incognizable within their discipline) but on ontologically transforming the discipline and all its paradigms so that it may be able to overcome its own limitations and become receptive to new forms of cognition. For literature, which works in and with language, Singularity is a presumed threshold beyond which language exhausts itself, its deepest structures collapse, and an entirely new grammar is needed to approach the unfolding reality. Just like in other disciplines, where only the most daring theorists engage with Singularities, often risking their reputations as serious scholars, in poetry, too, only a small handful of authors are interested in this fascinating yet extremely speculative idea.

There are many apparent paradoxes in the reception of Sosnowski's and Che's works by their respective audiences. On the one hand, their essentially

acognitive poetics are frequently drawn into the discussion on (in)comprehensibility in and of poetry and deemed hermetic. On the other hand, they are regularly disregarded as a mere language game or play. I try to address both of these mutually contradictory charges and turn them into a productive interpretational perspective. Deaxiologizing and desynonymizing the notions of game and play, I build on their dichotomy in order to construct an alternative framework for an analysis of nonepistemologically oriented poetics. In this framework, Sosnowski represents the poetics of gaming and Che Qianzi the poetics of playing. All in all, the comparative conversation between Andrzej Sosnowski's and Che Qianzi's poetries is meant as a contribution to a theoretical-philosophical discussion on understanding in literature and beyond.

1 Difficult Poetry?

In Euro-American poetry discourse, the problem of difficulty has been a regularly raised topic at least since the baroque period from the early seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century. It is in the baroque period that the poetic function of language—as Roman Jakobson would call it—that is, its artistic overorganization and weakened referentiality,¹ was first so prominently foregrounded, turning medium into (part of) the message. Various synonyms and near-synonyms of difficulty, such as obscurity, incomprehensibility, or hermeticness, have been used by critics in either blaming or praising authors for the demanding complexity of their works. The interest of the late modernists and in particular the postmodernists in the metalinguistic function of the literary utterance and in the text as a nontransparent metacode in which the literary language itself becomes a subject of scrutiny additionally increased the perceived difficulty of their works.

In modern Poland, the first big debate on the subject in question was initiated by the leading literary critic Karol Irzykowski in his 1924 article “Incomprehensibilism” (Niezrozumialstwo) and ended with a series of short, rather consensual essays titled *Outings into Lyric* (*Wycieczki w lirykę*) by the same critic in 1935. Participants in this debate included prominent avant-garde authors such as Tadeusz Peiper, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, and Julian Przyboś. Many arguments that emerged echoed later in the nationwide debate about “vision versus equation” (*wizja przeciw równaniu*) during the political thaw of the late 1950s and 1960s in which the role and place of

1 Jakobson 1960.

poetic imagination were at stake. It was initiated by established scholar Jerzy Kwiatkowski's 1958 paper *Vision Against Equation: A New Battle Between Romantics and Classics* (*Wizja przeciw równaniu. Nowa walka romantyków z klasykami*). To greatly simplify, one may say that both discussions somehow oscillated around poetry's relationship to truth, whose existence was generally taken for granted, although the notion itself was understood in different, often mutually contradictory ways. Among central concerns were questions such as: should poetry represent reality or create alternative, idiosyncratic imaginary spaces? Should it directly *express* or rather artistically *process* experiences and emotions? Does individual imagination obscure reality or help probe into new, previously unknown dimensions? Put differently, may incomprehensibility be a way toward a higher level of comprehension? Moreover, both debates drew largely on local material—that is, on the rich legacy of the Polish Romantic and modernist traditions—as their main points of reference.² In the third installment of the discussion on (in)comprehensibility, which took place in the 1990s, the previously relatively stable metaphysical and historical-geographical coordinates were significantly loosened. Poland was no longer a lonely island involuntarily isolated from the West and purposely isolating itself from the red East. And it no longer yearned for transcendence as much as it did during the years of communist rule, when the metaphysical perspective compensated for real-life hardships and humiliations.

The instigator of the discussion on incomprehensibility in poetry after 1989 was Czesław Miłosz,³ provoked by regular attacks on his work by poets centered around the journal *World Literature* (*Literatura na Świecie*), especially Andrzej Sosnowski and Piotr Sommer (b. 1948). An important context is also Bohdan Zadura's (b. 1945) speech titled "Give Him There Where He Is Not, or On Foreign Languages of Poetry" (*Daj mu tam, gdzie go nie ma, czyli języki obce poezji*, 1987) whose humorous title refers to advice overheard during a ping-pong game between his and Sommer's sons. Poetry, in Zadura's definition,

2 The two debates and the interactions between them are discussed in detail in Stankowska 1998. Critical texts from the vision vs. equation debate are collected and complemented with extensive literary-historical commentary in Stankowska 2013. An anthology of the debate over incomprehensibilism (alternatively translated as "dysunderstandableness") is found in Panek 2018. My discussion in the present section is based on these sources. Agata Stankowska and Sylwia Panek edit a regular online Open Access book series titled *The Literary-Critical Polemic in Poland* (*Polemika krytycznoliteracka w Polsce*), which, besides Stankowska 2013, Panek 2018, and Jaworski 2018 (the last on the Classicists-Barbarians polemic), includes thirteen other comprehensive critical anthologies on important literary debates in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

3 Stankowska 2011 insightfully discusses Miłosz's stance in the context of the earlier two debates over incomprehensibility.

is a game, which means that it is both fun and serious, and that it follows certain rules. A game requires various clever, misleading tactics exactly *because* one takes the partner/reader seriously and not just for the very pleasure of leading someone by the nose.⁴

Miłosz could not accept the notion of poetry as a game, however serious the game was said to be. In 1990 he published the essay “Against Incomprehensible Poetry” (Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej), where he sets out to diagnose the most essential problems of contemporary verse. He deplores especially literature and art’s detachment from Christianity and the decline of the religious imagination. To him, incomprehensible poetry is an effect of the “cult” of poetry that has its source in the works of the modernist avant-gardes, in particular the French Symbolists. Postmodernism, holds Miłosz, is a natural continuation of modernist ideas and inherits the modernist spirit. In “Postscriptum,” a later supplement to “Against Incomprehensibility,” he refers to deconstructionism, which flourished beyond Poland’s western border, as the final stage of the disintegration of the epiphanic function of poetry:

The disintegration of reality, which no longer was supported by any Absolute, followed by the disintegration of the subject, bequeathed us speech that speaks itself. Here, however, a paradox appears. Through their work, the poet proves that when poetry accepts assumptions of deconstructionists, it becomes incapacitated. Because, to put it simply, poetry needs faith in reality or, in other words, it must pursue the heart of things, with the awareness of an uncoverable distance. It situates itself on the side of *mythos*. That is, when we refer to God, or to the difference between truth and falsehood, good and evil, what we do is not just a demagogic operation targeted at the simple man, for behind our words and platitudes living content is concealed.⁵

Surprisingly, Miłosz finds the fulfillment of his epiphanic expectations in old Chinese and Japanese verses, which he sets against deconstruction. Reflecting on the growing popularity of this poetry among Western readers, he submits:

Numerous English translations of old Chinese and Japanese poetry gave me much food for thought. They are eagerly read by people who don’t like modern poetry and accuse it of incomprehensibility, aridity, and a

4 Zadura 2007: 187–195. On the importance of Zadura’s speech and its further reception, see Kozicka 2015: 55–56.

5 Miłosz 1990b: 174, trans. J.K.

penchant for purely formal exercises. Apparently, these poems by Far Eastern authors are closer to contemporary readers. I asked myself why it is so and what is so distinct in them. Their background is in a civilization that is different from our own, one strongly marked by nontheist religions such as Daoism and Buddhism, which perceive the place of the human in the universe in a different way. Who knows, perhaps this is confirmation of the Buddhists' thesis that the scientific worldview is not in conflict with Buddhism whereas it is difficult to reconcile it with the personal God of the Bible.⁶

The complex problem of the relationship between religion and science aside, Miłosz's remark includes a questionable suggestion, namely that Eastern poetry, which is commonly known for its formal perfection, may be an antidote to the "formal exercises" of contemporary Western authors; incidentally, this is the same thing that Chinese reformers in the early twentieth century hoped to find in Western literature, seeing it as less constrained by formal rules. The paradoxes accumulate when Miłosz proceeds to examine the concept of subjectivity in the two traditions:

But there's one more thing. The very foundation of Western thought has always been the opposition between subject and object. "I" stood vis-à-vis the external world, which should be cognized and controlled. This is the content of the epic of Western man. For a long time, there was a balance between subject and object. Its disturbance led to the emergence of the arbitrary "I". [...] In ancient China and Japan, object and subject were not understood in terms of opposition but in terms of identification. That's probably the source of their respectful description of the surrounding reality, flowers, trees, landscapes, for the visible things are in a sense part of us, but it is so only because they are first and foremost themselves and retain their "suchness," to use a term from Zen Buddhism. This is a poetry in which the macrocosm is reflected in every single detail, like seeing the sun in a dewdrop.⁷

Miłosz treats the model of subjectivity in the Eastern tradition as a way to retrieve the premodern state of consciousness of the West. Taking into account that it is exactly the same Eastern model of subjectivity that largely inspired twentieth-century hermeneutics and its continuations such as

⁶ Miłosz 1990a: 155–156, trans. J.K.

⁷ Ibidem: 156, trans. J.K.

poststructuralism and deconstructionism, Miłosz's attempt at employing it *against* these developments in Western thought appears to be countereffective to say the least. At the same time, it reveals more general inconsistencies and arbitrary appropriations in the reception of Eastern philosophy in the West, and vice versa.

When Miłosz proposed to import the (Western idea of) the Chinese "I" to the West, Chinese poets had basically finished the enterprise of transplanting the (Chinese idea of) the Western "I" into Chinese poetry, and they, too, were disturbed by the problem of incomprehensibility. In chapter 1, I mentioned the polemic surrounding Obscure poetry (朦胧诗) that was characterized by the Western-Romantic style of handling poetic subjectivity. In chapter 2, a few words were said about Ai Qing's 艾青 involvement in the discussion and his crusade against obscurity, which is one of several striking intersections in the artistic biographies of Ai Qing and Miłosz, although their criticism in this case had clearly very distinct grounds. Ai Qing remained faithful to the social(ist) mission of poetry, while Miłosz's stance throughout his life evolved toward elitist aesthetics. In "Against Incomprehensible Poetry," he declares that he already "paid the tribute of social engagements in [his] youth and [he] know[s] that this method of escape from the [ivory] tower leads to no good."⁸ Instead, he proposes the contemplation and affirmation of Creation.

All in all, however, looking back at Obscure poetry, one can hardly call it incomprehensible. On the contrary, those who accused it of incomprehensibility were well aware of the message that this poetry conveyed. Also, the masses who recited the works of Bei Dao 北岛 on Tiananmen apparently did not experience particular obstacles in getting to the idea of the texts and drawing practical consequences from it, just as they easily grasped the message of Cui Jian's 崔健 songs. Put differently, Obscure poetry did not really obscure anything; instead, it embellished and magnified certain concepts, such as the concept of individual freedom and agency, in a way that proved attractive to large audiences at the time and which facilitated the spreading of these ideals. Perhaps, as for example Bei Dao maintains, there was a semantic level in some Obscure poems that general audiences were unable to reach—but it was certainly not that hidden, inaccessible layer that troubled the pro-Party camp but rather those aspects that could directly influence the masses.

The Third Generation poets were consistently trying to overcome the simple logic of poetry production as writing against the system. They developed ambitious theoretical programs and strived to put their postulates into practice in poetry. Although their works indeed often demand much effort on the part

⁸ Ibidem: 155, trans. J.K.

of the reader, the simple dichotomy adopted by the literary-critical discourse, dividing the poetry scene into two camps, Intellectual and Popular, gave the readers some, if only illusory, sense of interpretational safety. Something similar could be said about the Brulion Generation in Poland. While many of their works are certainly not easy to read, the audience can entertain the illusion that there are at least some clear coordinates that help localize them on the map of contemporary poetry closer to one pole or the other. In both cases, the incomprehensibility problem emerged outside the central battlefield in which opposing camps fought for discursive power in national poetry.

Che Qianzi was initially counted as an Obscure poet. A set of four poems authored by him entitled “My Statue” (我的塑像), including his most famous early work “Three Primary Colors” (三原色), was printed in 1983 in the fourth issue of *Youth* (青春) together with a brief authorial comment. It immediately drew the attention of critics. In the ninth issue of the journal, there appeared a heated critical debate between five contributors in which extremely positive and extremely negative comments clashed. The same year, the more prestigious *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊) published a paper by the renowned critic Gong Liu 公刘: “Poetry Must Be Comprehensible: A Comment on ‘Three Primary Colors’” (诗要让人读得懂—兼评〈三原色〉); in 1985, Ding Guocheng 丁国成 elaborated on its theses in “A Sour-Bitter Olive That Is Hard to Swallow” (酸涩难咽的青果) in *Works and Contention* (作品与争鸣). Initially, “Three Primary Colors” was included in a 1985 collection of Obscure verse edited by Yan Yuejun 阎月君, Gao Yan 高岩, Liang Yun 梁云, and Gu Fang 顾芳, but it soon became clear that Che Qianzi’s obscurity was not that of the Obscure poets. And although in 2004 he was removed from the second edition of the anthology by Hong Zicheng 洪子诚 and Cheng Guangwei 程光炜 and relocated to an anthology of Third Generation poetry published in 2006, it was generally recognized that he did not fit there either.⁹ Meanwhile, in 1993, eight of his poems were included in Wan Xia 万夏 and Xiao Xiao’s 潇潇 two-volume “Collected Post-Misty Poems: A Chronicle of Chinese Modern Poetry” (后朦胧诗全集—中国现代诗篇年史).¹⁰ The selection of his works was preceded by a short bio and the following comment: “The poet believes that writing is just a pursuit of peacefulness, it is relaxed, delicate, vulgar, angry, and not distracted by laziness.”¹¹ Confronted with majority of Third Generation poets who worked hard to find a new universal formula for Chinese contemporary

9 Hu Liang 2007.

10 I use the English translation of the title that was placed on the book’s cover, “misty” being an alternative translation of *menglong* 朦胧, “obscure”).

11 Wan Xia and Xiao Xiao 1993: 925, trans. J K.

poetry, his lighthearted declarations could not induce confidence. Already in the late 1980s Cheng, one of the instigators of the Intellectual-Popular polemic and a supporter of the Intellectual camp, accurately identified some conspicuous features in Che Qianzi's writing, and—alluding to his native Suzhou—expressed his concerns in the following way:

Che Qianzi found himself in an unexitable Suzhou labyrinth, but at the same time he willfully creates labyrinths from words to lure you and make you languid, and in your languidity offers you flashes of amazement. [...] In that hallucination-like satisfaction, you forget to breathe, and move to another real self (辗转于现实中的另一自我) [...]. This strengthens his unique position on the contemporary poetry scene, but also unfortunately confines his perspectives, and blocks his way toward becoming a great poet.¹²

Third Generation authors distanced themselves from Che Qianzi, and Che Qianzi distanced himself from the Third Generation. In 1989 in Nanjing, as a “revolt against the Third Generation,” Che formed, together with several fellow poets including Zhou Yaping 周亚平 (b. 1962), Huang Fan 黄梵 (b. 1963), and Yi Cun 一村 (b. 1959), a group united by its members' common fascination with Russian Formalism.¹³ In 1991, they launched the unofficial journal *Original* (原样), likely inspired by the French *Tel Quel*, which translates into Chinese as *Yuanyang* 原样. Their work soon fell into the hands of American scholar Jeffrey Twitchell, who saw in it a Chinese poetic postmodernism comparable with the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement. This analogy was first observed by Zhang Ziqing 张子清 during his seminars on poetry in Nanjing and was eagerly taken up and developed by Twitchell. It was also Zhang, with the help of Huang Yunte 黄运特, who edited the first anthology of American language poets in Chinese published in 1993, followed by a visit from James Sherry and Hank Lazer in China. In 1994, Twitchell, in cooperation with English author J. H. Prynne, translated the entire issue of *Original* and published it in England.¹⁴ The analogy between *Original* authors and Western postmodernism largely determined the mode of reception of their works. American poetry, supported by a developed theoretical-methodological apparatus, helped justify

12 Quoted in Hu Liang 2007, trans. J. K.

13 Ibidem.

14 Zhang Ziqing 2009: 77. Zhang offers an extensive account of interactions between Chinese and American poetry, with a special focus on the period since 1970, when he was among those who most actively promoted dialogue between American and Chinese language poets.

their experiments and offered tools by which to approach them. Che Qianzi has since been perceived as a great innovator and not as the black sheep of Chinese national poetry.

What did the situation look like in Poland? Miłosz's tirade "Against Incomprehensible Poetry" did not immediately provoke a mass reaction on the poetry scene, which was seemingly preoccupied with the feud between the Barbarians and Classicists, but it did set the direction in which the discussion gradually developed after 1990. In the 1990s it largely took the form of individual attacks by "incomprehensible" authors on Miłosz and echoed in individual reviews of their books by critics representing different views on incomprehensibility.¹⁵ The epithet that gained particular popularity was "hermetic poetry." Even today, one can hardly find an essay on Sosnowski where this word is not mentioned at least once or an interview in which Sosnowski is not asked to comment on his purported hermeticness. Among younger authors, the most "hermetic" proved to be Marcin Sendeki (b. 1967), Miłosz Biedrzycki (b. 1967), and Adam Wiedemann (b. 1967). Miłosz's intuition to connect incomprehensibility with the advent of postmodernism was indirectly confirmed by Sosnowski's translatorial, critical, and academic activity. Besides being one of the moving spirits behind the famous blue issue of *World Literature* on American poetry in 1986 (discussed in chapter 1), he also published quite extensively on authors of the New York school and on new trends in Western poststructuralist literary theory, to mention but his essay on *Hamlet* and deconstruction included in *World Literature* in 1993. Still, none of those cursory readings of Sosnowski's work in the postmodernist spirit in the 1990s was particularly convincing, and the poet himself approached many of them with reluctance.

The problem of incomprehensibility became a central concern of the poetry discourse only in the year 2000, engaging some of the former Brulion authors. In 2000, Jacek Podsiadło published a humorously provocative essay titled "Give Me There Where I Can Reach" (Daj mi tam, gdzie mogę dobiec) in *Catholic Weekly* (*Tygodnik Powszechny*) which alludes to Zadura's speech on poetry and ping-pong from 1987.¹⁶ Speaking from the perspective of a common reader, who "received a gift and does not know what to do with it," Podsiadło complains that he does not dig the vibe of Sosnowski, Sendeki, Wiedemann, Biedrzycki, and ... Hölderlin(!), who, he supposes, must be somehow important to Sosnowski, though he himself considers his later poetry a "gabble" (*betkot*). Podsiadło feels distracted by the excess of quotes and hidden intertextual allusions in their works, new experimental writing techniques

15 Kozicka 2015: 51–60.

16 Podsiadło 2000.

named with English words such as “samples” and “covers,” and the overtly erudite idiom, which sounds like “a secret code for the chosen ones.” And even though he admits that beauty and pleasure may lie “beyond understanding,” he can hardly feel such pleasure. With the caveat that these are his personal impressions and not a frontal attack on the said authors or on contemporary poetry in general, he throws down the gauntlet, challenging “Someone Wise” among critics, preferably Jacek Gutorow, to break down the pleasure putatively offered by hermetic poetry into prime factors.

Gutorow’s response came less than three months later, also in *Catholic Weekly*. The author invokes several big disputes around incomprehensible poetry, including the controversies surrounding English metaphysical poets such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell in the seventeenth century, through to the polemics amid the modernist avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s, especially the case of T. S. Eliot and the realists’ criticism of James Joyce. Recalling György Lukács’s essay on Joyce, Gutorow points out that Podsiadło leans dangerously toward socialist realism, which in the Polish context is a particularly strong accusation. He adds:

Podsiadło writes as if nothing happened in the twentieth century, as if Adorno didn’t write *Aesthetic Theory*, as if the Russian Formalists didn’t develop a modern theory of metaphor, as if Ingarden didn’t carry out a phenomenological analysis of literary work and de Man didn’t reveal the mechanisms that work in the text. It seems that Podsiadło is not interested in the most fundamental findings in aesthetics and literary studies, that the reception of a literary work is entirely strange to him, and so are basic analyses of metaphor or structure.¹⁷

In the following years, critics, especially those from academic circles, including Michał Paweł Markowski and Piotr Śliwiński worked hard to help readers tame the above developments in literary theory and poetry.¹⁸ Andrzej Niewiadomski, in turn, wrote a meticulous essay titled “Incomprehensible Poetry, or on a Certain Exceptionally Durable Critical Misunderstanding” (*Poezja niezrozumiała, czyli o pewnym nadzwyczaj trwałym nieporozumieniu krytycznym*), in which he tries to reconstruct the rules of the game undertaken by Sosnowski.¹⁹ Judging by the growing number of affirmative reviews of Sosnowski’s collections, these efforts proved to be tremendously successful.

17 Gutorow 2000, trans. J.K.

18 Kozicka 2015.

19 Niewiadomski 2004.

In 2014 Andrzej Franaszek, Miłosz's biographer, wrote the essay "Poetry Like a Hoodie" (*Poezja jak bluza z kapturem*), later renamed "Why No One Likes New Poetry?" (*Dlaczego nikt nie lubi nowej poezji?*) and published in the popular *Holiday Magazine* (*Magazyn Świąteczny*), a supplement to *Electoral Gazette* (*Gazeta Wyborcza*), in which he basically repeats Miłosz's theses from "Against Incomprehensible Poetry," lamenting that "whole legions of authors abandoned writing about the human in favor of writing about language, in favor of 'inventiveness', ironic parody, game."²⁰ His argument, however, was roundly criticized and nearly the entire poetry scene turned against him, defending poetry's right to speak its own language.²¹

Although, as we will observe in the following sections, Andrzej Sosnowski's and Che Qianzi's poems radically differ in terms of style and specific textual strategies, there is something that brings them very close together. This feature is visible in their respective responses to the charges of incomprehensibility.

In the essay "The Destitution of Poetry," which appeared in *boundary 2*, Che says:

What is the essence of poetry? Above all, it should be defined as a game—a process in which the soul experiences pleasures or pains. It should be innocent, filled with initial curiosity and surprise, without ambition, interested in the signifier.

The genuine art of poetry, to the largest extent, overlooks the phenomenal part of poetry. Only so can it overcome its destitution—in fact, the essence of poetry can never be destitute; it remains as it is. Correctly speaking, what needs to be overcome is the destitution in our understanding of the essence of poetry.

Translated by HUANG YUNTE²²

And here is one of many utterances Sosnowski made about hermeticness and pleasure *as* understanding in conversation with Śliwiński during a poetry festival in Lublin:

There is some double game here, which always takes place when notions such as this one are concerned. It sort of assumes that it's good if a poem is hermetic, for this means that something was hermetically hidden to

20 Franaszek 2014.

21 Such critical voices included Beszterda 2014; Fiedorczuk 2014; Kałuża, Orska, and Świeściak 2014; Sendeci 2014; Kałuża and Jankowicz 2015; Wierzba 2015.

22 Che Qianzi 1999: 65.

make access to it more difficult. I actually can't imagine a situation in which a poet who writes a poem and has something to say would want to hermetize this something. No, what happens here is creating, it is a creation of a certain word matter which aspires to reflect certain states of the world, of the reality in which we are involved. This may be an inner reality, or an external reality [...]. It is supposed to play a certain kind of reality. And here is that aphorism [of Archibald MacLeish] that you invoked: "a poem should not mean but be." It is a disputatious statement, a very intense one. It is a banality but a very well put banality, because it makes us aware of something.²³

Both Sosnowski and Che Qianzi point out a general problem with the notion of understanding itself and its applicability minimally to a certain type of poetry. Their approaches resonate with McHale's distinction that we mentioned in the previous chapter: that is, modernist fiction = epistemological dominant ("to mean"), postmodernist fiction = ontological dominant ("to be").²⁴ In the so understood postmodernist paradigm, what a text draws from extratextual reality is not a sense to convey but some vital energy that fuels signifiers and prompts the transmutation of its ungraspable essence. Does it imply that such poetry leads to nowhere, as Franaszek imagines, or that it boils down to an "awful" form of "psychologizing" and "jotting subjective perceptions," as Miłosz once said in his tirade against Ashbery?²⁵ Well, not necessarily.

Arent van Nieukerken convincingly shows that the difference between Ashbery and Miłosz is not as fundamental as the latter imagined, and in fact both in their specific ways undertake a breathless "pursuit of reality" (*pogoń za rzeczywistością*), to use Miłosz's phrase.²⁶ One of the best-known essays by Sosnowski, in which he interprets Ashbery's long poem "Flow Chart," translated by him into Polish as "Spław" (lit. "floating by raft"), may help substantiate this argument. Sosnowski comments on the philosophical assumptions behind Ashbery's, and his own, poetry:

A secret is when it is possible to represent it: we keep something for ourselves when we can verbalize it. *Flow Chart*, in turn, is that movement of language which embraces the mystery beyond language [...] one has to

23 Sosnowski and Śliwiński 2013, trans. J K; cf. Sosnowski and Świeściak 2004.

24 See, e.g., McHale 1987.

25 Miłosz 2006: 429.

26 van Nieukerken 2011. Cf. van Nieukerken 2012b (on Miłosz vis-à-vis European Romanticism).

get lost in language and long wander in it in all possible directions; one has to entrust oneself to language and agree to get carried by, not as much toward the impossible as toward the unavoidable silencing.²⁷

In Ashbery's act of entrusting himself to language, argues Sosnowski, there is a tacit, persistent hope that the "movement of language" will allow him to touch a reality that exceeds our grammar of understanding (my term). At the same time, almost entirely epistemological activity is turned inward and focuses on the language, that is, on signifiers, and the connections between them, and on poetry itself, because a closer communion with language and a better recognition of and cooperation with its structures and mechanisms may allow one to travel further toward the "mystery beyond language," where the language will be unavoidably silenced. The oxymoronic idea of poetry as a flow chart is interpreted by Sosnowski as "free float (*flow*) subject to navigation (*chart*)."²⁸ He compares it to a painting, on which paint (a counterpart of *flow*) is limited by a frame (*chart*). Analogously, in writing, a page (*chart*) is inscribed with script (*flow*) and to some extent limits or minimally organizes it. This conveys

an idea of poetry that is first and foremost an experience of script. This intention is accompanied by a well-known epistemology: the limits of my language are the limits of my world, but the limits of our language are the limits of our language—and not the limits of the world.

Beyond the limits of language there is possibly a mystery that is "bigger than activity," in which life is immersed. [...]

Poetry as an experience of language, an experience that is possibly total, and at the same time, skeptical, ironic, playful—like in Ashbery in whose work language plays in so many registers, tones, voices, and intonations—is primarily an attempt at encircling this bigger activity of silence. [...] This enterprise is in fact a mystical project, or more precisely: an apocalyptic one.²⁸

Elsewhere, Sosnowski praises his favorite American author for the successful "embedding of the theme of poetry as such into a poem" and "writing a poem while at the same time putting the poem into question," in a way that is much more enigmatic, perplexing, graceful, and charming than modernist authors

27 Sosnowski 2007: 66–67, trans. J K.

28 Ibidem: 66, trans. J K.

such as Pound or Eliot did.²⁹ Likewise, Sosnowski's own project is a total project aimed at silencing the old grammars and arriving at a "grammar beyond the discourse that can be subject to deconstruction," as he writes in his essay on *Hamlet*.³⁰ Apparently, there is a method to this madness.

Similarly, Che Qianzi in "The Destitution of Poetry" speaks of the singular "one" as an undefinable and unattainable telos and the nonessentialist essence of poetry, which concurs with the idea of the "bigger activity of silence" in Sosnowski's essays:

It can be said that contemporary Chinese poetry has many different routes that don't lead to any end at all. Because the "end" must be "one." This "one" is the immutable essence of poetry from time immemorial; it's the telos, it's the "one." Whatever doesn't lead to the "one" is, on the one hand, not mature enough; on the other hand, it is due to a misunderstanding of the "many." The "many," I believe, should be the attribution of the particular writing methods; it should not lead to the assumption that poetry has many kinds of supreme essences. Neither does it support the notion that essence = sub-essence + sub-essence + sub-essence.

Translated by HUANG YUNTE³¹

Ming Xie, juxtaposing Che Qianzi's work with Yang Lian's "Non-Person Singular" (无人称), describes Che's strategy as "non-personal singularity" or "apersonal singularity," and argues that it implies a very specific type of active, anepistemological reading, to which audiences accustomed to poetics influenced by modernism were apparently not used. Xie notes:

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

29 In conversation with Mariusz Grzebalski and Dariusz Sońnicki, see Jankowicz 2010a: 14–15, trans. J.K.

30 Sosnowski 2007: 52, trans. J.K.

31 Che Qianzi 1999: 64–65.

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”.³²

This is, I believe, a very apt observation that may also be applied to Sosnowski's work. In the Polish author's poems, “language events” follow one another with unimaginable velocity, as if trying to catch up with the constantly accelerating reality and reunite with it. This quality makes Alina Świeściak associate his writing—indirectly, via Ashbery—with Paul Virilio's dromology and his philosophy of crisis.³³ Analyzing the long poem “Wild Water Kingdom” from Sosnowski's debut collection *Life in Korea* (*Życie na Korei*, 1992), Świeściak, who, like Karolina Felberg before her,³⁴ counts Sosnowski among the Polish poets of melancholia, invoking among other things Mueller's concept of *stratigraphy* (see chapter 5) and Sosnowski's own reflections on *flow chart*, argues that his language is “apocalyptic” or even constitutes an “apocalypse of the apocalypse.” This is a helpful intuition, but its conclusion should be, I believe, different to the catastrophic interpretation proposed by Świeściak. After all, *apocalypsis* (Gk. ἀποκάλυψις) in its most basic, etymological sense means “revelation” and not a dramatic end of everything. Furthermore, if we reach to the biblical source of this cultural theme, it is a revelation by participation and not by intellectual or even spiritual cognition. According to the last book of the New Testament, its author (Saint John the Apostle) was on the island of Patmos when he was honored with the vision contained in Revelation. His revelation breaks the grammar of Logos that determines all other books of the Christian Bible. Its symbols do not *mean* in the Logo(s)centric sense; rather, they testify to the helplessness of human language. In a conversation with his translator, Benjamin Paloff, Sosnowski says:

I write in an utterly fallen, scrambled language, and it's possible that somewhere in this language of mine, in the language of these poems, there remains some fallen spark of revelation [...]. You translate my fallen language into an equally scrambled and fallen American idiom, and your only essential task [...] is to discover and lift up this lost spark.³⁵

32 Xie 2012: 391.

33 Świeściak 2010a: 305–337; cf. Świeściak 2010b: 247.

34 Felberg 2009.

35 Quoted in Belli 2011.

The ultimate riskiness, to allude to the phrase Sosnowski applied to Rafał Wojaczek, of his project lies in that his poetry does not want to (cognitively) explore the *unknown* but (ontologically) approximate and embrace the *unknowable*, toward which the charted flow of poetic language is supposed to carry him.

2 Play and Game

In the poetics of Che Qianzi, we find a counterpart to Sosnowski's/Ashbery's notion of flow chart; it is exactly the contested notion of play/game, of which he speaks in the aforementioned excerpt from "The Destitution of Poetry." As noted before, much has been written about playing and gaming in the context of Sosnowski's and Che's works, and some of the studies are very enlightening, such as Niewiadomski's paper or Anna Kałuża's chapter from *Underneath the Game: How Poems and Poets Mean Today* (*Pod grą. Jak dziś znaczą wiersze, poetki i poeci*, 2015), where Sosnowski and Darek Foks are discussed together as poets of the "other ends of poetry." Not seeking to question the value of these studies, I will follow the example of dr caligari from Sosnowski's long poem "dr. caligari resets the world" (*dr caligari resetuje świat*), whom we will encounter in the next section, and "reset" the words to define them anew, starting with prime factors in order to reconcile different languages (English, Polish, and Chinese) and bring out certain subgrammatical mechanisms of the two essentially identical and substantially divergent activities described by the concepts of gaming and playing.

Unlike English and Polish, and akin to German (*Spiel*) and French (*jeu*), Chinese does not distinguish between play and game, offering the umbrella term *youxi* 游戏, which can function as both a noun and a verb and is used to describe various leisurely activities that display a higher level of organization. In "Original Group Manifesto" (原样宣言), cowritten by Che Qianzi and Zhou Yaping in 1988, the authors break down *youxi* 游戏 to single characters, arguing that *you* 游 (lit. "move, travel, swim, flow") stands for horizontal movement in physical space, while *xi* 戏 (lit. "[theatrical] play") marks a vertical, or meta-physical, axis; these two vectors intersect in language.³⁶ Their interpretation of the Chinese word resonates with Sosnowski's interpretation of flow chart: *you* 游, a leisurely flow, is charted by a "playscript" of *xi* 戏 (i.e., the genre of drama). The two concepts *flow chart* and *youxi* (in Che and Zhou's interpretation) share three crucial assumptions: free movement, a clear but dynamic

36 Che Qianzi and Zhou Yaping 1988.

structure characterized by certain rules that have to be accepted and do not need to be rationally justified, and the imperative of participation: being inside the flow of (language) events.

So understood the idea of *youxi* as *flow chart* roughly overlaps with the broadest, most general definition of the English-language notion of play as proposed by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their seminal study *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2005), which draws on the research of scholars such as Johann Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Salen and Zimmerman define play as a “free movement within a more rigid structure.” At the same time, they also emphasize the insufficiency of this formula, and postulate the necessity of a clearer distinction between the concepts of “play” and “game,” which English (and Polish) fortuitously permits. The relationship between them is not a simple opposition or complementarity: game constitutes a subset of play, but at the same time, play is an element of game.³⁷

Salen and Zimmerman reveal a complex dialectic between play and game, which I will not reconstruct here. Instead, I will avail myself of a simpler recapitulation in a similar spirit proposed by Bo Kampmann Walther, which may be almost directly transplanted into poetry discourse. Clarifying the distinction between playing and gaming, Walther argues:

The trick is to view gaming as something that takes place on a higher level, structurally as well as temporally. When it comes to play, the installation of the form of the play-world-non-play-world distinction must, performatively, feed back on itself during play: continually rearticulating that formal distinction within the play-world, so as to sustain the internal ordering of the play-world. However, in the game-mode, this rearticulation is already presupposed as a temporal and spatial incarceration that protects the rule-binding structure of a particular game from running off target. In other words: games should not be play; but that does not imply that they do not require play. This means, in effect, that in the play-mode the deep fascination lies in the oscillation between play and non-play, whereas game-mode presses forward one's tactical capabilities to sustain the balance between a structured and an un-structured space. In play-mode one does not want to fall back into reality (although there is always the risk of doing so). In game-mode it is usually a matter of climbing upwards to the next level and not lose sight of structure.³⁸

37 Salen and Zimmerman 2005: 70–83.

38 Walther 2003.

Seen from a bird's eye view, Sosnowski's poetry evinces many characteristics of game as defined by Walther. More precisely, it might be visualized as a video game. The author takes the existence of the language system for granted and does not allow the possibility that poetry might accidentally "fall out" of this system. At the same time, he assumes that beneath the language's interface, which displays words ordered according to conventionalized syntax and grammar patterns, there is an environment which is not available to the average player and obeys some higher-level rules that we are not able to comprehend. He entertains some illogical hope that if he re-plays the language game throughout many times in all variants and configurations, when all endgames exhaust themselves, perhaps the game will throw him out into this space of bare programming code. Maybe the designer has not predicted such a determined user who wants to test even the most unlikely and nonsensical scenarios? This may also explain Sosnowski's interest in all "system errors," which we will encounter in his poetry in the next section, including mishearings, misreadings, Freudian slips, where the language freezes or stutters, and through these fissures between phonemes one may try to peep into the reality that underlies the game.

Continuing his reflection on the differences between game and play, Walther elucidates:

Play commands presence. We have to be there—not only *be* there, but also be *there*. A game's success is intimately tied to the organisation of space and time. Gamers need to trust this organisation. Since a game hinges on a certain finite structure in order to promote infinite realisations of it—the correlation of rules and tactics—the very articulating of presence so important for play must already be presupposed in a game. One already knows in a game that the mission is to keep on gaming, which really means, in my vocabulary, to keep on playing, that is, to prolong the sensation of presence. The energy can then instead be directed towards elucidation of the game's structure.³⁹

In Sosnowski's game-like writing "being *there*," that is, inside the language structures, is taken for granted, and the energy is directed toward restless explorations of these structures, for example through abundant metapoetic reflections, in order to make the most efficient use of them and move toward the escaping horizon of language.

39 Ibidem.

Che Qianzi's poetry hardly ever goes beyond the sphere of pure play in Walther's sense of the word. In his numerous experiments with graphemes and phonemes, the author concentrates first and foremost on the very fact of "being *there*," that is, maintaining poetry's strategic detachment from reality and drawing—or luring, as Cheng Guangwei has it—others into play. He wanders around, stops at some place or at some object that he suddenly fancies, and symbolically conquers it by drawing what game scholars call a magic circle around it, a term first used by Johan Huizinga to mean a limited area within which certain rules, different from those that govern real life, have authority.⁴⁰ These magic circles function like portals through which the reader may further enter the world of the language game. But they may play at the threshold as well and still find the experience instructive. The work done by Sosnowski in his erudite, hybrid poems that often assume monstrous sizes and are closely interconnected like episodes of a video game, in Che's minimalist poetry has to be done by the reader. The author makes his textual avatar (the lyrical "I") available to the reader, which might be taken as an illustration of what Ming Xie termed the "non-personal singularity" of his poetic subject. He allows the reader to play on his behalf, *as* him, exploring different scenarios, unlocking new levels of abstraction, and opening up secret passageways. All in all, however, the goal is the same as Sosnowski's: to arrive at what Che calls "one" and I call Singularity, at the end of language. In both cases, poetic language is not treated as a medium of revelation and a cognitive tool facilitating understanding or communication of what the author understood, but as a challenging virtual space to traverse. As one is trying to make one's way through language, various discoveries are made, often quite spectacular, and one's individual style is shaped, but neither of these gains is an aim in itself.

In order to isolate his magic circles more effectively from everyday reality, Che Qianzi often fences them off with constructions made from pure script. In their manifesto, Che and Zhou declared that they prefer to work in script rather than in the entire system of the living language, "because script is less polluted [by reality] and contains less judgment."⁴¹ This makes their play particularly difficult to join for those who are not literate in Chinese. Nevertheless, I will try to give the non-Chinese-speaking reader a flavor of this play and will offer some snapshots of my language game to which Che's poems invite. Needless to say, I have not completed all levels thus far and do not know what, if anything, is beyond or beneath the game. Unfortunately, Che's hints are no more helpful than Sosnowski's "fallen sparks" of revelation:

40 Salen and Zimmerman 2015: 51.

41 Che Qianzi and Zhou Yaping 1988, trans. J.K.

I was dreaming of oceans, but my writing of New Poetry started near the bed—there’s a great mystery (天机) in it, a mystery can’t be revealed (天机不可泄露), yet a mystery also can be revealed (天机也可泄露). A masterpiece always reveals a mystery, opinions are divided, I’m just giving you a hint.⁴²

I will begin by investigating Sosnowski’s work because it offers some techniques of gaming that we may later apply in our adventure with Che’s poetry.

3 Rhyme Your Crime: Andrzej Sosnowski Resets and Recites

Almost every poem by Andrzej Sosnowski is a mini *ars poetica* in its own right. What fascinated him in Ashbery, namely the ability to embed metapoetics into a seemingly one-dimensional poetic narrative, is also manifest in his own work and arguably in an even more consistent and radical way. He persistently explores the structures of linguistic reality in order to navigate through them more smoothly toward the end, which may or may not exist.

Among the most explicit, albeit also most misleading, clues Sosnowski left to his readers, one should mention the poem “What Is Poetry” (Czym jest poezja) included in his debut collection *Life in Korea*. Written as a response to Ashbery’s “What Is Poetry,” it has been creatively interpreted by many scholars and critics looking for the answer to the question in the title, including for example Karol Francuzik’s reading through Horace’s “Art of Poetry” revisited later by Marcin Jaworski.⁴³

What Is Poetry

Sure, it’s no strategy for survival,
 nothing to live on. Your obstinacy is laughable
 as you recall the enchanted lakes,
 the rustling woods and hushed caverns
 where a voice echoes out vividly, and has for centuries.
 Sibyls? What matters is leaves, then maybe the rhyme
 of voice and choice, since voices press against the world,
 and choice is that which does not entrust names
 to leaves. Just you try to catch them! Try

42 Che Qianzi 2017: 3, trans. J.K.

43 Francuzik: 2003; Jaworski 2010.

to touch the ground and fly farther,
 like a flat stone over water—how many times?
 Five, twelve? A sequence of poems and reflections,
 a sequence of leaves, and anyway all the stones and leaves
 lie one beside the other according to an ancient order,
 their forms unclear. Then there's the cavern
 or the teeny room. But that gust!
 The draft as you open the door, and the wind
 disperses the leaves, and the world rears up,
 and the words come like a sprinkling of confetti.
 But don't give us the stinkeye, don't head out
 a sourpuss, not yet. No need to regret delay,
 for maybe it will sing? Perhaps it will suddenly say
 what people and wars are like, travels and travails,
 how things stand, what news?

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁴⁴

Czym jest poezja

Zapewne nie jest strategią przetrwania,
 ani sposobem na życie. Twój upór jest śmieszny,
 kiedy wspominasz zakłętę jeziora,
 szumiące bory i głuche jaskinie, w których głos
 idzie echem i pewnie trwa wieki. Groty
 Sybilli? Ważne są liście i jeszcze chyba rym
 “głos—los”, bo głosy prą na świat i losy
 właśnie liściom powierzają miana.
 Ale spróbuj je schwytać! Tylko spróbuj
 dotknąć ziemi i polecieć dalej
 jak płaski kamyk po wodzie—ile razy?
 Pięć czy dwanaście? Seria wierszy i odbić,
 seria liści, a przecież wszystkie kamyki i liście
 leżą jeden przy drugim w odwiecznym porządku,
 kształty nieprzejrzyste. Zatem jest jaskinia
 albo ty ci pokój. Ale ten podmuch!
 Przeciąg, gdy otwierasz drzwi i wiatr
 rozprasza liście, a świat staje dęba
 i słowa idą jak confetti w rozsypkę.

44 Sosnowski 2011: 14.

Lecz nie patrz wilkiem i nie odchodź jeszcze
 z odętymi ustami. Żadnej zwłoki nie żałuj,
 bo może sama zaśpiewa? Może nagle powie
 jakie są ludy i wojny, jakie mozoły i rejsy,
 jak sprawy stoją, a jak interesy?⁴⁵

When we juxtapose this poem with Ashbery's work, one difference is particularly striking. The two authors seem to be interested in the same questions and bothered by similar concerns, and both do not entirely abandon the hope that poetry may carry some "lost sparks" of revelation. However, while in Ashbery this revelation is visual and is expected to come in the form of scattered images that appear before one's tightly closed eyes ("Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around. // Now open them on a thin vertical path. / It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?"),⁴⁶ Sosnowski apparently awaits an aural communication. This communication is referred to as "singing," that is, it functions beyond the system of written signs, as if "pressing against" the reality through the fractures between letters, benefiting from the deferral between the world and the word. These two realities are connected by an elusive, untranslatable rhyme: *głos + los*, meaning in Polish literally *voice + fate/destiny*, and rendered by Benjamin Paloff as *voice + choice*. Coincidentally or otherwise, the word *zwłoka* ("delay, deferral") from the fourth line to the end of the poem, in Polish in plural form (*zwłoki*) means "corpse." This generates two other possible interpretations: (1) a grotesquely ironic image of a "prophecy" sung by a mummy or perhaps a zombie; this thread, in turn, might lead us further to Derrida's "undecidable" zombie, who is both dead and alive, and/or to Sosnowski's long poem "dr. caligari resets the world," which I will discuss later in this section; (2) blowing away the dead body of tradition. Yet, "sing" (*zaśpiewać*), in colloquial Polish has another meaning as well; it signifies not just singing a song but also revealing a secret, often one that helps solve a criminal case. A deferral/corpse of meaning in the language game can perhaps give one some insight into the deeper structures that regulate its organization.

Throughout the poem, besides the dialogue with Ashbery, one may identify allusions to frequent motifs in the poetry of the Polish Old Masters. A stone/pebble appears in well-known poems by Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska as a metaphor for self-contained, nontransparent (*nieprzejrzysty*, this word in line 15 of "What Is Poetry" is rendered in a less exact way as "unclear") reality characterized by cold perfection. In Sosnowski's work, the

45 Sosnowski 2009: 29.

46 Ashbery 1977.

stones serve to play a game known as stone skipping, or stone skimming. The scene “in the cavern or in the teeny room,” in turn, resembles an image from Miłosz’s poem “Ars Poetica?”. Instead of Miłosz’s Daimonion and other “invisible guests who come and go at will,”⁴⁷ Sosnowski, when he opens the door of his poem, is visited only by the gust which scatters the words like confetti. The verb “rear up” (*stawać dęba*) evokes associations with Julian Tuwim’s *Pegasus Rearing Up, or a Poetic Panopticon* (*Pegaz dęba albo poetyckie panopticum*, 1950)—a collection of miniature essays in which Tuwim gathers and discusses numerous examples of language play in Polish and world poetry. Finally, the scattered leaves, especially contrasted with stones that resist poetic description, might perhaps be taken as a metaphor for poems, as in the famous anthology of Japanese classical poetry, *Ten Thousand Leaves* (万葉集). When all canons and languages dissolve, what may the song of deferral/corpse sound like?

An example of a “prophetic” song from Sosnowski’s repertoire is found in the poem “Acte manqué” from his second collection *Season in Hel* (*Sezon na Helu*, 1994), whose title may be taken as a dialogue with Arthur Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*. This allusion, however, is unreadable in Polish and (contrary to the rhyme *gtos + los*) it is only the English translation that brings it out. Hel is the name of a peninsula in northern Poland separating the Bay of Puck from the open Baltic Sea that is a popular place for summer vacations. It by no means resembles the Polish word for hell—*piekło*. The narrative of the quasi-revelation is driven, as the title suggests, by Freudian slips. This recalls Joanna Mueller’s “stratigraphies,” which excludes the possibility of such slips in poetry. Mueller’s modernist thinking assumes that it is the author who has the last word and consciously decides which meanings to exhibit and which to conceal in the text. In Sosnowski’s work, this is certainly not the case. The narrator invites his guests for “a cup of bread” to his house which is suspended somewhere in the “comic space.” A mysterious crime committed by unknown doers is investigated by undone knowers, in my clumsy attempt at rendering the slip of the tongue in Polish, which transforms *nieznani sprawcy* (“unknown perpetrators”) into *niesprawni znawcy* (“inefficient/handicapped experts”). All in all, however, the sequence of apparent mistakes leads to some of the most poignant and explicit statements in Sosnowski’s oeuvre regarding the nature of poetry writing, which we see in line 4 and the final line, as if he indeed managed to peep into what is beneath the game.

47 Miłosz 2005a: 240, translated by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

Acte Manqué

Well, how about a nice night in our old base
 in another heating season
 or come around for a cup of bread.
 A poem leaves home and never comes back,
 the star still pulsates in the comic space
 like a green eye of a tape recorder, a magic
 lantern, though under it was a sea;
 music, dark room, dance or future
 started by a puzzled hand
 in a fly fastened with a safety pin? I'm
 unprepared, I have the smell
 of orange soda powder and I'm wet
 behind the ears, an adultlike girl.

I forgot myself, what will the executive say?
 There are disruptions in foreign connections
 and someone else is playing emcee.
 Undone knowers? Symptoms, signals
 that gush along the line of furious defense
 or perhaps geysers of steam over the entrances of manholes? E.g.
 that funny girl with a tropic
 of orange hair sleeping in the tent on
 bare earth, only pins and pegs, ah,
 fuck, skin and bones, I would say.
 You took these words out of my mouth.

We, unknown doers in the sleepy bivouacs.
 To say it different than yes and than no.

Acte manqué

Cóż, może w innym sezonie ogrzewczym
 jakiś miły nocleg w naszej starej bazie
 lub wpadnij do nas na kieliszek chleba.
 Wiersz wychodzi z domu i nigdy nie wraca
 a gwiazda dalej pulsuje w przestrzeni komicznej
 jak zielone oko magnetofonu, latarnia
 magiczna, choć co pod nią było morzem,

muzyka, ciemny pokój, taniec czy też przyszłość
 którą napoczyna zdziwiona dłoń
 w rozporoku spiętym agrafką? Jestem
 niegotowy, mam na palcach zapach
 oranżady w proszku i mleko
 pod nosem, stara maleńka.

Zapomniałem się i co na to egzekutywa?
 Są usterki na łączach poza granicami
 i ktoś inny bawi się w konferansjerkę.
 niesprawni znawcy? Symptomy, sygnały
 tryskające po linii zacieklego oporu
 czy gejzery pary nad wlotami włazów? Np.
 tamta śmieszna dziewczyna z tropikiem
 pomarańczowych włosów rozbita wprost
 na gołej ziemi, same szpilki i śledzie, ech,
 kurwa, skóra i kości, rzekłbym.
 Wyjąłeś mi to z ust.

My, nieznani sprawcy na sennych biwakach.
 Powiedzieć to inaczej niż tak i niż nie.⁴⁸

It might seem that it is the unleashed element of language that unexpectedly carries the speaker toward clear, self-conscious methodological theses that in Polish poetry discourse have already taken a life of their own: “a poem leaves home and never returns” and “to say it different than yes and [different] than no,” which look like postulates of Derridean deconstruction in a poetic nutshell. Yet one may also note that these two metalinguistic sentences clearly stand out from the stream-of-language narrative coshaped, as the Freudian title suggests, by one’s subconsciousness and suppressed desires. They are, to use Sosnowski’s image, like small lanterns at whose feet a sea spreads and perhaps soon the waves will swallow them as well.

Indeed, in many texts from later collections, these little lanterns of awareness disappear. In the scenario presented in “Poem (*Trackless*)” (Wiersz (*Trackless*)) from *Taxi* (2003), in which Sosnowski cites the signature phrase from “Acte Manqué,” the poem, cut from its roots, touched with a temporary amnesia, gets lost in a deluge of signifiers. We cannot even be sure that it ever existed:

48 Sosnowski 2009: 161, trans. J.K.

Poem (Trackless)

The poem loses its memory around the corner
 In the black air you can hear the guards calling
 I was looking for my sister and couldn't find her
 I had no sister and thus could not look for her

I had no sister how can one use memory to reach
 Back along a street long gone
 In our neighborhood lost in the courtyards
 It doesn't know bright and early It's drinking in basements

Dreaming the hours away by the dumpster wall
 My dark eyelids are heavy with wine
 The poem leaves home and never comes back
 The poem does not remember the home it never had

For this dark love for an uncivilized genre
 Back along a street long gone
 It walks without memory and vanishes without trace
 There is no poem memory sister no home

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁴⁹

Wiersz (trackless)

Wiersz traci pamięć za rogiem ulicy
 W czarnym powietrzu brzmia wołania straży
 Szukałem siostry i nie mogłem znaleźć
 Nie miałem siostry więc nie mogłem szukać

Nie miałem siostry jak sięgnąć pamięcią
 Wstecz wzdłuż ulicy której dawno nie ma
 W naszej okolicy zgubi się w podwórkach
 Nie zna białego ranka Pije w suterrenach

Marzy godzinami przy murku śmietnika
 Moje ciemne powieki ciężkie są od wina

49 Sosnowski 2011: 112.

Wiersz wychodzi z domu i nigdy nie wraca
 Wiersz nie pamięta domu którego nie było

Dla tej ciemnej miłości dzikiego gatunku
 Wstecz wzdłuż ulicy której dawno nie ma
 Idzie bez pamięci i znika bez śladu
 Nie ma wiersza pamięci siostry ani domu⁵⁰

In “A Song for Europe” (Piosenka dla Europy) from *Season in Hel*, however, Sosnowski declares that he is not going to sign an act of unconditional surrender of his stronghold-like lantern. He apparently wants to negotiate with the inhuman, unpredictable element, to chart the flow, and regain at least partial control over the text for the letter or the signal he sends from the lantern to reach the reader:

The nocturnal pollutions of factories, embers, dissonance,
 and the style of this history is so elusive you have to drive
 the poem down this track, then that one, if it's to make it
 into the hands of its unknown addressee.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁵¹

Nocą polucje fabryk, łuny, dysonanse
 a styl tej historii jest tak nieuchwytny, że wiersz
 trzeba pchnąć tym torem, potem tamtym, by trafił
 do rąk nieznanego adresata.⁵²

One option of regaining control which Sosnowski considers, though he finally rejects it in his own work, is Raymond Roussel's radical proposition in which “biography is grammar,” effectively recapitulated in the poem translated by Paloff as “For Raymond Roussel” (Polish title: “R. R. (1877–1933)”). In this bio-grammar, instead of the binary opposition of yes and no as the core principle of the logocentric order, a set of very precise arbitrary rules is established by Roussel (“Nothing, then, is accidental, although everything / is arbitrary” [Zatem nic nie bywa przypadkowe, choć wszystko / jest arbitralne]). On the one hand, “the initiative rests entirely / with the words”⁵³ (inicjatywa w pełni /

50 Sosnowski 2009: 376.

51 Sosnowski 2011: 30.

52 Sosnowski 2009: 156.

53 Sosnowski 2011: 39.

należy do słów), but on the other, Roussel works hard to turn the play of words to his benefit.⁵⁴ There is no space for any *acte manqué* in his projects. All slips of the tongue are considered potential artistic measures to push the narrative forward. Sosnowski quotes long passages from Roussel, for example:

I would choose two nearly identical words, such as *billard* [billiard table] and *pillard* [plunderer]. First I looked for words connected with *billard*, but I always chose the ones with a more distant meaning. Thus the word *queue* [a pool cue; the train of a dress] furnished me with the train of King Talou. A billiard cue often has its owner's *chiffre* [monogram], and thus the *chiffre* [code] on the royal train.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁵⁵

*Wybierałem dwa niemal identyczne słowa, np. "bilard" [stół bilardowy] i "pillard [łupieżca]. Najpierw szukałem słów związanych z "bilard", ale zawsze brałem je w bardziej odległym znaczeniu. W ten sposób słowo "queue" [kij bilardowy, tren sukni] dostarczyło mi tren króla Talou. Kij bilardowy posiada często "chiffre" [monogram] właściciela i stąd "chiffre" [cyfra] na królewskim trenie.*⁵⁶

Or:

I would connect one word with another using the preposition *à* [to, on, with, in, by, etc.]. Example 1) *Rour* [wheel] *à caoutchouc* [rubber]. 2) *Roue* [cocky] *à caoutchouc* [rubber tree]. Thus the rubber tree on the round Trophy Square where Talou cockily placed his foot on his opponent's torso.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁵⁷

*Łączyłem jedno słowo z innym przy pomocy przyimka "à" [do, na, z, w, u etc.] Przykład: 1) "Roue" [koło] a caoutchouc [kauczuk]. Stąd drzewo kauczukowe na okrągłym placu Trofeów, gdzie Talou buńczucznie postawił stopę na torsie przeciwnika.*⁵⁸

54 Sosnowski 2009: 172, translated by Benjamin Paloff.

55 Sosnowski 2011: 39.

56 Sosnowski 2009: 171; italics in the original.

57 Sosnowski 2011: 40.

58 Sosnowski 2009: 172.

Moreover, Roussel himself led an almost purely aesthetic existence. He traveled a lot, including “Africa, America, China, / Australia, Japan, Tahiti” (Afryka, Ameryka, Chiny, / Australia, Japonia, Tahiti), but hardly ever left his hotel rooms, and across Europe he moved in a self-designed *roulette*, so as to not pollute himself with reality. “For his work / ‘can contain nothing of reality, nothing observed’, / only structures completely imagined”⁵⁹ (Albowiem utwór / nie może zawierać nic rzeczywistego, żadnych obserwacji, / a tylko zupełnie wyimaginowane struktury).⁶⁰ Life should not either. Nor should death. Sosnowski’s poem ends with a meticulous description of the final hours of Roussel’s life:

It is unclear when he started working
 on his death. [...]
 Full of sorrow, on the 13th
 of July (Bastille Day’s Eve) he takes his usual dose of drugs,
 sits at the window, watches the festival honoring Saint Rosalia
 and a Balbo squadron (9:30, a display of allegorical lights
 on the boats and barges in front of the Foro Umberto: “a reiter
 trots across the sky, bowing to an invisible
 Amazon”). Whatever—commands, artificial fires—
 Mme. Dufrené doesn’t know when he locks his door
 between their rooms (something he never did), when he opens
 the door to the hall, when he drags the heavy straw mattress
 against the locked door. In the morning
 his body is resting on that mattress, his right arm
 outstretched, his index finger
 pointing toward the locked door
 (“A riddle,” says Hölderlin, “the pure of source.”)

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁶¹

Nie wiadomo, w którym roku zaczął opracowywać
 własną śmierć. [...]
 Pełen smutku, 13
 lipca (wigilia Bastylji) bierze zwykłą dawkę prochów,
 siedzi przy oknie, ogląda festyn ku czci Św. Rozalii
 i eskadry Balbo (o 21.30 pokaz alegorycznych świateł

59 Sosnowski 2011: 39, translated by Benjamin Paloff.

60 Sosnowski 2009: 171.

61 Sosnowski 2011: 41–42.

na łódkach i barkach przed Foro Umberto: *rajtar*
przejeżdża truchtem po niebie składając ukłon
niewidocznej Amazonce). Cóż, komendy, sztuczne ognie—
 łączące ich pokoje (nigdy tego nie robił), kiedy otwiera
 drzwi na korytarz, kiedy wlecze ciężki siennik
 pod te zamknięte drzwi. Rano
 ciało spoczywa na sienniku, prawa ręka
 jest wyprostowana, wskazujący palec
 sterczy w stronę zamkniętych drzwi.
 (Zagadka, mówi Hölderlin, pochodzi z czystego źródła).⁶²

For all his keen interest in Roussel's existential experiment, Sosnowski himself is definitely more subtle in his attempts to stitch together life and writing. He does it through an elusive rhyme (*los + głos*), as in "What Is Poetry," or, in another example, by encrypting them in ambiguous initials in a long "Poem for J. S." (Wiersz dla J. S.) from *Lodgings (Stancje, 1997)*. "J. S." conceals two identities: one of Sosnowski's literary inspirations, James Schuyler, and the author's then-wife Justyna Sosnowska. The text is a mixture of scattered memories, fragmented conversations with/about the living and the dead, including Polish and foreign poets, snapshots from a bar, encyclopedia entries, chaotic reflections on creative process, and so forth. Among the many tidbits, we find an anecdotal account of Piotr Sommer's interviews with the New York school authors, including Schuyler:

He flew in from Virginia to talk with Kenneth Koch and you
 and also with Edwin Denby *but*
 He didn't reach Koch, and Denby said in such a gentle and polite voice
 on the telephone that unfortunately
 He was just on his way to Maine. He wasn't on his way to Maine:
 he killed himself a few days later. "I know
 What he was talking about," P. S. says on the corner of the miniscule
 garden of Brodzka Pub (formerly Gong). And
 Schuyler? John Ashbery arranged for a two-hour sit-down,
 warning that Schuyler is difficult.
 Hotel Chelsea. What floor? Second or fourth? "I was just
 dumbfounded by how poorly I knew him.
 Sure, I had these questions, but such an unfledged shithead,
 on the one hand ..." And on the other: J. S.

62 Sosnowski 2009: 173.

In a dark room, about 15 m², as narrow as a sleeping compartment
 on a train, with dirty sheets, obese and unshaven
 He just sort of ... dragged himself up, put his legs down, and waited. "All
 that
 together blew me away, but I had to
 Keep up appearances, so I switch on my recorder and ask
 my questions, but that internal tension
 Is always there and shows up so floridly in everything I say,
 and Schuyler says only, 'Yes, I think so,'
 And 'No, I don't think so ...'" "Well, it's great that you got
 anything at all," Ashbery said.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁶³

Przyleciał z Wirginii, żeby rozmawiać z Kennethem Kochem i tobą i
 jeszcze z Edwinem Denbym ALE
 Kocha nie zastał, a Denby takim łagodnym i uprzejmym głosem
 powiedział przez telefon, że niestety
 Właśnie wyjeżdża do Maine. Wcale nie wyjechał do Maine: zabił się kilka
 dni później. "To wiem
 O czym mówił", mówi P. S. w rogu miniaturowego ogródka Brodzka Pub
 (dawny Gong). No a
 Schuyler? John Ashbery umówił ich na dwugodzinną sesję ostrzegając, że
 Schuyler jest trudny.
 Chelsea Hotel. Które piętro? Drugie czy czwarte? "Po prostu mnie
 zamurowało, tak słabo go znałem.
 Miałem wprawdzie te pytania, ale taki nieopierzony gówniarz z jednej
 strony ..." A z drugiej J. S.
 W ciemnym pokoju, ok. 15 m², wąskim jak przedział w pociągu w brudnej
 pościeli, otyły nieogolony
 Tylko tak trochę ... zwłókł się, opuścił nogi i czekał. "To mnie tak zatkało
 wszystko razem lecz musiałem
 Poudawać chyba do końca, więc zapuszczam tę moją maszynę i pytam,
 ale ten przykurcz wewnętrzny
 Ciągłe trwa i tak kwieście się objawia w całym moim mówieniu a
 Schuyler mówi tylko *Yes, I think so*

I *No, I don't think so ...* "No, to i tak świetnie, że w ogóle coś dostałeś", powiedział Ashbery.⁶⁴

So little and yet so much, one may add, comparing James Schuyler's answers with the numerous interviews with Andrzej Sosnowski. Sosnowski, as Krzysztof Hoffmann has noted,⁶⁵ is a gentleman who politely accepts invitations to various poetry events and engages in conversations with other poets and critics—a collection of such conversations was published by the Literary Bureau as *Following in the Footsteps* (*Trop w trop*, 2010). Nevertheless, in his generously profuse utterances, one rarely finds as clear-cut a message as Schuyler's "yes, I think so," or "no, I don't think so." And even when we encounter such declarations, they are usually immediately followed by various—annoyingly, some would say—thought-provoking ifs, buts, or counterstatements. Often the author intelligently shifts the topic of conversation. In the words of Grzegorz Jankowicz, the editor of *Following*, in conversations with Sosnowski,

the gesture of revealing is always accompanied by the gesture of dodge and camouflage. The poet easily sidesteps the question, changes the tone of the answer, switches tracks or cedes old threads, or adds new ones, and finally navigates the conversation toward the neutral ground of foreign literature, where he can freely talk about issues that are only indirectly connected to his writing.⁶⁶

Karolina Felberg, building on an earlier review of *Following* by Pior Śliwiński, characterizes what she calls Sosnowski's "positions," a word borrowed from the poem "Five Fathoms Down" (*Pięć sążni w dół*):

Sosnowski is at the same time—to refer to Śliwiński's review—"over, under, and between." "Over" the interlocutor in front of whom he always "buttons a frock coat" to cover himself [...]. "Under," for during the conversation he, in a sense, "impersonates" [Joanna Mueller's term] his own poems, from which we draw the infelicitous knowledge that in fact "[b]roken are bridges and rails // Broken // Our positions burned." But we shall note that although Sosnowski in a conversation "rewrites himself" as if through himself—at the same time remaining untouched, tightly closed, controlling the situation—he will also often smile like "a sandbar

64 Sosnowski 2009: 226–227.

65 Cited in Felberg 2010: 285–286.

66 Jankowicz 2010a: 6, trans. J K; cf. Felberg 2010: 285.

/ At the small ship on the water surface," that is, at his interlocutor who is thrown into the deep end. And, finally, he is always "in between": between Polish- and English-language literature, between modernity and postmodernity, between literature and literary-critical discourse, between literary history and philosophy; in other words, he holds a clear, if clearly borderline, position, which is not, I think, a particular side on an issue, a form of opposition, but rather an attempt to hold oneself within oneself while simultaneously, as Jankowicz wants, reaching one's hand "toward reality, toward the reader, but not with an intention to grab something or someone."⁶⁷

The strategy of constantly rereading himself through himself is present in Sosnowski's poetry as well, as if he is trying to test different scenarios of the language game, taking up threads tentatively explored in earlier works, or returning to "roads not taken," as Frost would say, and replaying the game throughout. Particularly rich reservoirs of such strategies are his two "apocalyptic" poems: "dr. caligari resets the world" from *poems* (2010) and "Séance after Histories" (Seans po historiach) from *Silhouettes and Shadows* (*Sylwetki i cienie*, 2012). The doomsday scenario presented in the former "resets the world," its entire cultural tradition, and poetry itself, including Sosnowski's own oeuvre, beginning with his debut collection. The scene in the lively aquapark described in the aforementioned "Wild Water Kingdom" from *Life in Korea*, after the intervention of doctor caligari turns into its negative: wild rivers of fire bursting their banks and flooding the earth. Yet, the word "reset" (*resetować*) used in the title never appears in the poem; it is replaced by the verb "recite" (*recytować*), which Sosnowski treats as its near-synonym. Apocalypse (resetting) is always a new genesis, but this genesis hinges on the ever-weakening Logos; it is recited (that is, repeated from imperfect memory) and re-cited (copied for the *n*th time from the increasingly distant and blurred source). Likewise, the apocalyptic end, too, blurs: the word "last" appears in scare quotes. Moreover, this "re(-)citation" is in fact voiceless if not impossible. Taking into account that "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" is a silent film, the opening part of the poem, in which the I-speaker urges the doctor to speak louder, brings the reader immediately to the heart of the absurd, onto an advanced level of the language game launched in Sosnowski's first poem:

67 Felberg 2010: 286–287, trans. J K. Quotes in the excerpt come from "Five Fathoms Down"; I cite Benjamin Paloff's rendition included in Sosnowski 2011: 64–65.

innocently heartlessly and from a distance
 doctor caligari recites the world
 a little louder please
 dottore
 no point in sleep Cesare
 quick as ghost in the sun
 came out shines is setting
 no chance of getting sleep here

or else sleep Cesare on such a night
 and how much time do i have left dottore
 and till the break of day Cesare
 (and you a little less than that alana)

we'll twist till the first tear
 till the first tears
till the first blood
 till the "last" drop of blood

till the first *nothing*
past the last something
 ha ha

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁶⁸

niewinnie bez serca i z daleka
 doktor caligari recytuje świat
 prosimy trochę głośniej
 dottore
 tu nie warto nawet spać cesare
 słońce szybkie jak duch
 wyszło świeci zachodzi
 nie da się tu zdążyć na sen

albo i śpij cesare w taką noc
 a jak długo będę żył dottore
 a do białego poranka cesare
 (ty zaś trochę krócej alanie)

68 Sosnowski 2011: 142.

skręcimy go do pierwszej tzy
 do pierwszych łez
do pierwszej krwi
 do “ostatniej” kropli krwi

do pierwszego *nic!*
poza ostatnie coś!
 ha ha⁶⁹

It is not possible to quote the entire seven-page-long poem here, and summarizing it in a few sentences is a futile task since the text is composed of loosely associated images; this makes it reminiscent of Eliot’s “Waste Land,” which is also quoted literally or explicitly alluded to in several places in “dr. caligari.” Let’s then instead carefully read a little sample from this insane book of Cancellation/Revelation:

and if the rat asks for our passports
 we’ll ask for the river of heraclitus for its depths its arrest
 in the fluorescent cave where we will hang
 injecting light into darkness or the other way around
 whipping up a lot of romantic
dust is that a friend or a fiend driving us please
 a rat named jagganath loves to dance
 the lost as he shines a light on our passports
 using “a limited set of means
 he suffers ‘finitude’” to the core.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁷⁰

a jeśli szczur zapyta nas o paszport
 spytamy o rzekę heraklita o jej dno i zaczepienie
 w tej odblaskowej jaskini gdzie będziemy wisieć
 wtryskując światło w ciemność albo i na odwrót
 romantyczne wyczyniając
hece czy to pies czy to bies co proszę gna
 szczur nazywa się dżagannath lubi
 zatańczyć zgubionego gdy prześwietla paszport

69 Sosnowski 2010: 15.

70 Sosnowski 2011: 144.

korzystając z “ograniczonego zespołu środków
wyczerpuje ‘końcówść’ do cna⁷¹

When the “finitude” is exhausted (suffered to the core), a new stage in the (re-) creation cycle begins. In this new cycle, Logos is further weakened and even the word “recite” itself is re(-)cited, and put in quotation marks. Re(-)cited is also *dr caligari*. After completing his destructive mission, he reemerges as “*dr charivari*”:

how beautifully heartlessly from a distance
dr charivari “recites” the world
a little softer please *dottore*.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁷²

jak pięknie bez serca z oddali
dr charivari “recytuje” świat
prosimy nieco ciszej *dottore*⁷³

Apparently, the cruel doctor rose in power: unlike in the beginning, he now has voice and speaks loudly from a position of authority, so to say. But ... does he? *Charivari*, his new name, is a term for a folk custom in which a wrongdoer, or his impersonator or effigy, was publicly mocked in front of the local community. In fact, the *dottore* ends up compromised and discredited. The story closes with a near-biblical last judgment of the oppressor. And yet, in the following lines it is restarted again:

in a moment at the start of a trip in other directions
let’s go to the kinds of places that never existed
a deep blue span like sapphire and steel
over the edge of the headland no quiet.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁷⁴

zaraz na początku wycieczki w inne strony
jedźmy w takie miejsce którego nigdy nie ma

71 Sosnowski 2010: 17–18.

72 Sosnowski 2011: 146.

73 Sosnowski 2010: 19.

74 Sosnowski 2011: 146.

ciemnoniebieski prześwit jak szafir i stal
za krawędzią przylądka bez ciszy i bez fal⁷⁵

In the place that never existed, “the triumph of life” is celebrated as in the so titled poem by Percy Shelley from which Sosnowski borrows the final lines of a weird blessing:

over the city a storm like a vast cave-in
the tempestuous mayor tap-dances by city hall
the sandgrouse is a kind of spritely bird
the ermine is a notorious moth
(not to be confused with the lovely lady’s ermine stole)
wild water kingdom timex show
what a strange lethargic trance
they’re oxygenating the H₂O

till all there is is h times two
 ha ha
just h
 and π
“happy those for whom the fold
of”
szczęśliwi dla których fałd
ów

happy.

Translated by BENJAMIN PALOFF⁷⁶

nad miastem burza jak rozległy zawał
siny burmistrz stepuje pod ratuszem
pustynnik to jest taki skoczny ptak
namiotnik to jest taka znana ćma
(piękna pani miała zaś namiotkę)
wild water kingdom timex show
jaki dziwny letargiczny trans

75 Sosnowski 2010: 20.

76 Sosnowski 2011: 148.

trwa obłęzenie tlenu w H₂O
 aż będzie tylko ha dwa
 ha ha

samo h
 i π
happy those for whom the fold
of
 szczęśliwi dla których fałd
 ów⁷⁷

The enigmatic “fold of” becomes one of the central issues in “Séance after Histories,” published in 2012.⁷⁸ The long poem, illustrated with images from the Mayan calendar, is another simulation of the apocalypse, which—according to some interpretations of Mayan astrology—was predicted for December 21, 2012. As an event that foreshadows the end of the world, Sosnowski refers to the 2010 explosion of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull. Its name functions in the work as “my tomorrow’s chorus” (mój jutrzejszy refren) and “my today’s call” (mój dzisiejszy okrzyk), which is, in reality, an antichorus and anticall due to its unpronounceability (“I will be learning its pronunciation until the end of the world” [do końca świata będę się uczył wymowy]). Again, the apocalyptic landscape is constructed, or “recited,” from scattered quotes, self-quotes, and allusions. For instance, Paul Celan’s “Deathfugue” (Die Todesfuge) is remixed with a demonic passage from Rimbaud’s “Season in Hell”:

Again the old conjunctions and bad culminations.
 Upper culminations, lower culminations,
 the rush of hallucinations after a misty catastrophe
 and time and again under the stained glass of names
 eternal return of hearings of what is always new:
 the rustle of your robes, Sunamit.
 The clop of your shoes, Margareta. You
 will always be a hyena, Arthur. Fire and
 a quick brightness.

Znów stare koniunkcje i złe kulminacje.
 Kulminacje górne, kulminacje dolne,

77 Sosnowski 2010: 21–22.

78 All quotes from the poem come from Sosnowski 2012: 13–55, trans. J K.

pęd przywidzeń po mglistej katastrofie
 i wciąż na okrągło pod witrażami nazw
 wieczny powrót słyszeń tego co zawsze
 nowe: Szum twoich szat, Sunamitko.
 Stukot twoich butów, Margareto.
 Ty pozostaniesz hieną, Arturze. Ogień
 i prędką światłość.

“Rosenkranz and Guildenstern are dead” (Rosenkranz i Guildenstern nie żyją), we hear later, as in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the title of Tom Stoppard’s play and film. “Behemoth and Leviathan [from the biblical book of Job] are dead too” (Behemot i Lewiatan też nie żyją). In this delogocentrized world, the tough voice of God is replaced by the music of “quite hard” (całkiem ostra) Pan Jam. “Jam Pan” (pronounced roughly as *yum pun*), means in old Polish “I am the Lord,” a formula in which God spoke to the Jews in the Old Testament (as in “I am the Lord, thy God ...” preceding the Ten Commandments). In the inverse order and pronounced according to the rules of English pronunciation, the two words turn into what might be the name of a music band, which perhaps existed in reality or, alternatively, is a pun on “Pearl Jam.” The Pan/Lord

started as sex’n’angry pistol
 but later toned it down a notch ... no future, no fun.
 And the spirit once “oscillated” over the face of the waters
 and it was quite cute, on the old leaflets
 holidays in the countryside or on the Cantharides—
Happy those two for whom the fold of

wystartował jako sex’n’angry pistol,
 później spuścił z tonu ... no future, no fun.
 A duch kiedyś “oscyłował” nad wodami
 i było dość uroczo, na starych folderach
 wczasy pod gruszą czy na Kantarydach—
Happy those two for whom the fold of

The “fold of” suddenly brings Sosnowski back to the beginning of his poetry writing like a fold in spacetime, which, as cosmologists suppose, is wrapped in a higher dimension (in the below excerpt the poet speaks of the “fifth dimension” [piąty wymiar]); this hypothetical quality would allow one to travel between two seemingly distant points in the (uni)verse by spaciotemporal shortcut. Alternatively, it might be likened to a hidden passageway in the

virtual reality of the (language) game. It turns out that the riddle of “the fold of” is a continuation of the mystery of the “voice” (*głos*), which in “What Is Poetry” from his debut collection so perfectly and untranslatably rhymed with “fate” (*los*) (*voice + choice* in Paloff’s rendition).

The riddle I investigated
 starting from the voice, asking questions
 to experts specializing in speech—this
 voice ... what timbre, what tone, what was
 that old projection, Agata? A snippy, bloody
 whisper? A desert-dry, rusty whisper,
 so quiet and slow in those ... straits?
 Beyond the sky that can be shown.
 Beyond the sky that can be named.
 From behind the fire, wind, trembling of the dear earth
 the whisper skimmed this world, and died down.
 And suddenly I hear it again ... Unbelievable,
someone again is calling me through the wind.

[...]

And times mingle, for time is running out,
 shrunk to the size of a microprocessor.
 The effect of gravity, called sometimes a rainbow.
 And the second riddle, *fold of*? A fold of the source,
 a pleat, a crease, a tuck? A narrow
 “aperture with rounded edges in the
 casting”? A kink? A crack? Or a call
 of time, spasm, laughter—along the beginning?

[...]

A late tremor of time, exhausted fold
 gets in frantic, end-time motion. Now
 a huge wave is approaching, furred by the sky,
 which shakes off “astronets” like ashes and glow,
 livid mites during the day that is not,
 for this day, more severe than the polar night
 is blacker than the interstellar night.

[...]

The fifth dimension, ether. A tangle of escape paths.
 The thunder was like a clearance for my voice,
 among rumble and lightness, I climbed to nowhere
 by a pass that was so narrow that vertigo
 pulsed like a cosmotron, an infernal whirlpool
 of critical phrases before the clock of new days;
 when tomorrow's voice returns into the remnants of creation:
 this voice which sends comfort through ether,
 whispers that Thou are not the world's end, but ...

Là ci

... present.

la

Zagadka, którą badałem,
 zaczynając od głosu, zadając pytania
 uczonym w mowie specjalistom—ten
 głos ... jaki tembr, co za ton, jaka była
 ta dawna emisja, Agato? Oschły, krwawy
 szept? Pustynnie suchy, rdzawy szept,
 tak cichy i wolny w tych ... cieśninach?
 Poza niebem, które można pokazywać.
 Poza niebem, które można ponazywać.
 Zza ognia, wiatru, drżenia milej ziemi
 szept musnął ten świat, potem ucichł.
 I naraz znowu go słyszę ... Niepojęte,
ktoś znowu woła mnie poprzez wiatr

[...]

A czasy się mieszają, bo kończy się czas,
 skurczony do wymiaru mikroprocesora.
 Skutek grawitacji, czasem zwanej tęczą.
 A druga zagadka, *fold of*? Fałdka źródła,
 zakładka, zmarszczka i załamek? Wąska
 "szczelinka z zaokrąglonymi brzegami w
 odlewie"? Zagięcie? Pęknięcie? Czy zew
 czasu, spazm i śmiech—wzdłuż początku?

[...]

Późne drgnienie czasu, wyczerpana fałdka
 wpada w ruch szalony, ostateczny. Teraz
 idzie już fala wielka, która zwija niebo,
 strzepując “astronety” jak popiół i żar,
 sine kruszynki w dzień, którego nie ma,
 bo ten dzień, surowszy niż polarna noc,
 czarniejszy jest niż międzygwiezdna noc.

[...]

Piąty wymiar, eter. Trop ścieżek ucieczki.
 Grom był jak prześwit dla mojego głosu,
 w huku i blasku pięłem się donikąd
 przejściem tak krętym, że zawroty głowy
 tętniły jak kosmotron, piekielna wirówka
 krytycznych faz przed dni nowych zegarem;
 gdy jutrzejszy głos wraca w ostatki stworzenia:
 ten głos, który przez eter zsyła pocieszenia,
 szepce, żeś Ty nie końcem świata, ale ...

*Là ci**darem**la*

This is a double cosmo(a)gonic image: the fold of the “pure source of the riddle,” as in “For Raymond Roussel,” becomes the riddle’s darkest solution. Everything shrinks to the smallest size; scientists term it Planck length, Sosnowski—“the size of a microprocessor.” The world implodes under the action of maximal gravity, “called sometimes a rainbow,” this being an allusion to the author’s collection *Along the Rainbow* (*Po tęczy*, 2007; alternatively translated as *After the Rainbow*). In scientific terminology, to which Sosnowski loosely refers, the world returns to the Singularity of the first moment of the Big Bang which is indescribable within any of the available physical (and literary) paradigms. It happens “Beyond the sky that can be shown, / Beyond the sky that can be named.” Like in T. S. Eliot, “in my beginning is my end,” only that for Sosnowski, “my,” too, is no longer possible. “My voice” is a thunder-like voice of past heroes, re(-)cited and recycled. Instead of individual diction, we can hear a blurred echo of a famous blasphemy that Konrad, the protagonist of Mickiewicz’s *Forefather’s Eve*, threw in the face of God:

KONRAD:

Respond! I take aim at Your very nature,
 And if I can't completely devastate Your
 Substance entire, I'll shake to the foundation
 Your realm, howling throughout all of creation,
 To every generation that Thou are
 Not the world's Father but ...

VOICE OF THE DEVIL:

It's Tsar! [literally: Its Tsar]

Translated by CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI⁷⁹

KONRAD:

Odezwij się,—bo strzelę przeciw Twej naturze;
 Jeśli jej w gruzy nie zburzę,
 To wstrząsnę całym państw Twoich obszarem;
 Bo wystrzelę głos w całe obręby stworzenia:
 Ten głos, który z pokoleń pójdzie w pokolenia:
 Krzyknę, żeś Ty nie ojcem świata, ale ...

GŁOS DIABŁA:

Carem!⁸⁰

In "Séance after Histories," again, due to a slip of the tongue in the re(-)cited phrase from Mickiewicz, *ojcem* (dative of the noun *ojciec*, "father") turns into *końcem* (dative of *koniec*, "end"), *carem* (dative of *car*, "tsar, Russian emperor") into *darem* (dative of *dar*, "gift, present"). Thus, the blasphemy becomes a blessing that signifies the emergence of a new ("present") world.

The poet is relentless in his investigations of the structures of textual space; he explores the secret connections between words, mechanisms of repetition and recurrence, and other laws as far as the rules of language game permit. Language—or, precisely, the physical tongue which messes with the meta-physical language—leads Sosnowski to the very verge of the understandability of things. It stops at the invisible line, to operate beyond which an entirely new grammar of speech and thought has to be invented. In the most recent

79 Mickiewicz 2016: 267–268.

80 Mickiewicz 1998: 161.

collections, *The House of Wounds* (Dom ran, 2015) and *Travers* (Trawers, 2017), he continues his attempts, initiated in *Life in Korea*, to overcome the idea of the end of literature, and find the formula that will allow for further inquiry into the (currently) unknowable.

4 In the Magic Circle: Why Che Qianzi Is Not Virgil

“Three Basic Colors” (三原色) from 1982 is Che Qianzi’s most frequently discussed poem, often used as a text through which to illustrate the difference between Obscure poetry and Che’s poetic project. This may of course be my omission, but it strikes me that among many papers, I have never encountered it paired with the poem that I believe would most naturally fit such a discussion, namely Gu Cheng’s 顾城 “I Am an Obstinate Child” (我是一个任性的孩子) written in 1981. In Gu’s poem, the I-speaker unfolds a vision of a picture that he would have drawn had he been given colorful crayons and a “moment of color” (一个彩色的时刻), which he is consistently denied by adults. Having only “my fingers and my pains” (我的手指和创痛) and only being able to “tear off strip after strip / of lovely clean paper / to flutter off in search of butterflies / to fade away from Today”⁸¹ (只有撕碎那一张张 / 心爱的白纸 / 让它们去寻找蝴蝶 / 让它们从今天消失),⁸² he paints abstract pictures in his imagination, including of freedom, love, future, and himself as a homeless koala bear enjoying abundant dreams. We can juxtapose this vision with Che Qianzi’s picture in “Three Basic Colors”:

Three Basic Colors

Three Basic Colors
I, on a blank page
A page that contains nothing
Drew three lines
With three crayons
One crayon, one line

With no ruler
The lines were crooked

81 Gu Cheng 1990: 46–49, translated by Eva Hung.

82 Gu Cheng 2010: 674–677.

The big shot (he's indeed very big) said:
 Red, yellow, blue
 Are three basic colors
 Three straight lines
 Symbolizing three paths

—Failing to understand
 (What did he say?)
 I drew again, as I liked
 Three circles

I wanted to draw
 the most perfect circle

Translated by YUNTE HUANG

《三原色》

我，在白纸上
 白纸一什么也没有
 用三支蜡笔
 一支画一条
 画了三条线

没有尺子
 线歪歪扭扭的

大人说（他很大了）：
 红黄蓝
 是三原色
 三条直线
 象征三条道路

—我听不懂
 （讲些什么啊？）
 又照着自己的喜欢
 画了三只圆圈

我要画得最圆最圆⁸³

This is a simple but perplexing poem. The audience, trained on Obscure poetry, where nothing means what it (literally) means and everything is a metaphor that should be approached with the relevant interpretational tools, unexpectedly finds itself thrown inside the text where its “adult” reading habits are called into question. An adult (大人, lit. “a big person,” translated by Huang as “big shot” to retain the pun) who imposes their abstract interpretation on the simple picture of three slightly crooked lines is like a so-called professional reader, specifically a literary critic. The child, utterly focused on the drawing itself, might be taken as a representation of a poet. The adult’s (reader’s/critic’s) remark about the symbolic dimension of the child’s (poet’s) simple activity distracts his attention for a while, but soon he again forgets himself in the engaging artistic process. Drawing “the most perfect circle” on paper, he marks a magic circle of play around himself: a space in which the laws of spacetime and social order are suspended. The adult (reader/critic) is not able to step across the circumference unless they accept the rules of play and take them seriously as they are, without seeking additional justifications and metaphysical senses. At the same time, the child (poet) shows no signs of hostility toward the adult (reader/critic) and probably would not mind them joining him and finishing the circle for it to become more round and closer to unattainable perfection. In a comment that accompanied the poem’s first publication, Che Qianzi directly invites the readers to help him complete the work, emphasizing the aspect of participation as more essential than understanding:

There’s nothing to say of the poem “Three Basic Colors” (in fact there nothing to say of poetry whatsoever). Yesterday, a friend asked me: do the “three lines” and “three circles” have a symbolic meaning? Really, I didn’t expect it to. I simply left more space for the reader’s imagination. Isn’t it better if the reader and the author complete the poem together? The reader must know that we are not wiser than themselves. A poem is not just one or two sentences after reading which one will stand in awe. It should give one a sort of holistic beauty (or rather a holistic effect); one shouldn’t dissect the lines to extract beauty from them. If we consider a poetic line a point, then the entire poem is a plane. A point must serve the plane; it can’t be too labored, otherwise it will destroy the entire plane. Let’s give people a holistic aesthetic experience.⁸⁴

In the short essay “Fragments and Collages of a Self-Portrayal” (自画像的片断与拼贴), he adds: “I believe a poem is a thing like this: it helps people discover

84 Che Qianzi 1982, trans. J K.

something for them to become inventors in their own right.”⁸⁵ Huang draws attention to a peculiar technique often employed by Che in his later poems, namely beginning a line with a left parenthetical mark which is never closed by a right one. He quotes the author’s explanation: “We are lucky enough to be able to begin a poem. We shouldn’t assume, so arrogantly or ignorantly, that we can always finish it.”⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the adult (reader/critic), too, has to accept that perfection is unattainable and come as a participant in the challenge, and not as a teacher who issues instructions. A child (poet) always feels when an adult (reader/critic) *really* plays together with him, not when they are just “babysitting,” with the emphasis on the passive *sitting*.

Unlike Sosnowski, who appears to be determined to play the language game to the end and often takes up the threads opened in one poem to develop them elsewhere or re-play in an alternative way, Che leaves small magic circles all around like traps, or free “demo” versions, into which he lures the reader. Once he makes sure the reader is in and knows the rules, he shares his password to the language game with them (more about the password will be said in the next section), allows them to log in using his poetic avatar, and withdraws.

Theoretically, one might read “Three Basic Colors” as a poem representing Popular aesthetics, that is, as an attempt to turn back the mechanisms of metaphorization and restore a purely metonymic function of language: a line means exactly a line and a circle is no more than a circle. Nonetheless, Che Qianzi’s later poems show that his conception was exactly the opposite, and that he wanted to liberate signifiers and not bind them more tightly to signifieds. Consider, for example, two poems in which Che employs a conventional poetic image of a horse, and—almost literally—harnesses it to the magic mill of his poetry, namely: “The Rider and the Horse” (骑手与马) and “The New Rider and the Horse” (新骑手与马):

The Rider and the Horse

This horse eye is deep blue, so
 deep, so deep
 that it joins the other eye
 A confluence of undertows

The horse looks at you with the left eye
 But actually, it’s the right eye

85 Quoted in Hu Liang 2007, trans. J K.

86 Che Qianzi 2019: xi.

peeking at you
through the left eye

They share a secret tunnel
Long and deep, reaching
The land of dreams
Nowhere near you

Translated by YUNTE HUANG

《骑手与马》

这一只马眼湛蓝，
深得，深得
与另一只马眼相通
慢慢漫来

这一匹马用左眼看你
其实是这一匹马的右眼
通过这一只左眼
向你窥探

它们有秘密通道
深长地，触及
梦幻的大地
但不走近你⁸⁷

The New Rider and the Horse

In a fire-like gallop
the first thing to burn is the rider's head
then shoulders
then arms
then chest
then belly
then loins
then ass
then legs
and then the saddle
and then the horse's body

the azure mane
and the horse's head
finally the horse's legs

when everything is burned
they run faster

《新骑手与马》

火一样的奔驰
最先烧掉的是骑手的脑袋
接下来是肩
接下来是胳膊
接下来是肚皮
接下来是腰
接下来是臀
接下来是腿
接下来是马鞍
接下来是马的身体
碧绿的鬃毛
和马的脑袋
最后，是马的腿

什么都烧掉了
它们就跑得更快⁸⁸

Ye Lu 叶槽 proposes to read the latter poem—although I believe part one of this diptych might benefit even more from such reading—in comparison with Xu Zhimo's 徐志摩 (1897–1931) Romantic-style lyric “To Find a Bright Star” (为要寻一个明星).⁸⁹ Xu's poem tells of a rider who bestrides a blind crook-legged horse and sets out through the wilds to find a star in the starless sky. The exhausted horse dies on the way, and the exhausted rider follows. After their gloriously pointless death, “the sky releases crystal-like light” (天上透出了水晶似的光明).⁹⁰ Another elucidating context for Che Qianzi's works might be Haizi's 海子 long poem “Motherland, or a Dream for a Horse” (祖国，或以梦为马), which is based on a similar concept as Xu's work but characterized by a more elevated style and imagery. The I-speaker in Haizi's heroic vision carries

88 Che Qianzi 2017: 42, trans. J K.

89 Ye Lu 2010.

90 Xu Zhimo 1924, trans. J K.

the fire of love into which he plans to throw himself at the end of his (also gloriously pointless) mission. Let me quote a few excerpts from this long poem where some motifs recycled by Che Qianzi appear:

I want to be a loyal son of farness
 like short-time lovers of matter
 like all poets who took a dream for a horse
 I have no way but follow the same path as martyrs and clowns
 thousands of people want to put out the fire only I alone want to raise it
 high
 this is a fire of greatness flowers bloom and fall in the sacred homeland
 like all poets who took a dream for a horse
 this fire will help me survive the lifetime of dark night
 [...]
 Like all poets who took a dream for a horse
 I throw myself in this fire these three are lamps that imprisoned
 me they spit out brightness
 thousands of people will pass through my knife wound to build the lan-
 guage of homeland
 I am willing to start everything from scratch
 [...]
 Years pass nothing remains in a drop of water there is a horse breath-
 ing its last
 if after thousand years I'm born again on the homeland's shore
 I will be given again Chinese rice paddies and Snow Mountain of the
 descendants of Zhou
 The heavenly horse gallops
 Like all poets who took a dream for a horse
 I choose eternal mission
 my mission is to live my life as the Sun
 from ancient times until today the Sun is unmatched in its brightness
 Like all poets who took a dream for a horse
 in the end gods of dusk will lift me to the immortal Sun
 Sun is my name
 Sun is my life
 Corpses of poems are buried on the peak of the sun—the thousands-year
 kingdom and I
 riding a five-thousand-year phoenix and a dragon called Horse—I will
 fail
 but poetry as the Sun will triumph

我要做远方的忠诚的儿子
 和物质的短暂情人
 和所有以梦为马的诗人一样
 我不得不和烈士和小丑走在同一道路上
 万人都要将火熄灭 我一人独将此火高高举起
 此火为大 开花落英于神圣的祖国
 和所有以梦为马的诗人一样
 我借此火得度一生的茫茫黑夜
 [...]

和所有以梦为马的诗人一样
 我投入此火 这三者是囚禁我的灯盏 吐出光辉
 万人都要从我刀口走过 去建筑祖国的语言
 我甘愿一切从头开始
 [...]

岁月易逝 一滴不剩 水滴中有一匹马儿一命 归天
 千年后如若我再生于祖国的河岸
 千年后我再次拥有中国的稻田 和周天子的雪山 天马踢踏
 和所有以梦为马的诗人一样
 我选择永恒的事业
 我的事业 就是要成为太阳的一生
 他从古至今一“日”一他无比辉煌无比光明
 和所有以梦为马的诗人一样
 最后我被黄昏的众神抬入不朽的太阳
 太阳是我的名字
 太阳是我的一生
 太阳的山顶埋葬 诗歌的尸体一千年王国和我
 骑着五千年凤凰和名字叫“马”的龙一我必将失败
 但诗歌本身以太阳必将胜利⁹¹

Che Qianzi plays with poetic convention, but one might hardly consider his works a parody or mockery. Had he been a Popular poet, he would have probably written a poem resembling Han Dong's "About the Wild Goose Pagoda" (有关大雁塔) or "You Have Seen the Sea" (你见过大海), in which he would have tried to demonstrate in plain language that the horse is just an animal with a head, mane, trunk, tail, and four legs, often carrying a saddle and a rider in the saddle, without any symbolic, metaphorical, or metaphysical meaning. But this is not Che's way of doing things. Instead of ostentatiously dismantling metaphors, he takes the metaphorical images as they are, accepts the rules

91 Haizi 2008: 72-74, trans. J K.

of language production and dissemination, and, according to these rules, processes the objects in his own way in order to further increase the distance from reality. When he is sure he has drawn the reader far enough and that they will not leave the magic circle but will want to continue exploring the space that opens in front of them, he puts down the pen, and the reader keeps on gaming, adding their own associations and contexts.

“The Rider and the Horse” might be read as a negative of “To Find a Bright Star.” The blind horse from Xu’s poem returns in Che’s work miraculously healed, although some strange symptoms remain after this mysterious operation. The horse is inwardly cross-eyed, with its right eye peeking at the rider through the left eye. Instead of bringing the abstract metaphor down to earth to disable metaphysics, the author treats the abstract image as a material object and body-scans it to see what is in the metaphorical horse’s head. What does he find? A forked tunnel that runs from the horse’s eyes to the “land of dreams,” or, in an alternative translation of the phrase *menghuan de dadi* 梦幻的大地, an “illusory earth,” the further from the real world, the better. Is it some umbilical cord that connects the horse to a hidden dimension which is not available to us? A secret passage to a virtual world? A time well, as in science fiction stories and some cosmological hypotheses, which sucks in everything in the horse’s field of vision, like a wellhole, and transports to an unknown place? If this is the case, what happens with us when we are seen by the horse? Do our images travel somewhere without our knowledge, and beyond our understanding?

These questions cannot be answered, and looking for meaning in the conventional sense of the word in this or any other poem by Che Qianzi is doomed to failure. This is a moment when noncommittal play turns into a game, and the reader has to continue by themselves, exploring the structures of the gradually unfolding gamescape and making their way toward the final level in pursuit of the escaping horizon of language. As promised earlier, I will share some snapshots from one of my game sessions with Che’s poetry, but, for practical reasons, I will choose a slower game, where one travels on the back of a snail and not a horse, which would take us too far if we unleashed it from the magic mill.

The second horse poem, “The New Rider and the Horse,” in its turn, can be taken as a playful continuation of Haizi’s “Motherland, or a Dream as a Horse,” or as a very literal fulfillment of Haizi’s prophecy of (self-)immolation of the rider traveling on the horse of dreams, an allegorical figure of a great poet reflecting Haizi’s idea of messianic poethood. In general, reading Che Qianzi “through” Haizi may often lead to interesting interpretations, another self-suggestive example being Che’s “Three Sisters” (三姐妹) and Haizi’s “Four Sisters” (四姐妹), although of course there is no telling whether these interactions were intended. If the allusions to “Motherland” in “The New Rider” are

deliberate, one can of course suspect a little dose of sarcasm on Che's part. After all, isn't it quite indicative that what is burned first is the rider's head? If it had been, say, a hand or a foot, the rider would have likely stopped the horse to put out the fire and save his own and the animal's life. But he apparently approaches the catastrophe head-on, like a moth drawn to a flame. And when the rider-poet, literally, loses his head, the total perishment of the rider's body and the horse that carries him is unavoidable. We may interpret this as an allegorical, grotesque image of the Romantic poethood represented by Haizi, among others. Yet, again, if it were, say, one of Han Dong's programmatic poems, it would probably end at this point, with the destruction of matter. Che Qianzi, conversely, allows his rider and his horse to gallop further and faster even after they have shuffled off this mortal coil. What is the status of their ghostly existence? And what is its aim? Will they run like this forever or do they have some special task to complete? Again, no answer.

We can also read the poem in an entirely different way: as a record of an optical illusion produced by the mind of an observer who watches as the horse gradually vanishes from their sight and, as it disappears beyond the horizon, speeds up in the observer's imagination. But none of these interpretations leads to any convincing conclusion or to a specific message conveyed by the text. Borrowing an image from another poem by Che, "A Horse" (马), to which we will turn now, in the end the horse is transformed into a question mark, or, more precisely, into a question particle.

"A Horse" (马) is a short and conceptually uncomplicated poem, but translating it into an alphabetic language poses considerable problems. I believe it is possible, but such a rendition would be rather useless in a discussion about Che Qianzi's inventiveness and his unique work in the Chinese language. Therefore, I include the source text in Chinese and dissect it below rather than translate it.

有一匹指鹿为马
 走上道路
 道不存，路还在
 人们奉献梅花
 我从马上奇下一头梅花鹿
 我指马为鹿、指猪为牛
 诸子百家为狗
 等等以及为了
 指马为吗？⁹²

The poem plays with the idiomatic expression *zhi lu wei ma* 指鹿为马, meaning literally “present a deer as a horse, call a deer a horse,” that is, deliberately misinterpret the facts, putting them in a better light. Che uses the idiom as a noun imitating a species name, which in English would be probably something like a “call-it-a-deer horse.” The call-it-a-deer horse walks along the *daolu* 道路, “road, way.” The word comprises two elements: *dao* 道, which is often used to refer to the Daoist concept of Dao/Tao (the Way), and *lu* 路, which is a physical road or path. “*Dao* doesn’t exist / but *lu* is still there,” writes Che Qianzi in line 3, bringing the reader down to earth at the very outset of the horseback trip. But only for a while. Soon we learn that on the *lu* people throw plum blossom (*meihua* 梅花). As a result, the horse turns into a spotted deer, which in Chinese is called *meihualu* 梅花鹿, lit. “plum-blossom deer.” The idiom used in the first line now returns inverted: “I call a horse a deer,” and is further processed: “I call a pig a horse / [I call] all schools of thought (*zhuzi baijia* 诸子百家) dogs / et cetera and in order to / call a horse (*ma* 马) [a question particle] *ma* (吗).” The question particle *ma* 吗, a near-homophone and near-homograph of “horse” (*ma* 马), carries no semantic meaning in itself and serves to turn constative sentences into interrogative sentences. Thus, a series of seemingly innocent phraseological and character-level transformations leads to the blurring of the meaning and leaves the reader on the verge of the unknown. This process works similarly to Sosnowski’s slip-of-the-tongue-driven narratives, though in Che’s work, it is not only the tongue that slips but also the hand, perfectly tapping into the potential of misreading and miswriting in the Chinese script.

Oftentimes, Che himself puts on an animal mask and lures the reader to follow him through the labyrinths of his poems, to recall Cheng Guangwei’s comparison, only to finally abandon them in a strange place in the middle of the magic circle. Among the most representative masks he wears, Zhai Yueqin 翟月琴 proposes reading Che’s work through the concept of mask borrowed from Luigi Pirandello⁹³ and lists a monkey, a cock, a unicorn, a goldfish, and a snail, demonstrating how the poet “travels in an unruly way between reason and emotions, reality and ideals, external appearance and inner world.”⁹⁴ The reader follows him, but when they already feel they know the rules of this play, a loading screen of the game is displayed, and they need to decide whether and how to continue. Let’s try then with the slowest of the animals from the poet’s bestiary to see the language processes in slow motion. The poem through which we will enter the virtual world is called “Introspective Snail” (内省的蜗牛) and reads:

93 Zhai Yueqin 2015, 2019.

94 Zhai Yueqin 2015, trans. J K.

Introspective Snail

A worm in the county town, if I see an introspective snail
colored face and printed cloth returning to the cotton field
and then loaded onto a barge. The barge loaded with cotton
goes to the weaving mill. "After lunch, one feels so relaxed!"

And delusive looms like cloud flowers
the worm is outside—on the left, a trace like whipping
draw a square logic from inside a square
from the square one can draw more than one square check

Equality: the soft part isn't snail's introspectiveness
the center of introspection, is its wind-up bowel
and illusionary looms like cloud flowers: "is not is not is not
the introspective line of script"

People who are introspective at their leisure, provide us with
introspective logic from their guts, wind up
not only in storages, in fabrics too there's cotton everywhere
Look! The loom that weaves common sayings stands closest to you.

《内省的蜗牛》

虫子在县城，设若我看到内省的蜗牛
彩色的脸蛋与花布都返回棉田
又搬上了驳船。驳船上加重棉花
去织布厂仓库，“吃过午饭，浑身轻松！”

而虚妄的织布机，如云头花朵
虫子在外面的一左边，痕迹似抽
抽出，正方形中正方形的逻辑
从正方形中不拘抽出正方形一格

平等：柔软的部分并非蜗牛自省
内省的中心，是上足发条的肠子
正如云头花朵虚妄的织布机：“并非并非并非
内省的这一行文字。”

业余自省的人，从肠子中
 给我们带来内省的逻辑，上足发条
 除了仓库，厂子里也都是棉花
 瞧！织出俗语的织布机离你最近⁹⁵

“Introspective Snail” reminds me again of Sosnowski’s reflections on Ashbery’s “Flow Chart.” The transportation of cotton by barge brings to mind the Polish word *splaw* (“float by raft”), which Sosnowski proposed as a translation of Ashbery’s title, and the chart-like “square logic” that Che Qianzi imposes on the snail additionally fosters this association. Finally, the image of clouds contrasted with the square logic is reminiscent of a long poem by Sosnowski from his debut book, “Essay on Clouds” (Esej o chmurach); in its final part, the Master (presumably invited to the poem from Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*) teaches the I-speaker about regular genre forms that are enchanted in floating, soft clouds. This final part of Sosnowski’s “Essay” also contains a metaphor of existence as a kind puppet show (with humans as marionettes controlled from above by some grand puppet master), which returns in Che Qianzi’s other works, most prominently in “Play a Little Bit More” (再玩一会儿). The final passage of “Essay” reads:

Here interrupted the Master, pointing with his hand
 to the fiery procession of heavy cumuluses,
 and said to me sadly: “The mines of air are
 shafts of voices, and choirs of rotten words
 which will return as rain—too heavy to fly,
 they’ll mix with the blood of the living. *Die Rede geht herab,*
denn sie beschreibt. In the puffs you see
 are strata of sonnets, odes, and novels,
 irreverent rhymes, rondos, and canzones;
 and in that limp cirrus are souls of scholiasts.
 From the very first moment, you breathe with words,
 a tight word circulation—that’s the secret
 of human commotions; and that puppet on the string
 joyfully trembles, like ourselves on banal words.
 Everything is a citation, a cloud of another’s speech,
 words that fell and all weathered thoughts,

95 Quoted in Zhai Yueqin 2019: 82, trans. J K. There is also a different version of the poem, included, e.g., in Che Qianzi 2017: 72. Zhai states that the edition she cites is a version revised by the author in the 1990s.

a mirror image of the miserable world
 in fleeting clouds: eternal speculation'
 This being finished, all the dusk champaign
 Trembled so violently, that of that terror
 The recollection bathes me still with sweat.
 The land of tears gave forth a blast of wind,
 And fulminated a vermilion light,
 Which overmastered in me every sense,
 And as a man whom sleep hath seized I fell.

Tu Mistrz mi przerwał, pokazując dłonią
 promienny pochód ciężkich cumulusów
 i rzekł ze smutkiem: 'Kopalnie powietrza
 to szyby głosów, chóry słów zwietrzałych,
 co wrócą deszczem—zbyt ciężkie, by fruwać,
 wejdą w krew żywych. *Die Rede geht herab,
 denn sie beschreibt*. W kłębach, które widzisz
 są piętra sonetów, ody i powieści,
 zuchwałę rytmy, ronda i kancony;
 ten wiotki cirrus to dusze scholiastów.
 Od pierwszej chwili oddychasz słowami,
 obieg słów szczelny, oto tajemnica
 ludzkich poruszeń; tak lalka na sznurku
 uciesznie drży, jak my na błahych słowach.
 Wszystko to cytat, obłok cudzej mowy,
 słowa, co padły i myśli zwietrzałe,
 lustrzany obraz nieszczęsnego świata
 w lotnych chmurach: wieczna spekulacja'.
 Gdy kończył mówić, całe białe pole
 drgnęło tak mocno, że kiedy przypomnę,
 dziś jeszcze dusza kąpie się w mozole.
 Z ziemi łez wianie buchnęło ogromne;
 przeleciał po niej gromu błysk czerwieny,
 i omdlały mi zmysły nieprzytomne—
 i padłem, jako pada człowiek senny.⁹⁶

96 Sosnowski 2009: 21–26, trans. J K. The excerpt from *The Divine Comedy* is quoted in Henry Longfellow's translation.

snail's bowels," describing a petty, narrow-minded person. As regards a connection between the introspective snail and cotton, I venture that it, too, may have a lingual provenance. There exists a saying that refers to a person/thing that looks good but is empty or worthless inside: *jinyu qiwai, baixu qizhong* 金玉其外, 败絮其中, literally "outside golden jade, inside rotten cotton," which may explain why the author decided to stuff the animal with cotton. All in all, these two idiomatic expressions do not put the snail in a good light and, on the other hand, do not leave us much hope that we can somehow existentially or epistemologically benefit from Che Qianzi's poem. Or do they? Who knows, perhaps we are just too snail-gutted to make our way through the cotton and reach the deeply hidden core?

My free associations have already gone quite far, but, with the blessing of the author, I take a liberty to push the game further and use the secret passageway of the Polish language. In Polish, there is an idiom *owijać w bawełnę*, literally to "wrap up in cotton," a counterpart to the English "beat around the bush," meaning to speak a lot, waywardly and without a clear message. This association leads us back to the Chinese language, namely to another idiomatic phrase, *huayan qiaoyu* 花言巧语, "flowery language, clever phrases," in which usually little content is hidden, and then again back to the Polish context. *Huayan qiaoyu* 花言巧语, or "wrapping up in cotton," as Che Qianzi declares, is his preferred mode of writing, and his master in this peculiar art is the Polish novelist and playwright Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), the author of *Ferdydurke* (1937). In a conversation with Zhang Hou 张后, playing with the near-homophony between assertive speaking (*zhenzhen youci* 振振有词) and skin warts (*zhenzhen youci* 振疹疣疵), Che elaborates:

"Flowery language, clever phrases" is my literary ideal. I like Lu Xun, I think Lu Xun is a vernacular (白话) author who truly grasped writing in "flowery language, clever words." Fei Ming 废名 grasped sixty-five percent, Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 forty-five percent, Shen Congwen 沈从文 twenty-five percent, and He Qifang 何其芳 nothing at all. I reject assertive speaking; it makes me get warts. Assertive speaking is always like warts, a skin disease caused by stress. [...] As regards "flowery language, clever phrases," Eastern European authors are the best example, take for instance that Gombrowicz, that *Ferdydurke*.⁹⁸

From "flowery language" and "wrapping in cotton," our associations may go in a yet another direction, toward Walter Benjamin's famous metaphor of

98 Che Qianzi and Zhang Hou 2012, trans. J K.

translation as a royal mantle: “In the original, content and language constitute a certain unity, like that between a fruit and its skin, whereas a translation surrounds its content as if with the broad folds of a royal mantle.”⁹⁹ And “folds of” again bring us to Sosnowski and Shelley.

In Che Qianzi’s and Andrzej Sosnowski’s oeuvres, poems as such are translational objects. Their unproportionally big mantles are weaved by large looms from recycled threads of thought and turns of phrase, under which we cannot see the unique silhouette of the author. But among the broad “folds of”—so persistently explored in Sosnowski’s “Séance after Histories” (“A fold of the source, / a pleat, a crease, a tuck? A narrow / ‘aperture with rounded edges in the / casting’? A kink? A crack? Or a call /of time, spasm, laughter—along the beginning?”), they preserve an intuition of something that is truly original and Original, meaning both innovative and primary, singular and Singular.

5 We Don’t Understand Understanding

“Reading Andrzej Sosnowski is basically a never-ending process: each act of reading calls for another,” said Grzegorz Jankowicz, quoted on the cover of the English-language collection of Sosnowski’s poems.¹⁰⁰ The same statement would also be true for Che Qianzi’s poetry. Similarly, poet Xiao Hai’s 小海 thesis in the paper “Avant-Garde Poetry Needs Avant-Garde Readers: A Guide to Che Qianzi’s Poetry” (先锋的写作需要先锋的读者—车前子诗歌阅读指南) may well be applied to Sosnowski. Although considered incomprehensible among their audiences, both authors are in fact most reader-friendly poets, leaving their poems open to those who want to participate in their pursuit of the unknowable. In Sosnowski’s poetry, one is usually invited to travel by the author’s side, and it is the author who completes the proceeding levels of the language game, although the reader, too, is most welcome to unlock secret passageways overlooked by him or explore alternative paths. In Che’s poetry, after being introduced to the rules, the reader usually continues on their own, using the author’s avatar. Their propositions are unique in their respective local poetry scenes, for, contrary to most poets, Sosnowski and Che do not aim to define national poetry nor foreground their individual singularity in, and through, poetry. They abandon the dominant Romantic-modernist epiphanic grammar of creation in favor of the charted flow of language. Sosnowski is more careful and sets the bar for the reader relatively high, requiring some

99 Benjamin 1997: 158.

100 Sosnowski 2011, back cover.

general cultural knowledge from those who want to join, while Che seems not to particularly care in whose hands he entrusts his avatar.

Throughout this chapter, my narrative at times gravitated toward scientific language, and in the previous section, it started to travel freely between Chinese and Polish. I did not try to curtail these excesses, because, even if some people may find this confusing, I perceive this as a natural and unavoidable, and, all in all, desirable occurrence. And evidence that Sosnowski's and Che's poetry actually works. Taking up George Steiner's observation in *Grammars of Creation* quoted in chapter 5, the further from familiar reality and concrete significations we travel, the more the different languages that are within our reach—be it national languages, dialects, idiolects, poetic idioms, mathematical/scientific languages, or computer languages—evinced symbiotic and synergic tendencies. If we manage to synchronize them, they will carry us ever further and help us push the limits of cognizability, at least those that lie within us and not in the external world. The more diverse languages we—as individuals and as humankind—grasp and learn to skillfully navigate, the more effective the search for Singularity will be.

In *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations*, Werner Heisenberg, whose famous uncertainty principle has been absorbed by the humanities, recalls his conversation with Niels Bohr during a walk after Bohr's lecture, when Heisenberg was still a second-year student.¹⁰¹ Asked by Heisenberg what he tried to prove by constructing atomic models, Bohr answered:

These models [...] have been deduced, or if you prefer guessed, from experiments, not from theoretical calculations. I hope that they describe the structure of the atoms as well, but *only* as well, as is possible in the descriptive language of classical physics. We must be clear that, when it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections.

Heisenberg insisted on further explanations:

I therefore asked him: "If the inner structure of the atom is as closed to descriptive accounts as you say, if we really lack a language for dealing with it, how can we ever hope to understand atoms?"

¹⁰¹ This is not to be mistaken with the famous meeting between Bohr and Heisenberg in 1941, which became the topic of Michael Frayn's 1998 play *Copenhagen* and Howard Davies's 2002 movie of the same name.

Bohr hesitated for a moment, and then said: “I think we may yet be able to do so. But in the process we may have to learn what the word ‘understanding’ really means.”¹⁰²

Indeed. We want to understand, but we do not even know what understanding is. To put it differently, the notion of understanding evolves together with our knowledge and ability to describe things. Today, in many disciplines, especially those that deal with fundamentals, we have found ourselves at a point in which we cannot even set a specific goal to achieve. This is because a certain logic of knowledge development has already exhausted itself and in order to identify what we still need to learn we cannot simply extrapolate from what we already know. To break the next barrier, we need a new system of “mental connections.”

Obviously, even the most optimal system of mental connections will not guarantee us omniscience, because it is possible that Singularities are ... censored by the cosmos itself and thus, objectively, unavailable to us. This may sound like a pseudometaphysical claim, but it is not. The hypothesis of cosmic censorship is a seriously considered issue in cosmology, one that has engaged scholars such as Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, who won the Nobel Prize for his research on black holes in October 2020. Cosmic censorship concerns the very geometry of spacetime, the core claim being that there exists no “naked Singularities” as such—that is, Singularities visible to the observer. They all are hidden beyond the event horizon.¹⁰³ This hypothesis is unverifiable within the currently available paradigms of physics, so we have no choice but to keep moving forward and search the space throughout; the very journey will gradually reshape our mental connections that underlie our grammars of creation and cognition.

Ryszard Horodecki, a leading Polish physicist and author of two poetry books, beautifully captured the unresolvable perplexity shared by poetry and science in his poem “Mr Sum Ponders the Brittleness of Existence” (Pan Sum rozważa kruchość istnienia). The text was included in the bilingual collection *Arras z Andromedy / The Andromeda Arras* (2009a), which is a dialogue with Zbigniew Herbert’s series of poems about Mr. Cogito (Pan Cogito), its near-symmetric image along the axis that cuts the world into the sphere of thinking (*Cogito*) and being (*Sum*). This is also illustrated in the title of Horodecki’s other collection: *Sum Ergo Cogito* (2009b). The formula foregrounds the primacy of ontological awareness of being and participating over cognition and

102 Heisenberg 1971: 41; cf. Fiedorczuk 2015: 157. See also chapter 7 in the present book.

103 See, e.g., Penrose 1999.

understanding, questioning the Cartesian order presumed by Herbert. As a teaching assistant at the university, Horodecki attended Herbert's seminars on poetry. He recalls that he once showed his writings to Herbert and the poet expressed his appreciation. However, having heard that Horodecki studied physics, he reportedly advised the young man to continue the scientific path rather than spend time and energy on poetry, especially if he has a family to support.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately, the two passions proved not to be mutually exclusive, and here is a sample of Horodecki's literary skills:

Mr Sum Ponders the Brittleness of Existence
for Professor Jerzy Warczewski

Mr Sum has never believed
in the conspiracy theory of history

if there was a conspiracy
it was at the beginning
of a grand programme

though he finds himself on the peak of epigenesis
he is far from enthusiasm

to speak the truth
he functions by miracle

—the multi-level rising hierarchy
suspended over the abyss of entropy
ceaselessly rebuffs attacks

he's not like the paramecium—
a simple functional system
development path unambitious
—it won't be king of creation
—or threaten extinction

nor like this virus
murderous caperer
armed with enzymes

104 Horodecki and Eckstein 2016.

bustling about unpunished
 on the movable border
 between animate and inanimate
 information

Mr Sum—a coded singularity
 engineer of cosmic soundings
 feels
 deeply humiliated

he's not even able
 to secure the password
 SUM

let alone revolt in the hierarchy
 a coup d'état
 liberum veto
 the Great Crash.

Translated by JANE WARD

Pan Sum rozważa kruchość istnienia
 prof. Jerzemu Warczewskiemu

Pan Sum nigdy nie wierzył
 w spiskową teorię dziejów

jeśli spisek
 to na początku
 wielkiego programu

choć znalazł się na szczycie epigenezy
 daleki jest od entuzjazmu

mówiąc prawdę
 funkcjonuje cudem

—wielopiętrowa hierarchia wstępująca
 zawieszona nad otchłanią entropii
 nieustannie odpiera ataki

nie jest jak pantofelek—

układ funkcjonalny prosty
 ścieżka rozwojowa mało ambitna
 —nie będzie królem stworzeń
 —nie grozi zagładą

ani jak ten wirus
 morderczy harcownik
 uzbrojony w enzymy
 bezkarnie buszuje
 na ruchomej granicy
 między informacją ożywioną
 a nieożywioną

Pan Sum—zaszyfrowana osobliwość
 inżynier sond kosmicznych
 czuje się
 głęboko upokorzony

nie jest nawet w stanie
 zabezpieczyć hasła
 SUM

cóż dopiero bunt w hierarchii
 zamach stanu
liberum veto
 Wielki Krach¹⁰⁵

In sum (and in *Sum*), to Horodecki everybody is a “coded singularity,” unique and incomprehensible even to themselves, albeit perhaps limited in their freedom and certainly limited in their cognition, perhaps even censored from the very “beginning of a grand programme.” Moreover, our individual singularity is not isolated from other singularities that emerged from the Singularity at the launch of the “grand programme,” a notion introduced by the author referring to the evolution of the universe that physicists try to describe using the standard cosmological model. The password *SUM* (“I am”) cannot be protected, thus everybody and everything has certain degree of access to us, and everybody and everything can use this password as their own in order to communicate their presence in the universe, including stars, planets, animals—even

105 Horodecki 2009a: 42–45.

such “unambitious” organisms as paramecium—plants, and all other beings. Only their joint narrative may help us move toward the event horizon, which we ultimately will or will not be able to leap through. This is beautifully shown in Che Qianzi’s poems, where he himself borrows identity from various animals, and willingly shares these avatars and the nonpersonal singular password with the reader. Of course, it is not the case that Sosnowski does *not* want to share. He does. But when he kicks off a poem in the middle of a game saved from earlier sessions (= poems), on the *n*th level of abstraction, with various references to the threads launched in older texts of his own and those of other people, only few readers are able to orient themselves and actively join the mission.

Sosnowski and Che try to force human language to betray its own rules from inside. In the final chapter, we will meet authors who attempt to push poetry onto the tracks of other disciplines or, more precisely, other spheres of existence explored by those disciplines. They attempt to con-verse; that is, they not only carry out a dialogue but actually cowrite with other inhabitants of the universe, allowing them to remold the human grammar of speaking and understanding the world.

Beyond Understanding

I came across Heisenberg's *Physics and Beyond* in the course of my reading of Julia Fiedorczuk's (b. 1975) study *Cyborg in the Garden* (*Cyborg w ogrodzie*, 2015), the first comprehensive monograph on ecopoetics in Polish literary discourse. Fiedorczuk, a poet and scholar specializing in English-language literature, quotes a brief excerpt from the same conversation between Heisenberg and Bohr to support her definition of ecopoetry as an "interdisciplinary practice which connects—not without tensions—various ways of creation" in order to address the very problem of understanding. Ecopoetics, in her words, "provokes a change of perspective in our approach to the world which reaches so deeply that the very 'approach to the world' itself becomes something slightly different."¹ Citing Neil Evernden's reflection on figurative language, Fiedorczuk argues that poetry and science both "use metaphors to push the limits of what is comprehensible and meet the world while at the same time changing the nature of this encounter—creating a new situation and new possibilities for perception, action, and cooperation between people and between people and other actors."² Her poetic credo, formulated elsewhere, reads:

Writing a poem means entering a dialogue: with other poems, with the reader, with poetic tradition, but also—that's what I really hope for—with other, nonpoetic, faces of language. None of the sentences pronounced by us is suspended in the void. All that we say is a response or a call, or both. A poem creates a space for an encounter that could not happen anywhere else. I wholeheartedly advocate for a poetry that rejects narcissistic solipsism and turns toward the world: toward people, but also toward the nonhuman, toward other living creatures, toward matter. My ideal is poetry that enters into a conversation with other disciplines of knowledge (for example, biology), a hospitable poetry which is open to the entire spectrum of beings and emotions, and at the same time humble, weighing its words. My masters are therefore not only (numerous!) poets, but also scientists, for they, too, always have to look at the world as if they were seeing it for the first time.³

¹ Fiedorczuk 2015: 157, trans. J K.

² Ibidem: 158, trans. J K.

³ Fiedorczuk 2009a, trans. J K.

Fiedorczuk's approach is very close to my own on the relationship between poetry and the world. Poetry has always drawn inspiration from nature, and as we explore nature's mechanisms deeper (at microscale), broader (in its amazing diversity), and further (from a cosmic perspective), there is no reason not to apply this new knowledge in and to poetry. By apply, I do not necessarily mean explicit inspirations, which indeed often result in embellishing the text with a number of wise-sounding words from different sciences. Rather, I mean, first and foremost, inspirations that may be referred to as structural or paradigmatic. Knowing more of how nature works, we are increasingly capable of working it into texts in a way that will not be tantamount to exalted descriptions of natural phenomena, sentimental nostalgia for a paradise untouched by human hands, or emotional/psychological colonization of nature, as, for instance, in Romantic paradigm, where nature served poets as a screen on which to project their own mental states. This is something that Fiedorczuk and a number of other, mostly younger and mostly female, authors in Poland very effectively do. In China, broadly taken, ecopoetry is an increasingly popular trend too. The most active and prolific advocate of ecocriticism in Chinese poetry-critical discourse is Hua Hai 华海 (b. 1963), the author of numerous ecocritical essays and the initiator of the first international forum on ecopoetry in China which resulted in the publication of the edited volume *Open Widely the Green Door* (敞开绿色之门, 2008). Yet, his own literary work is artistically less convincing than that of many other authors, such as Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955), Ai Fei'er 爱斐儿 (b. 1966), or Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (b. 1980), who do not explicitly advocate for ecocriticism as a discursive practice but interestingly put its postulates into aesthetic practice in their writing.

In section 1 of the present chapter, I will briefly examine the work of several Polish and Chinese poets who seek for alternative grammars of creation in the world of nature, in a micro- and macrocosm, availing themselves of different types of scientific knowledge from microbiology through to medicine, through to physics and cosmology. In section 2, we will shift our attention from gardens to cyborgs, to allude to Fiedorczuk's title. We will see how other authors attempt to look beyond the (human) language-event horizon to establish covenant with modern technologies, including cybernetics and artificial intelligence.

The reader will probably note that this is the second female-dominated chapter in my study, albeit not as clearly female-dominated as chapter 4. It elaborates on the works of six women (Julia Fiedorczuk, Yin Xiaoyuan 殷晓媛 [b. 1982], Ai Fei'er, Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiart [b. 1982], Małgorzata Lebda [b. 1985], and Zheng Xiaoqiong), one female robot (Xiao Bing 小冰), one largely male poetry hub (Rozdzielczość Chleba, "Bread Resolution/Multiplication"),

and one author who identifies themselves—“they” being the author’s preferred form in English,⁴ capitalized hereafter for clarity and followed by singular verb forms in order to emphasize the coherence of Their identity (“They is...,” “They believes ...”, etc.)—as nonbinary (Łukasz Kaźmierczak/Łucja Kuttig, b. 1990). Although, like in chapter 4, my selection of authors was not primarily based on gender criteria, I think it aptly reflects the changing (self-)perception of women’s role in poetry in Poland and in China. Specifically in Poland, however, this transformation should arguably not be regarded as a revolutionary breakthrough, but rather as a consequence and natural extension and gradual transcending of the modernist paradigm of female writing identified by Anna Nasiłowska as “androgynous,” which, as I argued, is present for example in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska and Wang Xiaoni 王小妮. Positioning Fiedorczuk within the lineage of modern Polish contemporary women poets—including Wisława Szymborska, Urszula Koziół (b. 1931), Bogusława Latawiec (b. 1939), Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar (b. 1963)—Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik writes of a common trait present in all of them: “Their poetry constitutes a manifestation of a new biologicity typical of women’s writing, a rational, scientificized, nonsentimental, and superindividual one, which however does not detract from intimacy and tenderness.”⁵

So defined, this new biologicity may also be observed in the poet-cum-academics Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiert and Małogorzata Lebda, in Ai Fei’er, who is a medical doctor by profession, and in Yin Xiaoyuan, a multilingual, erudite poet and translator, and the founder of the Encyclopedic Poetry School (百科诗派), who will be discussed in this chapter with Fiedorczuk and Kaźmierczak/Kuttig. Yin’s syncretic poetic program is built on a specifically understood concept of literary hermaphroditism (泛性别主义). She defines it as a textual counterpart to the infinite Penrose stairs, also dubbed the impossible staircase, which allow one to approximate a sphere located far beyond our Euclidean-geometric imagination. A crucial role in the process of infinitely climbing up the Penrose stairs of the history of literature is to be played by the genre of epic, which Yin wants to demasculinize and herself assume the role of the first woman epic poet. Yin identifies herself as an INJT-type (Introvert, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging) in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is

4 For the author’s reflection on the pronouns in the Polish language, see, e.g., an interview conducted by Maria Czeakańska for *Silesian Gender Zone* (Śląska Strefa Gender) in August 2020 (Kaźmierczak/Kuttig & Czeakańska 2020). In the conversation, Kaźmierczak/Kuttig points out the lack of suitable pronouns in Polish, and states that, as long as they are used without hostile intention, They is inclined to accept all forms of address and Themselves frequently uses masculine, feminine, and neutral pronouns interchangeably within the same utterance.

5 Grądziel-Wójcik 2018a: 129, trans. J K.

stereotypically perceived as more specific to men than to women, and considers herself a living proof of the inaccuracy of socially constructed gender identities.⁶ Kaźmierczak/Kuttig's poetry illustrates the opposite mechanism, showing how poetry, in its symbiosis with mathematics, physics, and chemistry, addresses and textually processes physical hermaphroditism or androgyny/gynoandry, as the author refers to Their own condition.

1 Con-Versing with the World

The fundamental premise on which the new covenant between poetry and nature and between poetic language and the language of natural sciences hinges is abandoning the anthropocentric perspective; by this last, I understand a belief that humans are the only sense-making creatures in the world, whereas other living things acquire their meaning only when drawn into the human milieu. This is crucial especially from the perspective of so-called biosemiotics, which, as Wendy Wheeler explains,

puts human meaning-making as interpretation and purposiveness back into evolutionary nature where it belongs, and also undoes the unhelpful distinctions between mind and body and nature and culture. All living things are in constant creative semiotic interaction with their environments: each makes the other in a continual process. We can call this natural constructivism.⁷

Invoking Jakob Johann von Uexküll's notion of *umwelt*, that is, the perceptual environment of an individual living creature within which it performs its intentional activities, Wheeler urges:

let us think properly about the semiotic nature of all living organisms and experience. But that modeling of organismic *umwelten* goes hand in hand (or paw in paw) with shaping and being shaped by the world of the particular species *umwelt*. Therefore, while we must eschew the anthropocentric idea of radical socio-linguistic constructivism, we can nonetheless talk about natural constructivism.⁸

6 Yin Xiaoyuan 2016.

7 Wheeler 2014: 122.

8 Ibidem: 127.

In other words, the new deal proposed by ecopoetry assumes that non-human beings have their own inherent rationale which we can explore and peacefully exploit in our creative work and everyday life but without exploiting these beings as such more than it is necessary for our survival. In practice, this means, among other things, that we should avoid projecting our abstractions on things and instead try to read the biosemiotic or physicosemiotic (Winfried Nöth's term)⁹ code and draw abstract notions out of the things themselves allowing them to shape textual matter. An ethical attitude that originates in the ontological premise of the above covenant is the rejection of anthropocracy, the conviction that being human entitles us to exercise our rule over other inhabitants of the earth, be it in a physical or symbolic way.

Ideally, in this new paradigm, basic ethics should emerge directly from ontology, and not from epistemology: it should be based on *that* and *what* things *are* rather than on what humans know or think of them and what values and judgments they attach to them; its foundation is the *Sum* of the observed rather than the *Cogito* of the observer, to recall Ryszard Horodecki's exchange with Zbigniew Herbert from the previous chapter. What I have termed as *conversing with the world* implies creating a poetry aesthetics that is simultaneously an epistemology: it unifies (verse) creation with cognition in a way that is arguably unprecedented in literary history, based on the assumption that cognition is a natural consequence of ontological transformation which (verse) creation stimulates.

This is obviously a utopian project, and it would be naive to claim that we indeed may so easily adopt nonanthropocentric and nonegocentric ways of thinking, but—as we will see in the poets discussed in this section—regularly exercised imagination is not completely doomed to failure in this enterprise.

1.1 *The Return of Encyclopedia: Julia Fiedorczuk, Yin Xiaoyuan, and Łukasz Kaźmierczak/Łucja Kuttig*

Julia Fiedorczuk's poetry is generally considered hugely challenging due to the abundance of disciplines from which she draws inspiration, including micro- and macrophysics, micro- and macrobiology, geology, chemistry, and astronomy. Among the titles of her works, we find, for example, "Orion's Shoulder" (Ramię Oriona), "Photosynthesis" (Fotosynteza), "Beetle" (Chrząszcz), "Bio" (Bio), "Oxygen" (Tlen), "Electricity" (Elektryczność), and many more that name, or explicitly allude to, natural phenomena. In her poems, the author does not hesitate to use chemical symbols or the names of subatomic particles,

9 Nöth 2001.

galaxies, and constellations. Yet, before we start desperately googling the periodic table or star charts, let us read something less dense in terms of terminology. I am thinking of the poem “Lands and Oceans” (Lądy i oceany), which was rightly chosen by Bill Johnston as the opening poem in the bilingual edition of Fiedorczuk’s poetry *Oxygen* (2017), for it is arguably the purest and clearest embodiment of the unique poetic method of the author. I propose to consider it in a context that may perhaps seem surprising but hopefully will prove self-explanatory in a moment, namely the article “Encyclopedia” by Denis Diderot in the monumental eighteenth-century *Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts* he coedited with Jean d’Alembert. Below is an excerpt that I find particularly helpful in the interpretation of “Lands and Oceans”:

I have said that only a philosophical century could attempt an *encyclopedic*; and I said this because this work everywhere requires more boldness of mind than is normally possessed in centuries of cowardly taste. One must examine and stir up everything, without exception and without cautiousness: one must dare to see, as we are beginning to be persuaded, that literary genres resemble the general compilation of laws, and the first formation of cities, in that they owe their birth to a singular chance, a strange circumstance, sometimes a flight of genius; that those who came after the first inventors, were for the most part merely their slaves[.] [...] We must trample under foot all that old foolishness; overturn barriers not put there by reason; restore to the sciences and arts their precious liberty [...]. We needed a time of reasoning, when we no longer look for the rules in authors, but in nature, and when we can feel what is false and what true in all those arbitrary poetics; I am taking the term poetics in its most general sense, for a system of given rules, according to which, in whatever genre, people pretend you must work in order to succeed.

Translated by PHILIP STEWARD¹⁰

And here is Fiedorczuk’s poem:

Lands and Oceans

It is literally fire that is dear to us.
 At times you feel it on the soles of your feet.
 It’s a sign that everything was once divine ocean,

10 Diderot 2002.

while the deep time of earth is expressed in such disquieting numbers
that their discovery has changed the course of human thought.

Which, it goes without saying, expects the ground
beneath its feet, and a favorable ambience.
From this perspective the sun is something like eternity,
the sea a stubborn subtext.

The place
will work so long as graves can be dug.
Only in certain places can houses be built.
Despite everything there's faith in the permanence of these traces,
though everyone knows it's better to have one handful of peace.
Still other versions speak of the answered prayer of the fish.

One way or the other, chaos has its laws.
Bodies are solid, though we do have tears, and they are in every word:

for salt is on the tongue's tip and is the dot over the i.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Lądy i oceany

Dosłownie ogień jest nam bliski.
Czasami czujesz go w podeszwach stop.
To znak, że kiedyś wszystko było boskim oceanem.
Zaś głęboki czas ziemi wyraża się w liczbach tak zatrwających,
że ich odkrycie odmieniło bieg ludzkiej myśli.

Która, rzecz jasna, spodziewa się gruntu
pod nogami i przychylniej aury.
Z tej perspektywy słońce jest czymś w rodzaju wieczności,
a morze upartym podtekstem.

Miejsce
ma sens o ile da się wykopać grób.
Tylko gdzieśgdzie można pobudować domy.
Na przekór wszystkiemu wierzy się w trwałość tych śladów,
choć powszechnie wiadomo, że lepsza jest jedna garść pokoju.
Jeszcze inne wersje mówią o wysłuchanej modlitwie ryb.

Tak czy inaczej, odmęt ma swoje prawa.
Ciała poniekąd stałe, mamy przecież łyzy, a te są w każdym słowie:

bo sól jest na końcu języka i jest kropką nad i.¹¹

The third stanza depicts the landscape of the anthropocratic world, where humans conquer space by building houses and conquer time by digging graves and planting their memories in the earth. People create their cities and their laws, and—one may add, invoking Diderot’s triadic analogy genres-laws-cities—their poems; they naively believe that “these traces” will last forever and are ready to sacrifice peace to fight for them. They are afraid to immerse into “the deep time of earth” lest they become distracted by a discovery that may shake their imagination and curve the trajectory of their thinking; they prefer to feel the hard ground under their feet. Fiedorczuk is the one who gracefully but firmly puts her foot down and—again paraphrasing Diderot—tramples the old habits of thinking to start looking for the rules in nature itself, convinced that even “chaos has its laws.” This peculiar encyclopedic anarchism, which treats everything as entries in the same cosmic book and replaces hierarchies with alphabetic order, offers itself as an alternative to the overturned anthropocracy (of course, one cannot forget that the alphabet itself is a human-made structure, but still, it is at least free of axiological hierarchization). Is it what the fish in the poem prayed for? Probably not exactly, but “chaos” is not Fiedorczuk’s last word.

Invoking a geographically, historically, and culturally closer context than Diderot, Julia Fiedorczuk is—I hope the two authors will not mind this comparison, which is not meant to detract from the uniqueness of their writing—the Olga Tokarczuk of Polish poetry (and vice versa). Tokarczuk was praised by the Nobel Committee “for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life.”¹² Were we to replace “narrative” with “poetic” the exact same might be said of Fiedorczuk, who herself has long emphasized the crucial role of imagination in life and writing. Her book on ecopoetry, for instance, builds on the diagnosis made by Lawrence Buell, the author of *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), who argued that ecological crisis is first and foremost a crisis of imagination.¹³ But besides “encyclopedicity,” Tokarczuk and Fiedorczuk also share an unusual tenderness,

11 Fiedorczuk 2017: 2–3.

12 The Nobel Foundation 2018.

13 On ecological imagination in Fiedorczuk’s poetry, see Węgrzyniak 2018.

of which Tokarczuk spoke in her Nobel lecture titled “The Tender Narrator” (Czuły narrator) and Fiedorczuk wrote, for example, in the poem “Dedication” (Dedykacja):

When tender Buddha emerges from the jasmines,
A boy with a tattoo,
a cobweb of wrinkles on the face of an old woman,
who smiles: this time, our common dream

weaved from dreams. I’m sorry! It just
came out. Tenderness is dif-
ficult. Because one loves people and trees,
this stone, it has certainly existed,
now I’m giving it to you,
hold it.

Kiedy czuły Budda wychodzi z jaśminów,
chłopiec z tatuażem,
pajęczyna zmarszczek na twarzy staruszki,
która się uśmiecha: ten czas, nasz wspólny sen

utkany ze słów. Przepraszam! Tak
się powiedziało. Czułość jest tru-
dna. Ponieważ kocha się ludzi i drzewa,
ten kamień, on zapewne istniał,
teraz ci go daję,
potrzymaj.¹⁴

Joanna Grądział-Wójcik speaks of this feature of Fiedorczuk’s writing, connecting it to her experience of womanhood:

For womanhood is here a fundamental, though not dominant, component of a neo-avant-garde project, which constitutes a complement of, or an alternative to, the patriarchal model. Fiedorczuk’s poetry is non-masculine-personal, it does not subdue the world, it does not equalize nature with womanhood which should be subjugated. This work balances between the “male” precision of a “thinking” poetry and the watchful and tender, emphatic commitment, it abandons violent vocabulary in

14 Fiedorczuk 2009b, trans. J.K.

favor of “soft,” “fluid” imagery [...], thus fighting off all language manifestations of dominant attitudes. [...] In her poems, nature does not connote a “weak,” clingy womanhood, but a conscious and “tender” opening up to the diversity of beings, supported by science-based reflection.¹⁵

Tenderness and openness come to the fore in the final two lines of “Lands and Oceans,” where Fiedorczuk writes of solid bodies which yet contain a big supply of salty liquid tears. Perhaps these are drops of the “divine ocean” that preceded the lands, and from which fish and humans alike emerged in the long process of evolution. It is as if she wanted to say: we are not “the salt of earth” as the Bible wants us to believe; salt had existed long before us and will last long after all the i’s of our existence become dotted. The idiom *kropka nad i* translated by Bill Johnston as “the dot over the i” signifies a final, often decisive and effective action that allows one to see a given enterprise as completed, or, in some specific contexts, making something clear, spelling out. One day, suggests Fiedorczuk, we will be “completed” or “clarified” by that salt. In the last stanza of “Eclogue” (Ekloga), when “sleep / eases hard shapes of specters and the poem / lets its braids down like a sea / that’s being toyed with by a little girl / who’s made of stars” (sen / zmiękcza bryły zjaw i wiersz / rozpuszcza warokcze jak rozturlane / morze w rączkach dziewczynki / z gwiazd), this thought is articulated more clearly in the image of the salt “speaking us”:

that’s right:
the delight of the little girl from the far side of time.
shards of green glass amid the seashells,
salt on the collar bone, tasty and very old,

is speaking us now.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

tak:
radość dziewczynki z drugiej strony czasu.
pokruszona zieleń między muszelkami.
sól na obojczyku, smaczna, bardzo stara

mówi nas teraz.¹⁶

¹⁵ Grądziel-Wójcik 2018a: 129, trans. J K.

¹⁶ Fiedorczuk 2017: 32–33.

The process of coming out of the ocean signaled in “Lands and Oceans” is narrated in greater detail in what we might consider Fiedorczuk’s evolution tetralogy: “Photosynthesis,” “Retrospection” (Retrospekcja), “Being a Self Part I” (Bycie sobą I), and “Bio.” In “Photosynthesis,” the I-speaker finds herself at an intermediary stage between a sea creature and a land creature:

The sun gives birth to me almost without pain,
a dressing of warmth on my foot, on my eyelids
a light compress of blood, unearthly goggles.
On them crouches a spectrum like a rapid

giddy anemone that tells me
colorful ichthyological stories.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Słońce mnie rodzi prawie bezboleśnie,
na stopie mam plasterek ciepła, na powiekach
lekki kompres krwi, niezemskie gogle.
Przysiada na nich widmo jak roztrzepany

błyskawiczny ukwiał, który mi opowiada
barwne ichtiologiczne historie.¹⁷

She apparently does not want to leave the familiar sea world:

those subcutaneous
times drift even nearer, they are mine
for a light flash, a brief apnea
and an exquisite fear

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Tamte podskórne
czasy podpływają bliżej, są moje
na ułamek światła, momentalny bezdech
i rozkoszny strach.¹⁸

17 Ibidem: 10–11.

18 Ibidem.

Finally, however, she musters up the courage and decides to surface in order to take her first breath and first look in the eye of the sun:

But what's needed is to emerge on land, grow feathers,
look straight at the sun.
The sealike green of the iris.
Flesh, cloth, breath.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

A trzeba wyjść na ląd, opierzyć się i patrzeć
prosto w słońce.
Zieleń tęczówki jak morze.
Tkanka, tkanina, tlen.¹⁹

She starts a new life, but the color of the sea is preserved in her irises to remind her of her origins. Each image that enters into her pupils will since have a sealike lining: it will be soft, fluid, tender like seawater, as in “Retrospection,” which describes the speaker’s “waking toward flesh” (budzenie się ku ciału), “toward the same skin / New water” (Tej samej skórze / Nowa woda). Already a “land animal,” she still has a sea optic:

See these soft
Wet seascapes
They tell her each step
At the cost of rapture.
How they dance, the ribbons—
Algae—for water
Is good and enwraps
The flesh in warmth.
To die each day,
Such a flight. Images float by
In silence.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Jakież to morskie miękkie
Mokre krajobrazy.
Mówią jej każdy krok
Za cenę tej rozkoszy.

19 Ibidem.

Jak tańczą te tasiemki—
 Wodorosty—bo woda
 Dobra jest i ciepłem
 Opatula ciało.
 Co dzień umierać,
 Taki lot. Cichutko płyną
 Obrazy.²⁰

In “Being a Self Part I,” she is still not entirely used to, and familiar with, her new body, observing herself with a mixture of confusion and amazement: her hair, her feet, and “for some reason ten funny little toes” (i czemuś dziesięć / śmiesznie małych palców). “I awoke / and I was a woman” (obudziłam się / i byłam kobietą)—she declares in the opening lines, and ends the poem with an observation addressed to an unknown “you,” like a child who comes to their parents’ bedroom in the morning to tell of her dreams: “and I came / to tell you / because this / is splendid news” (i przyszłam / żeby ci powiedzieć / bo to bardzo dobra / nowina).²¹

In “Bio,” she starts to miss the sea life again, but she deals with her longings in a more rational, if not actually economical way, making a list of gains and losses in the evolutionary process. Let’s read this exquisite poem in full, as it contains some very clear theses that organize Fiedorczuk’s poetry in general.

Bio

When I was a fish
 Space had cosy walls
 And as always was round

I dreamed of divine fins
 Feather headdresses and life
 Upon the water

It was said that the tail
 drops off but there is a reward:
 A pair of aching feet.

I did not believe

²⁰ Ibidem: 16–17.

²¹ Ibidem: 20–21, translated by Bill Johnston.

In fairytales. I grew
Wings like the fronds

Of black ferns.
Where did I
Not go!

When I was a fish
There were no days,
No sex, no difference.

Warmth came
From outside. Now
In my lungs I have unbearably light air.
I have the lure of the sea
In my green irises.

I look at the sky: o you
miraculous turret. I dance
For you.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Bio

Kiedy byłam rybą
Kosmos jak zawsze okrągły
Miał przytulne ściany

Śniłam o boskich płetwach
Pióropuszcach i życiu
Po wodzie

Mówiono ogon
Odpada ale jest nagroda:
Para bolesnych stóp.

Nie wierzyłam
W bajki. Zapuściłam
Skrzydła jak liście

Czarnych paproci.
Och gdzież ja
Nie byłam!

Kiedy byłam rybą
Nie było w ogóle dni,
Seksu, ani różnicy.

Ciepło przychodziło
Z zewnątrz. Teraz
Mam w płucach nieznosnie

Lekkie powietrze,
Mam pokusę morza
W zielonych tęczęwkach.

Patrzę w niebo: wieżyczko
Jakaś ty cudowna. Tańczę
Dla ciebie.²²

The physical lightness and psychological heaviness of life on land are a negative of the physical heaviness and psychological lightness of life under water, where space was cozy, warm, and round, and no problematic differences existed; apparently, even the pleasure of sex (from the Polish text, it is clear that the word “sex” in the poem refers to sexual intercourse, and not to biological sex) cannot counterbalance the disadvantages that stem from the binarization of the world. “I” feels that the past of the human species is encrypted in her body. She was born with an unquenchable nostalgia that is not a mere emotional state but a biologically conditioned disposition, a genetic memory of the “deep time of the earth.”

In “Lands and Oceans,” Fiedorczuk entrusts herself to the laws of chaos. In the “evolution tetralogy,” she shows how these laws are being gradually codified in human—precisely, her own—poetry, which assumes the role of the encyclopedia, the “chain of knowledge” in Diderot’s etymology-based definition, where objects, historical events, people, and other species are gathered together, old hierarchies dismantled, and new, possibly fair and objective, knowledge-based interconnections between them start to develop. Through

22 Ibidem: 22–25.

(nonsolipsistic) introspection, in her own postfish body, Fiedorczuk observes this emergent grammar of knowledge and tries to convey it in poetic language as best she can. She rewrites the ambitious project of the Enlightenment, which in the decades and centuries after the French encyclopedia was compiled underwent a gradual degeneration and produced totalitarian ideologies, almost from scratch. She reaches for the invention of the encyclopedia and restores its proper meaning. To her, just like to Tokarczuk, the encyclopedia is not evidence of human omniscience but a miniature of the universe which shows the place of humans among other creatures.

The way in which human life is inscribed into the grammar of nature is most visible in "Oxygen," which construes "us" as the last link in the chain of the photosynthetic reaction, and the main beneficiaries of the green factory of the earth. "We dwell lightly at the outbreath of the world" (*Lekko mieszkamy na wydechu świata*), reads the central phrase of the poem, and, I hold, one of the most beautiful phrases in contemporary Polish poetry, the precisely located axis around which human consciousness must turn in order to tune itself to the rhythm and melody of the Spheres. With no intention of taking anything into possession, and with the simple aim in mind expressed in the peaceful declaration, "I came here in order to breathe" (*Przyszłam tu, żeby oddychać*), the poet approaches the garden, and the garden trustfully opens its gates to her, letting her in and revealing its miracles to her:

I'll show you love in a handful of stars.
 Have you seen the spectacle of snow on the roadside leaves?
 The purple silhouette of a December day?
 I came here in order to breathe.

There are small dancers in a droplet of river water.
 Insect heavens beyond the garden gate,
 a nest in the crook of the pine tree's broad arm,
 in the nest of my arm a child's milky breath.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Pokażę ci miłość w jednej garści gwiazd.
 Znasz feerię śniegu na przydrożnych liściach?
 Fioletowy kontur grudniowego dnia?
 Przyszłam tu, żeby oddychać.

Są mali tancerze w kropli rzecznej wody.
 Raje owadów za bramą ogrodu,

gniazdo w zgięciu ramion tamtej grubej sosny,
w gnieździe moich ramion mleczny oddech dziecka.²³

And then, a subtle shift in the narrator's perception of the world takes place. When the I-speaker pronounces the key phrase, like a password to the gates of Eden: "we dwell lightly at the outbreath of the world," putting herself in the right place in nature, the static landscape is suddenly set in motion, and remakes itself before her eyes; it absorbs her narrative and the sadness of her stories, displaying it on the firmament graced with stars. It is not the poet who captures or rents the sky to throw various scenes from her life on it, but the sky itself seems to be inviting her to share her feelings and soothes her sorrows like "the river's smooth skin":

We dwell lightly at the outbreath of the world,
dusk heaped upon dusk.
Mouth next to cheek.
Cheek next to thigh.

We dwell lightly at the outbreath of the world,
the she-wolf's warm pelt and her pointed fangs,
the razor of ice that smoothes the river's dark skin,
its occupants sinking to the bottom.

I came here in order to breathe.
The sadness of our stories upon a winter sky.
Snow quickly melting on the cheeks of a child,
our eyes laughing with the stars,

the sky meeting the river's smooth skin;
I breathe, I breathe therefore I am.

Translated by BILL JOHNSTON

Lekko mieszkamy na wydechu świata,
jeden mrok dodany do drugiego mroku.
Usta przy policzku.
Policzek przy udzie.

23 Ibidem: 26–27.

Lekko mieszkamy na wydechu świata,
 ciepła sierść wilczycy i jej ostre zęby,
 brzytwa mrozu gładzi ciemną skórę rzeki,
 jej mieszkańcy bezszelestnie opadają na dno.

Przyszłam tu, żeby oddychać.
 Smutek naszych rzeczy na zimowym niebie.
 Śnieg szybko topnieje na policzkach dziecka,
 nasze oczy śmieją się do gwiazd,

niebo spotyka gładką skórę rzeki,
 oddycham, oddycham więc jestem.²⁴

In the last line, the Cartesian dualism, the rupture between *Cogito* and *Sum*, which continues to divide poets and scientists (e.g., Horodecki and Herbert), is bridged and replaced with the simplest possible, purely physiological act of ventilation as the basic condition of existence. We can take it as a reminder that before we start to philosophize and define the relationship between being and consciousness, we first need to anchor this being properly in matter, position it in the natural landscape in such a way that the abstract constructions we start to raise do not occlude or disturb the hospitable earth.

This is perhaps the most prominent difference between Fiedorczuk's subtle lyrical encyclopedism and the epic encyclopedism represented by Yin Xiaoyuan and the Encyclopedic Poetry School. Although invented with a similar aim in mind—namely, to restructure poetry by transplanting nonpoetic grammars into it—Yin's encyclopedism, unlike Fiedorczuk's aconceptual encyclopedism, is predetermined by a certain concept and it is only based on this conceptual foundation that the world is invited into her poetry. This is visible, for instance, in the manifesto of hermaphroditism, in which the author explains that she avails herself of the genre of epic, which has long shaped the collective memory and consciousness of communities, with the intention to change the hierarchies that are deeply rooted in society:

Although world literature has birthed many outstanding and even great woman writers and poets, [...] there have hardly been any women authors who could be counted among the elite group of epicists. "Hermaphroditism" will include the mission of the female epic in the future agenda.

24 Ibidem.

Unlike traditional epic poetry, which builds on religion, myth, fantastic stories, linear narrative, and genetic mode, and is characterized by an overtly constant and therefore declining decoding system, the Encyclopedic School pioneered in introducing a range of avant-garde elements to the canonical structure of epic: hard sci-fi construction, film editing techniques, fashion trends, irrational episodes, the newest developments in science, works of visual and performative arts, multimedia interfaces; this allows one to create the effect of weirdness, bizarreness, diversity, and magnificence.²⁵

For all their bizarreness and unpredictability, in the seemingly unleashed narrative of encyclopedic epics, one can see the presence of the strong personality of the author, who is also a very efficient manager of her own poetry and of the poetry school she established. Yin not only writes and provides interpretations of her works in copious self-commentary, but also translates her and her fellow poets' works into English and occasionally into four other languages: Japanese, French, Spanish, and German. She organizes poetry events, including anniversaries of the Encyclopedic Poetry School, and manages publications and marketing. Besides, she regularly sends her books to academic libraries around the world, advertises them online, edits articles on encyclopedic poetry in various online encyclopedias, including Wikipedia and Chinese Baidu, and submits poetry in English to international poetry websites, such as PoemHunter, Poetry.net, and AllPoetry. At the same time, although she is a member of the Chinese Writers' Association (中国作家协会), the Chinese Poetry Society (中国诗歌学会), and the Chinese Translators' Association (中国翻译协会会员), she is not particularly active in mainstream poetry life in China and does not extensively socialize with fellow poets, largely focusing instead on developing her independent enterprise for which she seeks an audience abroad. In 2020, her first English-language collection was published with the title *Cloud Seeding Agent: Collected Poems by Yin Xiaoyuan (2013–2019)* and includes poems in her own translation and photographs by several Chinese and foreign artists. The final six pages of the book contain profuse praise for *Cloud Seeding Agent* exclusively by foreign recommenders, mostly professors at renowned universities and poet laureates.²⁶ Interestingly, this is the only bilingual part of the book. Poems as such are only included in English, while the recommendations are additionally translated into Chinese, which may suggest that Yin is not

25 Yin Xiaoyuan 2016, trans. J.K.

26 Yin Xiaoyuan 2020: 102–107.

unconcerned about her position on the Chinese literary scene and tries to build her prestige using her international connections.

In poetry writing, too, compared with Fiedorczuk, Yin the epicist is more of a conqueror who wants to replace a set of patriarchal and anthropocentric grand narratives with another set of grand narratives, more pluralist and diverse, but still centrally devised and executed. Yet, she, too, has a lyrical face, albeit she seems to show this face only reluctantly. Her short poems are usually organized in big series, as if they are too weak and vulnerable to function as stand-alone texts; they are accompanied by an elaborated bio in which she introduces herself as an epic poet, as if to emphasize that these short poems are not representative of her oeuvre and constitute rather a leisurely exercise between one great epic mission and another. This is, for example, her profile on AllPoetry:

Yin Xiaoyuan [...] is an avant-garde, crossover epic poet as well as a trans-genre & multilingual writer, founder of Poetic Encyclopaedist School (in the year of 2007), initiator of hermaphroditic writing movement and chief drafter of Declaration of Hermaphroditic Writing. She is author of 18 encyclopaedic epics (add up to a total of 70 thousand lines) and 24 series of short poems with themes varying from physics, chemistry, biology, geography, geology, psychology, calligraphy, photography, musicology, geometry, atmospheric science to information sciences.²⁷

In her trust in epic and mistrust in lyric, Yin very much resembles Haizi 海子, who also cherished his epic-like narrative poem *The Sun* (太阳), more so than the lyrical parts of his oeuvre. On the other hand, it should be noted that while Haizi tried to recreate the tradition of the Western epic in the Chinese language, Yin consciously breaks with genre conventions and strives to redefine them. She is not the first author to undertake such attempts, to recall, for instance the nineteenth-century American poets' quest for the modern epic, crowned by Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*.²⁸ Still, in China her enterprise certainly may be considered quite innovative and, I suppose, interesting to native readers, among whom the question of why Chinese—or more precisely, Han—literature has not engendered epic poetry is regularly asked and discussed; indeed, in recent years there have been considerable efforts to

²⁷ Available at https://allpoetry.com/Xiaoyuan_Yin (accessed December 22, 2020).

²⁸ On Whitman's connections to epic tradition, see, e.g., Miller 1979; McWilliams 1990; Hardwig 2000; Studniarz 2005.

promote the epics of indigenous ethnic minorities to fill this gap.²⁹ However we assess their artistic value, I think Yin's syncretic, at times grandiose, works embody the spirit of modern China.

Whereas Yin's epics may appear overwhelming and sometimes overdone to readers who do not operate between different domains of knowledge with such incredible ease, her lyric poems manage to grasp something of the plasticity of the newborn world. This impression is particularly strong when they are isolated from her big poetry series or cycles, thrown into interlingual space, unarmed, unprotected, vulnerable, and as such unconditionally open to the reader, as so happens in *Cloud Seeding Agent*. Many of these poems are closely related to nature and, similarly to Fiedorczuk's works, explore, and try to reenact by textual measures, the process of creation and formation of matter, starting from the initial Singularity, followed by the Big Bang and early quantum reactions, and then inquiring into mechanisms of the evolution of species, as if seeking an opportunity to grow roots in the history of the earth before it was named and colonized by humans.

In this genetic context, the fact of Yin's poetry's inherently translational, multilingual mode of existence becomes particularly intriguing. Because her poems want to build directly from primary matter, the very substance from which the world was made, I think it is more apt to say that their different language versions are parallel attempts at a translation of the Source, the "zero moment," the unknowable Singularity, rather than that, for example, an English or French edition is a translation of a Chinese original. In whatever language the author wants to rewrite the poem, she must push this language back to the primary notions, and then develop them in the rhythm and prosody specific for this particular language, each time renegotiating the grammar anew. As Bill Wolak puts it, "[h]er poetry pushes language to the brink of the undefinable, where the ordinary through a miracle of imaginative alchemy becomes numinous."³⁰ Concha García, in turn, observes:

29 Gong Pengcheng 龚鹏程 (2019) discusses the absence of epic poetry in China as well as the May Fourth authors' quest for, and misunderstanding of, the genre in a frequently cited and reposted paper: "Why China Has No Epic?" (何以中国没有史诗?). In two recent papers, Ma Xin 马昕 (2020) and Zhao Yanfang 赵彦芳 (2020) seek traces of the epic tradition in Chinese classical literature, which is generally considered lyrical. Feng Wenkai 冯文开 (2019) has published a monograph that summarizes the explorations of Chinese ethnic minorities' epic poetry and proposes to treat it as a discipline within Chinese humanities: *Reflection on and Construction of the Study of the Epics of Ethnic Minority Groups in China* (中国少数民族史诗研究的反思与建构).

30 Cited in Yin Xiaoyuan 2020: 105.

The author has given us indication of her “Quantum Ways,” and only by diving deep into the energy fields and the vibrations within could we find the beams of spooky voices and men classified into various archives by scores set according to their structures, so the reader imagines those supernormal, surrealist forms, navigating themselves across the spaces stretching within the poem. [T]he poet extends her verses beyond the realms of transcendence and sublimation; the only way to read her poems is by fitting them into a mathematical universe, where the beauty of equations constructed this extraordinary poetic quality, in a space where parallel realities multiply and project themselves on everything.³¹

Since for many people physics actually sounds like (pseudo)metaphysics, it is difficult to speak of Yin Xiaoyuan’s poetry without provoking suspicions of practicing a sort of New-Age-like quackery or modern astrology or, minimally, without sounding megalomaniac. But, well, sink or swim. I will try to demysticize certain notions by bringing them down into prime factors and show that a project of poetry that wants to incorporate them is not baseless, even though one may not always feels satisfied with the specific artistic solutions Yin employs. Let’s start from Yin’s poetic inquiry into the most fundamental, quantum level of reality in the poem “Quantum Walk” (量子漫步) mentioned by García.

Quantum Walk

Man with [ginger-hued fingers][standard biological clock][recluse mind]
[decrepit lungs]

Man with [jade-hued fingers][oversped biological clock][moderate
mind][fresh lungs]

Man with [jade-hued fingers][disordered biological clock][fractured
mind][stout lungs]

...

HE formulated them as above until the scarlet scrawl zigzagged
Beyond the ever stretching wall, while between the curves he remarked
In smaller font size: “Only for reference as gender-specific samples,
Applied equally to females, even humans in preceding or subsequent his-
torical stages.” Quanta without features

31 Ibidem: 106.

Longan-shaped-skulled ones, swirling blind, taking in wisps of smoke,
 and aroma of wheat
 Then dissolved into differentiated data. Appearing like rolling date code
 stamp,
 They formed digits of various numerals, with inherent DNA fragments
 within,
 Snaky bones (almost phenomenal), and got the label
 “Superposed State.” Braided into a binary plait

Thin and diaphanous, suspended vertically,
 They bided their time. Later claimed to be shaped like spinning tops
 Instead of coins with heads and tails. They disentangled themselves
 Into different positions. This time they were observed

On a two-dimensioned basis. Honeycomb pattern in the bullseye
 —men in [equilibrium state]
 9 Points—men in [particular states]
 7 & 8 Points—men barely classed as [existing]
 2 to 6 Points—all men known to us

Translated by YIN XIAOYUAN³²

《量子漫步》

有生姜色指甲 标准生物钟 遁世思想 衰老肺叶的男子
 有玉白色指甲 过速生物钟 庸常思想 新鲜肺叶的男子
 有玉白色指甲 紊乱生物钟 碎片思想 健壮肺叶的男子……
 Ta 在墙上，像油漆工，把若干行红字越写越长直到
 超出延伸不尽的墙的平面，并在曲线间
 用小一号字体备注：“只是分类样本，
 对象也可以是女子，甚至更前后阶段人类。”没有面孔的量子

头颅如银色桂圆，盲而翩跹，呼吸炊烟和麦穗
 开始幻化各自数据。“看起来就像日期转动印章，
 他们内置的万千DNA片段，及外显的蛇状关节
 在不同数位拼出不同数字，这就是他们
 叫做‘叠加态’的东西。”有时候它们也像香草

32 Ibidem: 40–42. The Chinese versions of this and following poems by Yin were provided by the author and come from the Chinese edition of the collection *The Cloud Seeding Agent*: 《播云剂》.

被编成窄而薄、二进制的一束，垂直挂起来
 等待时日。后来有人说，这些不是非黑即白的硬币
 而是一堆陀螺。它们在解放的草束里
 旋转起来，落成不同姿态。这次人们只从一个层面

观测：中间集中成蜂窝状的一均衡态生存的男子
 九环—生存特殊态中的男子
 七、八环—尚可归入生存态的男子
 二至六环—一切已知男子二至六环—一切已知男子

The title refers to a phenomenon of the atom's random traveling. Quantum walk differs from the traveling of bigger objects to which classical physics applies in that the atom can move in all directions simultaneously; thus, in a very short time, it covers a large area of three-dimensional space. It is only as a result of a measurement (or observation) of this atom that its quantum state is decided, and the atom becomes pinned down in a certain point in space. In the poem, the idea of the simultaneity and entanglement of different quantum states, called superposition, is indirectly connected to Yin's concept of hermaphroditism; the latter assumes the parallel existence of male and female traits in one organism/text that we—as society—"force" into *either* a male *or* female "state," being unable to embrace both at once. Put differently, we need what the poet calls "gender-specific samples" to organize our thinking. The quantized narrative of the text offers an alternative story of Genesis, in which the heads and tails of a coin—a popular illustration of a particle in quantum physics, used interchangeably with the image of a spinning top (with a spin -1 or $+1$)—preceded the emergence of head-and-tailed animals. In other words, language does not want to describe the final products of creation but rather reenact the entire process of world-making, showing that what grand narratives of the origin present as Creation was in fact not the *production* but the *reduction* of matter. In this sense, Yin's vision resonates with Joanna Mueller's concept of literary works as *stratygrafie* (stratigraphies / writing losses) discussed in chapter 5. Here, the Creator—"HE", in the original referred to as "TA" provided in Pinyin, which in Chinese may signify any of the three pronouns "he," "she," "it," written with the use of different character but pronounced in the same way, as *ta*—should be considered as the first and most melancholy stratigrapher, who had to reduce Him/Her/Itself to a gender-specific sample so that people He/She/It created could embrace at least part of His/Her/Its essence, and human writing as remote echoes of this original melancholy.

Besides the scientific laws discussed above that feed into the text, one mysterious "unscientific" moment can be found in the poem. I am thinking of the strange scale of the intensity of existence in the final stanza, which suggests

that among us there are also some unfinished people, who have not yet hatched from their quantum clouds of probability.

The motif of an underevolved human also appears in another poem by Yin, inspired by the theory of evolution which Yin interprets through quantum logic applied at a macroscale, titled “Brooding over the Dwindling Figure of a Kenai Peninsula Wolf” (默数基奈山狼的背影). The eponymous animal is an extinct species, one that succumbed to natural selection and which only survives in myths and legends. Its extinction is taken by Yin as a metonym for all nonhappened histories which could not co-occur parallel with the dominant one that “seems to stretch permanently”:

To slit open the glow-suffused canopy above, you must turn around first
 And face the grey and damp vastness. In the heather shrubs, lies the
 Excalibur of the mighty
 resplendent with a diamond in its handle. Your hands are stuck, there
 between
 maxillary and mandible jaws of a Kenai Peninsula Wolf. One possibility
 of geological history must succumb to another
 that seems to stretch permanently. Sometimes you can witness whiteness
 extracted
 from wheat and milk, and tapped with mallets to be chewier

“Get me stoned, or turn me into a stone.”
 in return he murmurs Lamentations
 Into your ears. You will soon be banished into the darkness
 of a hangover or a crush.

Translated by YIN XIAOYUAN³³

为了切割开流霞熙攘的天屏，需要转身向
 灰湿的原野。石楠丛间，勇者的亚瑟王之剑
 剑柄钻石耀如朝露。你的手被钳住了，因为那是
 基奈山狼的白齿。一种时间走向
 必须臣服于悠久的另一种。有时候白色会被
 从麦穗与牛乳抽出，在漂洗布匹的号子中抽打。

“施咒麻醉，或将我化为石头。”而它在你耳边念的
 乃是《耶利米哀歌》。你即将被流放到
 一宿醉或者热恋的黑暗中。

33 Ibidem: 52.

The wolf's fate provokes reflection on the either/or mode of existence to which we, too, are doomed, although the primary matter from which the world, and ourselves, is made, functions beyond our consciousness in a "superposition" that does not demand disambiguation. In the world that is available to us, one cannot have a diamond and the wolf at the same time just like one cannot have both light and darkness:

But what are you precisely? A musk ox?
 A link in their concentric defensive formation? Or are you a blessed
 infant,
 Or some ardent, self-sacrificing devotee? The scavengers on the hillside
 have drawn second hands from clocks for the fencing:
 In the capricious world, a belle is now Bodhisattva, now asura.

The wind never stops. The Great Migration taking place through the
 wilderness
 Forms shapes of moths, nimbuses, spirals and beltfish ... in the turmoil
 You saved the diamond while losing your precious wolf
 Just as long ago, you saved the sun but lost your eternal night³⁴

而你是什么？是麝牛—
 组成同心圆阵型的深红一环，你是神圣的婴儿
 或者一个虔诚的自我牺牲者。山坡上，拾荒者们
 忙于拨下钟表的指针用于击剑：
 玄秘的世界，她左脸菩提，右脸修罗。

风从未断流。迁徙的物种，在大地上组成
 蛾翅形、雨云形、螺旋形、带鱼形……动荡中，
 你留下钻石丢失了基奈山狼，
 犹如多年前拦住了太阳丢失了夜晚。

In the penultimate stanza, there is an image that should not go unnoticed: the scavengers stealing the hands of clocks for fencing. From the Chinese text, it is obvious that by fencing the author meant the sport in which foils and sabers are used; however, my first association when reading the English was fencing in the sense of a boundary line or perimeter. As such, the image struck me as an original experiment in which the temporary (clock hands) is transformed into the spatial (fencing): something that normally serves to measure time is

34 Ibidem: 52, translated by Yin Xiaoyuan.

appropriated to fence off a piece of space for oneself. This is an example of how, when dealing with absolute fundamentals, each language has to negotiate grammar with the “cosmic matter” on its own and how it sometimes clearly skews, carried away by unknown forces; one has to be very careful not to “vanish simultaneously into multi-dimensional coordinate spaces / And before that / Highly similar speed and coincidental paths, which the researcher, apathetic and detached as he always was / Will never comprehend”³⁵ (在某个坐标上你们一起消失，在那之前 / 是高度相似的速度和路径记录。那个离群索居的研究员——他不明白。), as Yin warns in “Family Feud, or Coevolution” (宿怨，或协同进化).

Fluid spacetime “swings” the language structures that are supposed to synchronize themselves with the movement of fresh, still liquid matter. To this end, the language becomes “saturated” with “champagne,” which helps one loosen one’s self-control and follow the rhythm of the world. In “Circatidal Rhythmus” (近潮汐节律) we read:

No need to worry, the bells have their own rhythms to toll
 through the dusk, when monks in ochre stroll across
 To a stone arch. No peak time period for the world
 In birthrate or death rate, but for champagne activity,
 and language saturation. The high lightness of humankind’s brain zones
 Soars, and in the next second plunges. In the light of universe’s torch
 on its last beach named “the world,” all dead crabs lie transparent and
 feathery, while the living ones of its kind
 Synchronize their watches, with the moon.

Translated by YIN XIAOYUAN³⁶

不用担心 [...]]
 哪些钟该在暮色里
 次第响起？红袍的僧侣走向
 桌上圆拱形的金属。在这一时间段，世界并不拥有
 最高的出生率或者死亡率。香槟活跃度高，
 语言色彩渐趋饱和，他们大脑的亮度
 在冲刺正数和负数的顶峰。宇宙的手电筒下
 世界是最后的海滩，死去的蟹变得透明，活着的
 和月亮对了一下表。

35 Ibidem: 54–55, translated by Yin Xiaoyuan.

36 Ibidem: 42–43.

The “high lightness of humankind’s brain zones” brings to mind the weird lightness of breathing after humans’ emergence from the divine ocean in Fiedorczuk’s work. In Yin’s poem the ocean imagery plays a vital role, too. The primeval element has been already yoked by the moon, which determines its ebbs and flows, and thus the life of water creatures whose biological time needs to be tuned to this rhythm. In that, humans do not differ so much from crabs. Similarly to Fiedorczuk’s “Bio,” where the sea was captured in human irises and sometimes still floods one’s subconsciousness in dreams from which one wakes up and feels strange in one’s own human body, in Yin’s cosmogony, likewise, we have the elemental power and structure of the sea encoded in our bodies, namely in the cells of our nervous system. The poem “Schwann Cells” (施旺细胞) speaks of it:

Schwann Cells

An insect: never wanna risk my life to fly over
 This net, shaped like a fluorescent anemone, emerging out of a bleak
 paleness. (THAT is the nervous system of a human being)
 The spider: I’ll return at dawn, when dreams and flasks of absinthe
 are locked behind a wooden cupboard door, and I’ll sweep away the rem-
 nant of
 a night of bacchanalian revelry. (The sea covers his entire mind during
 the nights,
 so when a ray of light kindles the daybreak, all waves yield underneath
 the hem of the sky)

A good thought flashes by—it is hyacinth blue; an evil thought flits
 past—oriole orange.
 Yet most of the time there are just distracting grey thoughts: the gossa-
 mer of capillary currents, flowing through pearly soft metal
 Some grow brighter and brighter, flickering, others dive into the cortex
 and never show up again. “Short-circuiting is inevitable, like seawater
 gushing into the cabin
 and makes the ship list. Then an emanation from ephemeral mirages,
 tempting deliriums, and from disillusioned passions, rises overhead ... He
 starts to gasp with gills
 like an aquatic invertebrate.” The skin the spider has shed lies there
 in the corner of the fences. Obviously no lost hiker will pass by today.

The woman spinning in his head is as brilliant as light itself, and 100% active

But it is no more than a holographic image: purified, processed and revised by his will and his passion ...

Everyone has his own wilderness, ever stretching without overlapping, like an archipelago scattered in the air.

Translated by YIN XIAOYUAN³⁷

《施旺细胞》

飞虫:何必赌上性命飞越这张
 明灭如海葵的电网。(这是某个人类的神经系统)
 蜘蛛:我将在破晓时分回来,那时苦艾酒和梦境
 被锁进木橱,我负责打扫它们狂欢
 留下的碎屑。(他的大脑夜晚为大海所占据,白昼打开
 于是天空压低了潮汐)

一个善念闪过,微蓝;一个恶念闪过,橙红。
 更多时候只是杂念,细若游丝的电,在柔软的金属中
 有的越来越明亮,打出火花,有的潜入深层
 不复出现。“短路不可避免,犹如海水涌入
 船舱倾斜。于是一切残烬飞扬:童年遐想、
 病中错觉、幻灭爱恋,他如像长鳃的鱼类
 张嘴呼吸。”蜘蛛褪下的壳

在篱笆角落。当然今天也不会有人来问路。
 他脑中那名女子,鲜亮如光芒,有一百分活性。
 但那只是一个全息图像,被他提纯、加工、篡改……
 每个人有自己的荒原,互不交错,从上空望下去
 像散在空中的群岛。

The boundary between the human and nonhuman is blurred. In love, for example, one resembles more a shapeless aquatic invertebrate breathing through gills than a human being tightly wrapped in skin. In Yin's phantasmagorical, at times Kafkaesque, universe this is arguably not merely a metaphor but a material flesh-and-blood transformation, which pushes the “action” of the poem in a new direction, toward further metamorphoses of the anonymous protagonist

37 Ibidem: 51.

under the combined influence of passion and general gravity. We are individual beings with our singular wildernesses which are not available to anyone else, yet our singularity is not the singularity of lonely islands but rather of “archipelagos scattered in the air.” This is an interesting vision of subjectivity, as if we are all “quantum walkers,” spreading ourselves in all directions across the universe and yet still unable to meet one another (we exist “without overlapping”), even though we occupy the same space.

In Fiedorczuk’s and Yin’s work, poetic language enters into symbiosis with nonlingual systems in order to break free of the limitations of certain cultural paradigms that shape human thought, imagination, and ways of expression, and to become more independent from the specific wiring of the human brain, especially from either/or logic and binary thinking, with particular focus on the construction of gender categories. In this place, however, one cannot not mention at least one author to whom the nonbinarity of their own gender is the primary experience and starting point from which they proceed to reconfigure the language and rewrite the world. In the late 2010s, the Polish poetry scene witnessed the emergence of its first nonbinary poet (or at least, the first person who had “come out” as nonbinary and “come out” as a poet): Łukasz Kaźmierczak/Łucja Kuttig. In Kaźmierczak/Kuttig’s operations with Polish grammar, one may observe up close a struggle for a more flexible poetic language. The poet tries to destabilize poetic language’s structures through its constant collisions with the natural sciences and mathematics. It would be a tortuous process for a non-Polish-speaking reader to delve into grammatical and lexical nuances of the Polish language to which the author, for example, (re)introduces the old class of grammatical form known as “dual” (as distinct from singular and plural) to address and refer to Themselves. Therefore, let me just quote an excerpt from Kaźmierczak/Kuttig’s manifesto “Biogranifesto” (Biogranifest), which closes Their debut poetry collection *Cocothistles* (*Kokosty*, 2018). In the below rendition, I replace Their experiments with Polish grammar with some roughly analogous modifications of English grammar (“we am,” “one-s,” “one-self,” “one-selves,” etc.³⁸), although in Polish, which has a much more nuanced inflection and a greater variety of inflectional morphemes, these operations sound more inventive and refreshing, and stand out more clearly in the text. I also decided to replace the trademark *Viva!* in the text with *PEAK!* in order to retain the original meaning. *Viva!* is the title of a popular Polish women’s magazine. And *mó-Viva!* is the poet’s experimental

38 If these look odd in English, it is because they are in Polish. Kaźmierczak/Kuttig deliberately plays with pronouns and verbs to create plural singulars and singular plurals that throw into question the conventional “grammars” of language and thought.

reinvention of the word *mówiwa* (the obsolete first-person dual form of the verb *mówić*, “to speak”).

In the era of cybernetics, one doesn't need a truth about one-self, fixed trajectories that start from the right/servile (*stu[sz/ż]ebny*), axioms-based initial condition. In metrics, there is a choice: e-Euclidean, Lobachevskian, Riemannian [geometries], a variety of names, surnames, dates of birth, addresses, eye colors—and still [only two] sexes/genders [*ptcie*]. Does anybody need a declinatory and declamatory grammar gender in the agglutinative grammar of hashtags with the continuity of identity and a proven theorem of the extendability of solutions minimally for a countable number of cases[?] Can one communicate with an extraterrestrial civilization in Polish if one can't even communicate with a person without gender? What if the cosmos doesn't need gonads, chromosomes based on PNOCH [phosphorus, nitrogen, oxygen, carbon, hydrogen], *andro/estro*-hormones, phenotypes, and metabolism? And performative sexuality. If one-s SPEAK® [*mó-Viva!*] of one-selves in a nonsingular [grammatical] number.

this body is made from flesh

this body is made from sex/gender

where shall I go with this knowledge

K. BERGET, *** [this body is made from flesh]

It is not that our mouths don't want, they are just unable to pronounce the pronoun *ego*. Human speech can't convey the sense of one-s' inner identity. Am we then a subject at all? Or perhaps our subjectivity simply can't be expressed?

W dobie cybernetyki nie potrzeba prawdy o sobie, ustalonych trajektorij startujących ze słu[sz/ż]nego, zaczepionego w aksjomatach warunku początkowego. W metrykach do wyboru: e-Euklidesowskość, łobaczewskość, riemannowskość, mnogość imion, nazwisk, dat urodzenia, miejsc zamieszkania, kolorów oczu—płcie wciąż. Po co komuś deklinacyjny i deklamacyjny rodzaj w aglutynacyjnej gramatyce hashtagów z ciągłością tożsamościową oraz z udowodnionym twierdzeniem o przedłużalności rozwiązań przynajmniej w przeliczalnej liczbie przypadków. Czy po polsku można się porozumieć z obcą cywilizacją pozaziemską, skoro nie wiadomo, jak rozmawiać z osobą bez płci. Co, jeśli kosmos nie potrzebuje gonad, chromosomów opartych na PNOCH-u,

andro/estro-hormonów, fenotypu ni metabolizmu. Ani performatywnej seksualności. Jeżeli mó-Viva!® o sobie w liczbie niepojedynczej.

*to ciało jest z mięsa
to ciało jest z ptci
dokąd mam się udać z tą
wiedzą*

K. BERGET, *** (*to ciało jest z mięsa*)

Nasze usta nie tyle nie chcą, ile nie mogą wypowiedzieć zaimka “ego”. Ludzka mowa nie udźwiga poczucia wewnętrznej tożsamości. Czy jestewa w ogóle zatem bytem podmiotowym albo czy li tylko naszej podmiotowości wyrazić nie sposób.³⁹

Among Their literary inspirations, Kaźmierczak/Kuttig lists Olga Tokarczuk, Toni Morrison, and Elfriede Jelinek,⁴⁰ the first of whom I discussed as a kindred spirit of Julia Fiedorczuk. Indeed, Kaźmierczak/Kuttig’s encyclopedism and Their belief in the plasticity of matter and identity is what the author shares with both Tokarczuk and Fiedorczuk, and also with Yin Xiaoyuan. Yet, unlike them, Kaźmierczak/Kuttig does not seek communion or even collaboration with nature. Nor does They seem to believe in individual singularity or in any Singularity in which to probe through language. Rather than trying to synchronize poetic language with natural phenomena, the author is busy exploding the existing connections between the word and the world in order to build a more efficient system of linguistic (self-)(re)cognition. In *Cocothistles*, one can hardly see any positive project emerging in Kaźmierczak/Kuttig’s work. Rather, the author appears to be accepting Their own image in the eyes of others with resignation, like a new Romantic hero, comparing Themselves to Konrad Wallenrod, the title protagonist of Adam Mickiewicz’s poetic novel. Take this excerpt from “Identity” (Tożsamość), for instance:

At student conferences in mathematics, people usually aren’t friendly. They outdo one another in mental shortcuts and applications of topology for generating algebra and vice versa. For some time, I remain myself, then I take the shape of what they expect from me. A hypothesis of freedom

39 Kaźmierczak/Kuttig 2018: 67, trans. J K. The quoted excerpt from Kristin Berget, *** (*this body is made from flesh*), is rendered based on the Polish translation by Justyna Czechowska quoted by Kaźmierczak/Kuttig.

40 Kaźmierczak/Kuttig 2017.

states that to remain oneself, one has to build a convex shell made from convenient imaginations. I present the proof at the end of the week and actually no one wants to find a mistake in it. Even mathematicians pity Wallenrod.

Na studenckich konferencjach naukowych z matematyki ludzie zazwyczaj nie bywają życzliwi. Prześcigają się w skrótach myślowych oraz zastosowaniach topologii do generowania algebry i vice versa. W jednym czasie pozostają sobą, w dalszych słowach przybieram postać tego, czego ode mnie oczekują. Hipoteza o wolności głosi, że dla zachowania siebie trzeba zbudować otoczkę wypukłą z wygodnych wyobrażeń. Dowód referuję na koniec tygodnia i w zasadzie nikt nie chce znaleźć w nim błędu. Nawet

matematycy ubolewają nad Wallendrodem.⁴¹

In “Humanity” (Ludzkość), this existential helplessness is considered the condition of all humankind:

Success. My first theory was accepted. A modest proof confirmed. A human turns out to be a linear and limited operator. Immersed in an open infinite-dimensional and spherical space. S/he struggles with the Euclidean norm and standard basis. Transformations of a human into another normed vector space are limited, like her/himself, like me. This stems from Cauchy-Schwarz inequality. In the appendix, I elaborate on the derivation of the formula into the sunset, which I finished before the cinnabar of the sunset.

I feel completely.

Sukces. Moja pierwsza teoria została przyjęta. Nieśmiały dowód uznany. Człowiek okazuje się operatorem liniowym i ograniczonym. Zanurzonym w otwartej przestrzeni skończenie wymiarowej i kulistej. Mierzy się z normą euklidesową i ze standardową bazą. Przekształcenia człowieka w inną przestrzeń unormowaną są ograniczone, jak i on sam, jak i ja. Wynika to z nierówności Cauchy’ego-Schwarza. Wyprowadzenie w siną dal, dokończone jeszcze przed cynobrem w zachodzie słońca, rozpisuję w uzupełnieniu.

Czuję się kompletnie.⁴²

⁴¹ Kaźmierczak/Kuttig 2018: 19, trans. J K.

⁴² Ibidem: 22, trans. J K.

All three poets discussed here experience, and want to overcome, the limitations of poetic language and human language in general, those that render us unable not only to express but to think and imagine beyond a certain, more or less flexible, cognitive grammar. All of them try to transform, expand, or sometimes explode this grammar by exposing it to interactions with nonhuman grammars in order to make poetic/human language cognitively functional and ethically inclusive. None of them is entirely satisfied with the effects of their respective experiments, albeit Fiedorczuk's calm, gentle, balanced diction compared with Yin's uneven, sometimes pompous, and self-absorbed epicism, and Kaźmierczak/Kuttig's provocative rebelliousness, suggests that the author of "Oxygen" has already managed to gain some insight into what is or might be located beyond the language-event horizon and has started to build a consistent idiom based on it, even if it still remains flawed and unfree of human limitations. The other two authors tirelessly continue their search and every new poem becomes a unique layer in the definition of their (poetic) identity. Since *Cocothistles*, Kaźmierczak/Kutting has published another collection *Goosberries (Agresty, 2019)*, a large step forward in this enterprise, although still somewhat more deconstructive than constructive, and, as I am writing these words, They is working on the next book, which will soon be submitted to the publisher. In this forthcoming book, as They revealed to me, a multidisciplinary approach is employed in a proposed "atomistic quasi-theory of gender along with poly-isotopically superfluid model of gender and the uncertainty principle of inflection morphemes."⁴³ Likewise, Yin Xiaoyuan never slows down in her innovations, exploring various topics not only from a panoramic, syncretic perspective (which often leads unavoidably to superficiality) but also immersing more deeply in certain topics, as she does, for instance, in her huge poetry project based on the concept of an ornithological atlas.⁴⁴

1.2 *Poetry as Photosynthesis: Małgorzata Lebda and Zheng Xiaoqiong*

Absorbed by these total projects aimed at reinventing the language, one should not, however, overlook a number of perhaps less spectacular but nonetheless artistically appealing poetic propositions in which nonhuman grammars of cognition and creation are more subtly intertwined into the structure of poetic narrative and have a soothing effect on the text, on the author themselves, and on the reader. Competently applied naturotherapy detoxicates language, restoring some of its flexibility and significantly fastening its metabolism,

43 Personal communication with the author, July 2021.

44 Personal communication with the author, July 2021.

allowing it to process images and impulses in a more efficient way without losing lightness and agility.

In Polish contemporary poetry, an alluring example of such naturotherapy of language and mind is the work of Małgorzata Lebda. The author, who now lives and works in Krakow, returns in her poems to her native village in the Beskid Mountains in southern Poland, a place where people “obey the will of the river” (*postępujemy zgodnie z wolą rzeki*)⁴⁵ “put autumn in their mouth” (*wkładaliśmy w usta jesień*)⁴⁶ and, when they die, as in the eponymous poem from *The Border of the Forest* (2013),

the forest feels the emptiness of the house it tries to come closer and
sends its does
to gnaw frail benches of the apple tree observes spreads its fox approaches
horse-barns made from heavy logs *you need to know that there are unset-*
tled fears
and misty stories between us and the forest they should be told hence
all those walks ear-straining picking acorns rubbing

birch sap in the body drying mushrooms and herbs

las czuje pustkę tego domu i próbuje się zbliżyć wysłała młode sarny
by obgryzały kruche gałęzie jabłoni przygląda się rozrasta i podchodzi
listem pod stodoły z ciężkich bali *musisz wiedzieć że mamy z lasem*
niedokończone strachy i mgliste historie należy je opowiedzieć stąd
te nieustanne spacerzy nasłuchiwanie zbieranie żołądźci wcieranie

bzowiny w ciało suszenie grzybów i ziół⁴⁷

The place is not idealized or presented as a utopia. Rather, it constitutes an ecosystem into which humans still naturally fit. They do cruel things, but they also accept the cruelty of nature, intuitively knowing, from early childhood, that the accounts must be settled, and that the same laws apply to them as to other creatures, as we learn from “the praise of water” (*pochwała wody*):

45 Lebda 2013: 20, trans. J.K.

46 Ibidem: 14, trans. J.K.

47 Ibidem: 40., trans. J.K.

the praise of water

those children must have fed on fear and rue we knew
of their hidings of dark attics of barns' roofs
on the western side of the fragile tree crowns in the daytime they hunted
for birds
in order to examine their smooth anatomy and texture at evenings at
candlelight

after all they belonged to water and thus when the first of them
gave his body to the cold lake the others didn't ask questions all
confessed the faith in the cross although if they believed at all they
believed in the abyss
rather than in ashes in autumn they were seen in the nearby fields from
where they stole
edible corms their faces swollen from the sun their mouths ready for
snow.

pochwała wody

tamte dzieci musiały żywić się popłochem i rutą wiedzieliśmy
o ich kryjówkach o ciemnych strychach o wystawianych na zachód
dachach stodół o kruchych koronach drzew dniami polowali na ptaki
by wieczorami przy świetle świec badać ich gładką anatomię i fakturę

skrzydeł ostatecznie należeli do wody dlatego kiedy pierwszy z nich
oddał ciało zimnemu jezioru pozostali nie zadawali pytań zgodnie
przyznali się do znaku krzyża chociaż jeśli wierzyli to w odmęt a nie
w proch jesienią widywano ich na pobliskich polach z których wynosili
jadalne bulwy mieli twarze opuchłe od słońca usta gotowe na śnieg⁴⁸

The crimes of adults are even heavier. In the village where Lebda grew up, the sound of animals being slaughtered regularly filled the air. From the window of their room, Małgorzata and her twin sister Magdalena would watch animals being led to their death.⁴⁹ In "white bread ..." (biały chleb ...), the father, a passionate beekeeper who is a central figure in three poetry collections by Lebda, returns from the butchery, Małgorzata and her sister hear him entering the

48 Lebda 2013: 18, trans. J K.

49 Lebda and Małochleb 2019.

kitchen, “put[ting] fresh pork on the table” (układa na stole świeże mięso); later, “mother serves us / warm dewlap and white bread on a cold plate” (matka poda nam na / zimnym talerzu ciepłe podgardle i biały chleb).⁵⁰ Another time, the father, looking at his two daughters, pronounces a key sentence that helps explain the relationship between humans and animals in the countryside: “we feed animals with animals, I thought / looking at your incomplete dentition and oily hands” (*karmimy zwierzęta zwierzętami—pomyślałem / patrząc na wasze niepełne uzębienia i tłuste dłonie*).⁵¹ This utterance, in Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska’s interpretation, testifies to Lebda’s animalistic attitude:

Lebda shows many times her animalistic attitude to the world. Not only in her specific way of portraying animals and humans as equal, but also in her sensitivity to the suffering of animals, which is unthinkable in the countryside where procedures of killing and abusing animals have been accommodated throughout centuries. It is not the case that animalization of the world means its degradation; on the contrary: it foregrounds the connection between humans and nature, humans’ dependence and submission to the same laws. And even a kind of superiority, their instinct not yet stifled by civilization, and their openness to understanding the laws of the world.⁵²

Daria Lekowska, in turn, emphasizing the ritual side of the act of meat consumption in Lebda’s work, quotes the Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina, who in her widely discussed book *Metaphysics of the Flesh* (*Metafizyka mięsa*, 1999) argues:

Taking another creature as food, we transform death into life. For now, it is a transformation of the death of another being into our life, but at some point, the accounts will be settled. Each time when we swallow another body, we become a place of passage to the other side of life through death. This transformation constitutes the sacrality of the act of eating, in particular when the ingested food is meat.⁵³

Many of those who have an experience of growing up in a Polish village in the last two decades of the twentieth century, myself included, would

50 Lebda 2013: 24, trans. J K.

51 Lebda 2009: 28, trans. J K; italics in the original.

52 Sołtys-Lewandowska 2015: KL 7069–7073, trans. J K.

53 Quoted in Lekowska 2018: 197, trans. J K.

probably testify to the accuracy of Sołtys-Lewandowska's, Lekowska's, and Brach-Czaina's statements. Images like the one below from "june: blood" (czerwiec: krew) strongly resonate as well:

june: blood

in the kitchen i see my sister her head bent over the sink
dense blood coming out from her nose the red line leads through
the floor boards to the sofa i lift her forehead
wipe her mouth with a mop

father enters the hall carrying a bleeding animal
he takes my sister's face in his hands i see blood
of the animal and of my sister mix together

czerwiec: krew

zastaję siostrę w kuchni z głową pochyloną nad zlewem
z nosa cieknie jej gęsta krew czerwona linia prowadzi
przez deski podłogi do wersalki odchyłam jej czoło
ścierką przecieram usta

od sieni wchodzi ojciec z pokrwawionym zającem
bierze w dłonie twarz mojej siostry widzę jak krew
zwierzęcia i krew mojej siostry mieszają się⁵⁴

Even if many years later, when one is no longer part of this peculiar ecosystem and looks at it through the eyes of an outsider, a city dweller, academic, intellectual, poet, and vegetarian, like Lebda, seeing its brutality and shuddering at the mere thought of one's former living and eating habits, one cannot understate the power of the ritual and is still drawn by it as an experience that cements the family and the entire local community, strengthening the feeling of belonging. Commenting on her decision to become a vegetarian ecofeminist, Lebda confesses:

It was a difficult decision, especially for someone raised in the countryside, at whose home one of the most important family events was the

54 Lebda 2016: 21, trans. J K.

ritual slaughter of a pig and working together on processing its carcass: marinating, smoking, drying.⁵⁵

She speaks of her childhood as “beautiful but scary, which would not be like this if it weren’t for the vicinity of the forest, intensity of work, and the shadow of butchery. All of this resonates in me and reminds me that who I am now comes from the earth.”⁵⁶

“Who I am now” includes things such as a specific mentality and character (consistency and persistence), but also everyday habits and hobbies like running long distances, which, as Lebda explains, helps her keep a closer connection with nature and her own physicality, to feel the gravity and the rhythm of the body.⁵⁷ There is a beautiful word “fotminne,” meaning literally “foot memory,” invented by Swedish novelist Karen Ekman in her novel *Blackwater*, which I believe aptly explains the mechanism behind running as a reaction to the feeling of disconnection Lebda experienced first after moving to the city and then, even more powerfully, after her parents’ death. In *Ecotopian Lexicon* (2019), introducing this word to English-language readers, Sofia Ahlberg writes:

The problem of humanity’s detachment occurs at exactly the moment when our impact on the future of the planet is greater than ever before. Against these trends, the loanword fotminne, or “foot memory,” reminds us of our primeval connections to the ground beneath our feet. Collective memories are intricately dependent on the pathways we traverse and the physical places where we meet. The usefulness of the term fotminne rests on the assumption that whatever we do that sustains memory also, and necessarily, sustains life.⁵⁸

That said, “who I am” is of course not a raw product of the earth. It required enormous intellectual and psychological work from the author to remold the sensibility she developed in her childhood and attentiveness to the smallest creature instilled in her by her father-beekeeper into a conscious cognitive activity, ethical attitude, and language practice which she describes as “speaking the language of plants.”⁵⁹ A transition from “animalism” reinforced by the robust rituals of the local religion, which constitutes a blend of Christianity

55 Lebda and Maľochleb 2019, trans. J K.

56 Ibidem.

57 Ibidem.

58 Ahlberg 2019: KL: 1395–1407.

59 Lebda and Maľochleb 2019.

a seemingly dispassionate voice. After the explosion of bestiality, there comes something like a sudden liberation and the book ends unexpectedly with a tender gesture: the I-speaker volunteers to absorb her sister's disease (from the opening poem, we learn that she suffers from chickenpox), in whose feverish mind all memories and images blur into a nightmare:

close-up: dreams

the boys from the felling site have cold palms
 (such must have been the palms of the girl
 who gave herself to the poprad in august)
 the boys from the felling site return to us
 in feverish dreams they have cold
 tongues

at dawn my sister asks: and what if
 we are dreamed by the heads of uckermärkers dragged
 by the dogs?

in response i kiss her purple mouth
 to take a piece of disease from her
 and carry it further to the world.

zbliżenie: sny

chłopcy z poręby mają zimne dłonie
 (takie musiała mieć tamta dziewczyna
 która oddała się w sierpniu Popradowi)
 chłopcy z poręby powracają do nas
 w gorączkowych snach mają zimne
 języki

nad ranem siostra dopytuje: a co jeśli
 śnią nas przywleczone przez psy łby
 uckermärkerów?

w odpowiedzi całuję jej fioletowe usta
 by zabrać z niej fragment choroby
 i ponieść dalej w świat⁶³

The sister's delirium is like a pang of the conscience of humankind. It contains an ecoapocalypse in a nutshell: humans being reduced to an eternal dream engendered in the skulls of dead cows—uckermärker is a cattle breed raised since the second half of the twentieth century—created by them and slaughtered by them, becoming thus prisoners of their own guilt. The poet takes part of this guilt from her sister and carries it further to let others know that everybody has a share in this evil. When one gets one's teeth into Lebda's poems, one cannot remain uninfected with remorse, like taking a bite of a plant polluted by contaminated soil and air. At the same time, however, this poetic plant, even if sick inside, continues photosynthesizing, as in Fiedorczuk's work, and supplies the world with pure and fresh oxygen for us to breathe.

In China, there is a group of authors in whose work "photosynthetic" qualities of poetry play a particularly prominent role, namely the so-called migrant worker poets, *dagong shiren* 打工诗人, translated alternatively by Maghiel van Crevel as battler poets. Most of them come from rural areas and have left their homes in search of a better future in big cities, taking up menial jobs, often physically exhausting and dangerous, in disastrous conditions, and with no access to social care. Their poems, written in rare free time after work, in overpopulated dormitories, often with the use of cell phones, and printed in small local migrant workers' magazines, have received the sustained attention of Chinese critics and literary activists since the late 1990s, and gained popularity in the West largely thanks to two figures: Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014). Zheng appeared on the official poetry scene almost out of nowhere. Unknown in poetry circles, in 2007 she won the national Liqun Literary Award for her poems concerning the experience of female migrant workers; she has since published twelve poetry collections and become a prominent persona among the poetry establishment. Xu Lizhi's story is much less optimistic. The world first heard about him only after his suicide, when he threw himself from the window of a building near a Foxconn factory. Published posthumously in the collection *A New Day* (新的一天) and translated into many languages, including English and Polish, his poems testify to the author's existential drama but also to his sensibility, intelligence, and talent.

I will not engage extensively in the migrant worker poetry, for many insightful studies of the phenomenon are available in English;⁶⁴ one can also reach for the anthology translated by Eleanor Goodman, titled after Xu's best-known poem *Iron Moon* (2017). Instead, using Zheng's work as a mini case study, I wish to say a few more words about "photosynthetic" poetics in order to address—or,

64 See, e.g., Gong Haomin 2012; Jaguścik 2014, 2017; Goodman 2017; van Crevel 2017a, 2017b, 2019a, 2019b; Picerni 2020.

in a sense, circumvent—a problem that is arguably specific not only to the discourse of migrant workers' writing, namely the dichotomous and often indeed antithetical reception pattern of certain (types of) poetry as having “high social significance and low aesthetic value,” as van Crevel aptly puts it.⁶⁵ My thesis, provisionally formulated in the preceding discussion of Małgorzata Lebda, is simple and may sound naive, but I believe there is sufficient reason and textual evidence to argue for its accuracy. Plants that grow in a devastated environment do not produce a *different* (or *worse*) oxygen; usually they produce less as they wither and lose their green parts, but there is no connection between the health and the appearance of the plant and the quality of the oxygen. And so it is with poetry: as long as it is alive, on whatever matter it feeds, its inner factory of oxygen works exactly in the same way and offers essentially the same product. A plant, on the one hand, graces its surroundings and, on the other, also helps sustain and improve the quality of human life; the more devastated the environment, the more precious every single plant/poem is. In crowded, stuffy dorms, a small piece of verse photosynthesizing on a phone screen might sometimes save one's life and help one survive another lonely night. In normal cultural reality, which abounds with (poetic) oxygen, we are perhaps not even aware of its importance, taking its presence for granted, and do not pay attention to it until we start lacking it. Only then do we realize that it has actually always sustained our everyday existence.

As the example of plants shows, beauty and functionality are not mutually exclusive things. Of course, there are various kinds of beauty, and not all of them have to satisfy us. Some people only enjoy primary backwoods, to use Lebda's title—that is, poetry produced in a wild, purely literary, for example bohemian, environment; others prefer neat potted flowers kept on windowsills, the intellectual poetry of academic lecture rooms; and still others are attracted by the crude, harsh beauty of puny trees along the expressway or the pattern created by moss in the fissures of an abandoned building marked for demolition, the style of poetry that is characteristic of many migrant worker's writings. In a longer perspective, poetry, like a plant, can to a degree adapt to the changing habitat, be it of industrial zones, or of modern city centers, or even of the operating system environment of computers (see the reflection on cyberpoetry in section 2). Also, if one tends it and gives it enough space, poetry, like a plant, does possess complex mechanisms that help protect it from degeneration by transporting what is harmful through the roots to the earth, which will “absorb a piece of disease,” in Lebda's words.

65 van Crevel 2017b: 275.

In the case of poetry writing, the “earth” is a centuries-old poetry tradition with which every poem is to some extent connected. Through the plant metaphor, one can look for instance at the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of the popularity of classical poetry forms among migrant worker authors. Their deep nostalgia and solastalgia, meaning the unsatisfiable longing for the gradually deteriorating natural environment of their native homelands, plus the irreversible loss of *fotminne* combined with financial instability makes their psychological situation especially difficult. These matters are of course very subtle and require a more nuanced approach than my provisional big picture, but perhaps this might be one reason behind these migrant worker poets’ demand for classical genre forms that seem to have a strong, regular inner scaffolding and well-proven machinery for oxygen production and transportation of emotional toxins down to the ground, to the massive body of tradition in which they become neutralized. The case of early-modernist reformers comes to mind, and their frequent recourse to traditional textual patterns when writing on personal and emotionally difficult topics. Discussing the dialogues with ancient poets seen in the works of Lu Xun 鲁迅, Yu Dafu 郁达夫, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, and Nie Gannu 聂绀弩, Haosheng Yang notes:

In contrast [to vernacular poetry], when writing classical-style poetry, writers follow restrictive formulaic rules, choose from a limited array of rhyme schemes and meters, use well-received allusions, and utilize rhetorical methods passed down from their literary ancestors. Correspondingly, the readers of old verse are engaged in decoding a series of nuanced lyrical modes with which they are generally familiar. Compared with new poetry, classical-style poetry evokes a deep sense of empathy with the audience’s shared cultural experience. This is the psychological ground upon which classical-style poetry has been built.

Modern Chinese writers must strike a balance between presenting a “self” distinguished from anyone else and a “self” incorporated in the historical and aesthetic genealogy of the Chinese tradition. As they come to question the ability of Western-style modernism to represent distinctive Chinese experiences and sensibilities, they often turn to their own cultural heritage to seek consolation from an intimate community of like minds. They may feel less vulnerable to existential loneliness when they recognize that their predecessors as poets also faced challenges and difficulties, though of course the challenges varied in scale and cause from those in the modern world.⁶⁶

66 Yang Haosheng 2016: 27–28.

Zheng Xiaoqiong was not among the practitioners of classical verse, but she received some formal training that helped strengthen the (inter)textual tissue of her work. Also, her poems apparently prefer bright places and develop particularly well when more light is cast on them, being here a metaphor for professional literary education which not all migrant worker poets were lucky enough to receive and, on the other hand, there is no telling that it would have had a positive influence on their writing either; again, poems are like plants: some prefer the sun, others the shade. Having discovered Zheng's natural predisposition, two influential scholars, Zhang Qinghua 张清华 and Xie Youshun 谢有顺, took up the role of unofficial promoters of her writing among the poetry establishment, also becoming her good friends, advisors, and mentors; they would recommend her books to read for inspiration and to learn some effective techniques that may help process various types of experience.⁶⁷ Xu Lizhi presents a very different case. His poems for a long time teetered on the brink between life and death, like puny trees along the road or moss on decaying walls; at some point, they apparently ceased to photosynthesize and an important source of oxygen from the author's life was cut off. What has remained are unpolished, ascetic, irregular forms in the midst of a gloomy industrial landscape that display a terrifying beauty which fascinates some people and repulses others.

Several scholars have written perceptively in English of Zheng Xiaoqiong's work as ecopoetry. Gong Haomin, for example, discusses Zheng's ecopoetics as a strategy in a particular social-political context to effect social change, inscribing it into the broader horizon of New Left ecocriticism.⁶⁸ Justyna Jaguścik⁶⁹ and Zhou Xiaojing take an ecofeminist perspective, the latter invoking Stacy Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality and focusing on the reactions that occur inside, or between, human and nonhuman bodies in Zheng's writing.⁷⁰ Zhou's interpretation resonates with my conception of photosynthetic writing as a form of posthuman practice, which is present in Julia Fiedorczuk's and Małgorzata Lebda's poetry; it is also present in Zheng Xiaoqiong's oeuvre, and perhaps more powerfully so, for it is radicalized by the extreme, inhuman conditions in which the author's consciousness was shaped. Transcorporeality in Alaimo's definition is a new grammar of cognition, "an epistemological 'space' that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other

67 Zheng Xiaoqiong and Zheng Runliang 2017.

68 Gong Haomin 2014, 2018.

69 Jaguścik 2018.

70 Zhou Xiaojing 2014; cf. Alaimo 2008.

actors” and factors. Among them, Alaimo lists “environmental health, environmental justice, the traffic in toxins, and genetic engineering, to name a few.”⁷¹

Zheng’s poetry reenacts the openness and vulnerability of a female body in which impulses from different realities intersect like nerves in the solar plexus. This body was primarily connected to nature as its integral part, but the connection was severed when the poet left her hometown and moved to Dongguan to work on an assembly line in a factory. It became detached from the natural world to such an extent that as a result of weariness and intoxication it lost its lunar monthly rhythm, as in one of her most touching poems “She” (她),⁷² included in the anthology *Iron Moon* under the alternative title “Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station” (女工: 被固定在卡座上的青春):

Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station

Time opens its enormous maw the moon on the machine
 rusting tired darkened turbid its inner danger
 gurgles past the cliff of the body collapses into mud and splintered
 stones
 the splinters of time turbulent waters fill a woman’s body
 wild tidal waters no longer fluctuating with the seasons she sits at her
 station
 the flowing products and interlocking time are swallowed up quickly
 aging ten years flowing past like water enormous weariness
 floats through the mind for many years she’s stuck by the side
 of the screws one screw two screws turning to the left to the
 right
 fixing her dreams and her youth to some product look
 at her pale youth running from an inland village
 to a factory by the sea all the way to a shelf in America
 fatigue and occupational diseases build up in the lungs
 get caught in the throat a lifetime of irregular periods
 fierce coughing the distant development zone full of factories
 the green lychee trees cut down the machines by her side
 shivering she rubs her swollen red eyes and sticks herself back
 into the flow of products

Translated by ELEANOR GOODMAN⁷³

71 Alaimo 2008: 238–239.

72 Zheng Xiaojiong 2008: 13.

73 Qin 2016: 124.

《她》

时间张开巨大的喙，明月在机台上
 生锈，它疲倦，发暗，混浊，内心的凶险
 汨汨流动，身体的峭壁在崩溃，泥土与碎石
 时间的碎片，塞满了女性体内汹涌的河流
 混乱的潮水也不跟随季节涨落，她坐于卡座
 流动的制品与时间交错着，吞噬着，这么快
 老了，十年像水一样流动……巨大的厌倦
 在脑海中漂浮着……多年来 她守着
 这些螺丝，一颗，两颗，转动，向左，向右
 将梦想与青春固定在某个制品，看着
 那些苍白的青春，一路奔跑，从内陆的乡村
 到沿海的工厂，一直到美国的某个货架
 疲倦与职业的疾病在肺部积蓄着
 那些暗示：不再按时到来的月经
 猛烈的咳嗽，她看见工厂远处的开发区中
 有绿色的荔枝树正被砍伐，身边的机器在
 颤抖……她揉了揉红肿的眼窝，将自己插在
 某个流动的制品间⁷⁴

Despite her longtime detachment from nature, the pain of a polluted river or a leafless tree hurt her almost like a wound. This empathy is visible for example in poems centered around the recurring image of lychee trees, as in "Lychee Forest" (荔枝林):

Lychee Forest

Among the gentle fragrant serpentine, the setting sun enters Tongmulung
 gloomy and bright lychee forest, in its vast body
 dusk swings like light on waves, cold brooks play the thousands-year-old
 songs. Ah, it can't grow accustomed to the industrial era,
 its hustle and bustle have nothing to do with it, it still keeps
 slowness and sadness of old times, like a patient
 oily, black, its breath smelling with industrial sewage,
 and no one will come to listen to its low cry, on the hill
 excavators dig forest ground, felled trees
 fall on the yellowish earth, tiny flowers

74 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2009: 25.

spread around, the plum blossom smell fades away, ah, against the setting
 sun
 on the Phoenix Street I saw many people who like me
 arrived from afar to have their share in the glory of industrial era
 to witness the felling of lychee forests and the raising of factories and
 machines
 Chinese-style green-tile houses replaced with western landscape
 in this village, there's no one except me
 who listens to the cry of cold brooks and to the sadness
 of the felled lychee forest, a conservative temple in the middle of the sky-
 scraping jungle

《荔枝林》

在暗香的弯曲间，落日上了桐木岭
 幽暗与明亮的荔枝林，黄昏在它空阔的
 身体波光粼粼，寒溪吹奏着数千年来的
 乡村乐曲，啊，它无法适应工业时代
 喧哗与繁华都与它无关，它还保留着
 旧有时代的缓慢和忧伤，它像病患者
 油腻，黝黑，淤塞工业废物的腥臭
 没有谁来倾听它低低的哭泣，山岗上
 挖土机挖掘着荔枝林，被砍伐的树木
 倒在裸露的黄土间，那些细小的花朵
 洒落在地，暗香渐失，啊，落日里
 我看见凤凰大道上，有多少人像我
 从远方来这里，分享工业时代的繁华
 目睹砍伐的荔枝林间竖起厂房，机台
 中国情调的青瓦屋舍换成西洋风景
 在这个村庄，没有谁会像我一样
 倾听繁荣背后，哭泣的寒溪与砍伐的
 荔枝林的忧伤，高楼丛林中守旧的祠堂⁷⁵

Nature reciprocates this sympathy and it, too, suffers with humans. In Lebda's work, the forest sent its messengers to the house of the dead father. In Zheng's poetry, trees wither when a person dies, as in the long poem "Pedestrian Overpass" (人行桥), which I quote here following Jaguścik who cites it in her reflection on Zheng's "eco-injuries": "somebody is crying for a fallen star / due

75 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2009: 35, trans. J K.

to a man's death a tree withers" (一个人因为一颗星的陨落流泪 / 一棵树因为一个人的死而枯萎).⁷⁶ The intimate relationship between humans and nature is founded on a deep awareness of their intertwined pasts and futures, and not on the physical or symbolic violence exercised by humankind. It would be difficult to seek manifestations of anthropomorphization of nature in Zheng's poetry or other attempts at projecting "humanness" on nature. Rather, remarks Jaguścik, "she transforms the human body into an arborescent shape that mimics trees."⁷⁷ Or, perhaps, she discovers in it traces of treeness from its distant past in a similar way as the body recalls its fishness in Fiedorczuk's poetry.

At the same time, akin to Lebda, who sympathizes with animals but is also very strongly connected to a community which draws animals into its cruel rituals, Zheng sympathizes both with lychee trees and with the iron that fells the lychee trees as part of the modern myth of China. Iron is a crucial image in her poetry, identified first by Zhang Qinghua. In one of his early essays on Zheng, he put forward a tentative thesis which he would elaborate several years later in the introduction to her collection *Pure Plants* (纯种植物, 2011) entitled "The Darkness of Words, or, the Iron of the Era" (词语的黑暗, 抑或时代的铁):

Who touched the iron of the world? Who wrote the iron of the era? Who wrote the coldness and toughness of iron, its painfulness and sharpness, its wildness and heartlessness? Zheng Xiaoqiong. Obviously, it is not her alone who touched the iron of the world and of the era, and her poetry is anything but flawless, but it is consistent, deeply personal, close to life, full of pain, their breath smelling; the poems come directly from the heart, and are not "made up" ["造"出来的].

Iron, indeed, thrilling iron ...⁷⁸

Born in a socialist country, where iron was a cult object, Zheng developed a sentiment for it and absorbed some of its hardness in her youth. She wrote about it in her 2007 essay "Iron" (铁) for which she was awarded a prize by the renowned *People's Literature* (人民文学). There, she confessed:

I have always wanted my poetry to be filled with the taste of iron, solid, sharp. Two years after joining the metalwork factory I was transferred from the operating platform to the warehouse. There I guarded the iron slabs, steel rods, iron plates, iron filings, all kinds of processed iron

76 Jaguścik 2014: 157.

77 Ibidem: 158.

78 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2011: 4, trans. J.K.

products. I was surrounded by piles of iron. In my mind, the smell of iron was pervasive, hard, gravitating. I felt that the air in the warehouse was weightier because of it. [...] Gazing as the heat turned red, a sheer red, translucent as tears, I would cry. Those tears that fell on the searing iron soon disappeared. To date I believe that they didn't evaporate in the high temperature, but fell into the searing iron and became part of it. Tears are the strongest material in the world, with a soft yet unrelenting power. As the blaze turned more and more crimson, the scorching smell of iron became increasingly more concentrated. The iron pieces were reduced to slices of red light, burning logs. One by one, flowers bloomed in the furnace.

Translated by ISABELLE LI⁷⁹

Even when she sees iron piercing the hands of her fellow workers, cutting their fingers, or scraping off her own nail, she still considers it part of her identity rather than something that acts premeditatively against her, as in the below poem from her best-known collection *Female Workers: A Record* (女工记, 2012):

A 37-Year-Old Woman Worker

So many trees're shedding leaves, so many people're growing old
 The stars dimmed by lights, amid the industrial roar of October
 Hear youth aging in the bones and faces
 Declining, day by day
 Like worn-out machines
 Quiet in the autumn light

So many screws're coming loose, so much iron's rusting
 Fatigue and pains accumulate in the body, toxic residues
 Of chemical products cling to the bones and muscles
 Tangled in the veins and nerves, while dull illness
 Cold as night's chill in late autumn ... spreading
 Rising. You hear your age shivering on the edge of wind
 Your body breathing outside of autumn, quivers

At the bulletin of job postings for applicants aged 18 to 35
 A 37-year-old woman worker stands outside the factory gate

79 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2018.

She lifts her head up and notices trees in autumn, the wind is stripping
 away their leaves
 Fallen leaves are rusted by time, rusted by industrial disease
 Numb limbs, irregular breathing ...
 Her life of more than a decade turns rusty, she's left with ... old age
 Like fallen leaves ... trembling
 In the autumn wind

Translated by ZHOU XIAOJING

《三十七岁的女工》

多少树在落叶，多少人在衰老
 灯火照耀的星辰，在十月的轰鸣间
 听见体内的骨头与脸庞上的年轮
 一天，一天，老去
 像松散的废旧的机台
 在秋天中沉默

多少螺丝在松动，多少铁器在生锈
 身体积蓄的劳累与疼痛，化学剂品
 有毒的残余物在纠缠着肌肉与骨头
 生活的血管与神经，剩下麻木中的
 疾病，像深秋的寒夜……上升着
 上升，你听见年龄在风的舌尖打颤
 身体在秋天外呼吸，颤栗

招工栏外，年龄：18-35 岁
 三十七岁的女工，站在厂门外
 抬头看见树木，秋天正吹落叶
 落叶已让时间锈了，剩下……老
 落叶一样的老……在秋风中
 抖动着⁸⁰

The leaves of trees, iron, human bodies, human lives ... they all “rust,” each in its own way and at different speeds, but they share the same helplessness when confronted with time. In “Iron,” she recalls how she learned to see the other side of iron’s nature, namely its softness:

80 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2017: 104.

Two years of my life on the operating floor, I had worked as a lathe operator, a driller, and over time I developed a new awareness about iron. Iron was also soft, pliable. One could bend it, fold it, punch holes, cut grooves, and engrave words on it. It was soft as soil, lonely, silent. When the iron blocks for processing were placed in the heat processor, I often gazed at them, watching them change in the founding fire. What had previously been shiny and whitish gradually turned red, its cold brightness changing into searing transparency.

Translated by ISABELLE LI⁸¹

Like Lebda, who both draws her strength and learns sensitivity and humility from the tough mother earth, Zheng developed these two qualities through the constant exercise of her will and spirit on iron, which, too, may be “soft as soil, lonely, silent.”

All in all, some of Zheng Xiaoqiong’s poem-plants, to return to my metaphor, due to their hard iron scaffolding may resemble electric plants more than organic plants. While they naturally fit the industrial landscape, transplanted into another landscape, be it that of the countryside or, say, of the university campus, they evoke an aesthetic dissonance. This is what many of her professional readers, including Zhang Qinghua, admit having felt at first contact with her idiom.⁸² As Zhang’s example shows, this does not necessarily speak against her poetry. On the contrary, the impression of estrangement raises curiosity and encourages the reader to dig deeper into the texts. But there is also another phenomenon characteristic of her work and closely related to transcorporeality which can be described by the notions of genotype and phenotype as in (natural) plants species. I am thinking of Zheng’s poetry’s unique ability to physically (or phenotypically) adapt to different environments without changing its genotypic qualities.

While most of her works are short poems that revolve around the dehumanizing experience of migrant workers and are settled against the industrial background or, alternatively, in present-day villages affected by rapid development, as in the collection *Two Villages* (两个村庄, 2007), Zheng Xiaoqiong also makes many successful attempts at writing on other topics and employing other forms. One particular example is the collection *Rose Manor* (玫瑰庄园). It consists of eighty 24-line narrative poems created in the course of fourteen years, between 2003 and 2016. Zheng started writing them when she was working on the factory assembly line and finished as a celebrated poet and

81 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2018.

82 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2011, introduction.

advocate for the rights of migrant workers. It may be said that they constitute a parallel thread of her oeuvre developing simultaneously with the more widely commented-on migrant worker themes. The cycle presents a partly fictitious family saga in which Zheng deals with the history of the second half of the twentieth century through the prism of the fates of her grandparents—or, precisely, her grandfather and his five wives—and their children in a small village in Sichuan, with a particular focus on the women. In “I” (我), the second poem from the collection, she explains her motives as follows:

I returned to the Rose Manor, with three volumes of moist books
 ill-timed feminist thought
 nostalgically recalled the past in the Rose Manor, five grandmothers
 their love, happy or unhappy lives
 dusk envelops the manor, day and night come by turns and so do suffer-
 ings and glory
 scattered sorrow of autumn blossom, the bird of love
 flits by, a tangle of thoughts and time
 I entrust my soul to its clear lasting sound

我回到庄园，带三卷潮湿的书
 不合时宜的女权主义者思想
 怀想起庄园往昔，五个祖母
 她们的爱情，幸或不幸的生活
 暮色环绕庄园，昼夜交替枯荣
 散落秋日花丛的忧伤，爱情的鸟
 越过，这纠缠不清的念头跟时光
 我把心灵交付给它高亢的长鸣⁸³

“The bird of love” helps the poet traverse decades and, with the same tenderness with which she “researched” the life of migrant workers, explore and narrate the lives of her ancestors in the era of predatory socialism of which they became victims as unwelcome landlords (地主). In another poem, “Grandmother” (祖母), addressing the old woman, we read:

Old things made you gradually waste away, in suffering, your life was like
 snow
 flake by flake, tough and unrestrained, scattered all around, burning pain
 and loving care in your heart

83 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2016: KL 155–172, trans. J.K.

faces and names that one would miss ever scarcer ever stranger, your
 exquisite grief, thick snow covering old things, spring sun sinking in the
 mirror
 you arranged for yourself a heartbreaking place, several decades later
 I return to the ancestral home, pick your broken heart, so bitter
 so lonely, ah, I hear them knocking at the door in dream, walk
 sigh, suffer, life on paper, realistic snow
 will frostbite love, you and me, divided by feminism
 and emancipation, divided by snow from before decades
 landlords and tenants, through details in sleepless nights I experience
 your fading
 life, sitting in the manor contemplate loves of my grandmothers.

旧事一件件，让你消瘦、痛苦，日子似雪
 一瓣重复另一瓣，坚硬飘逸，灼痛怀爱的心
 依恋过的面孔与姓名，已依稀而陌生，你的
 悲哀细腻，霏雪淹没往昔，春日淹溺镜中
 你把自己安置在心碎的角落，几十年后
 我返回祖居，捡起你碎了的心，它苦涩
 孤单，啊，它们仿佛在梦中叩门、行走
 叹息、痛苦，在纸上生活，现实主义的雪
 将爱情冻伤，你和我，隔着女权主义与
 女性主义，我们隔着数十年前的冬雪
 地主与佃农，失眠的细节经历你稀薄
 的人生，我坐在庄园冥想祖母们的爱情⁸⁴

It is almost unbelievable how Zheng's "iron" language non-iron-ically softens when she speaks about people, places, and things from the past. It quiets down like the sound of footsteps when one steps off a concrete pavement and continues walking on the grass by the roadside. Zheng's perfect footminne allows her to recreate the rhythm of the world whose last moments she experienced as a child in the 1980s. She does not idealize that world but narrates it in its own language, which is sometimes crude or brutal, for example when she recalls years of hunger or opium addiction, yet it is wrapped in a thick, soft layer of fitogrammar that amortizes the rough phrases and unpoetic words, as for example in this passage from "Clouds" (云):

84 Ibidem: KL 445-456, trans. J.K.

Things turned into nothingness, opium seeks roses and the small round
 mirror
 sleepless pomegranates, he missed his nutlike youth
 missed roses and dawns, constellations changed, childhood passed,
 senility
 pushes forward like a river, life, like clouds, like dust

化虚无之物，鸦片寻找玫瑰与小圆镜
 失眠的石榴，他错过核桃样的青春
 错过玫瑰与黎明，童年星移斗转，衰老
 似江流急泻，一生，似云，也似轻尘⁸⁵

This is of course but a linguistic curiosity but I think it incidentally offers an apt summation of Zheng's poetics in *Rose Manor*: the word *yun* 云 which in contemporary Chinese signifies clouds, in ancient Chinese had an additional function; it was used as a verb meaning "say, speak." The author's swift, ethereal, cloudlike phrases easily penetrate the smallest fissures and furthest corners of the past reality. Nature heals her tongue from the aftertaste of iron as it healed the loneliness of her grandmother in "Bird" (鸟):

like a nutshell wrapping
 fleshlike loneliness, her imprisoned wings, sounds of insects in the garden
 leftovers from the summer feast, joy of autumn days, from the rain she
 fishes out
 a common pheasant and a silver pheasant, soft chitter drifts across the
 night, and she
 like a solitary hoopoe stands in the middle of the garden, the well, the
 high walls
 why not cook some painstaking herbs to heal the storm in her heart
 books, schools, ideals ...

像果壳裹着
 果肉般的寂静，她囚禁翅膀，花园的虫鸣
 夏日的欢宴残剩秋日的清欢，她从雨里捞出
 雉鸟与白鹇，温婉的啼声飘浮黑夜中，她似
 孤独的戴胜立于院中桑树枝，天井、高墙
 或者用一颗苦心熬药，医治她内心的风暴
 书籍、学堂、理想.....⁸⁶

85 Ibidem: KL 290-301, trans. J K.

86 Ibidem: KL 230-241, trans. J K.

Having grasped the language of nature, Zheng receives a key to the secrets of human lives. Collecting their “outbreaths” still suspended in the air in the old garden, poetry transforms them into oxygen that fills the long unaired rooms of the manor, reviving its dwellers.

1.3 *Cosomologies: Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiert and Ai Fei'er*

Speaking of the process of tongue-healing, two other poets offer us works in which this process is displayed with near-clinical precision, namely Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiert with her debut collection *Songs of Myrmidon* (*Pieśni Myrmidonu*, 2019) and Ai Fei'er with a prose poetry (散文诗) cycle titled “Medications Without Prescription” (非处方用药), included in her collection *Inverted Image* (倒影, 2014). In their subtly emotional but unsentimental, intellectually challenging but accessible works, the two authors foreground the interplay between nature and culture and between human and nonhuman in traditional, local *cosomologies*. By this linguistic hybrid composed of *cosmos* and *soma*, I understand artistic conceptualizations of the universe and its relationship with the human body, including ways in which the body reflects, or reacts to, the processes occurring in the world of nature, be it directly or mediated by culture, society, and/or science.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is particularly concerned about these connections based on the assumption that humans are an integral part of nature (天人合一) and that cosmic elements and “energies”⁸⁷ co-constitute, and circulate in, the human body as well and their balance guarantees good physical and mental health. Drugs, made mostly from herbs, carefully and individually composed for each patient, are supposed to regulate this circulation and help maintain the optimal “temperature” (i.e., “warmness” or “coldness” taken as prevalence of one of the two elements: yang and yin, respectively) of all organs. On the one hand, TCM in recent decades has been increasingly scientificized in the Western sense of the word. Specialists are looking for confirmation of their knowledge through laboratory experiments and other academic research methods. On the other hand, it also constitutes a part of Chinese cultural heritage and plays a role in the self-identification of the Chinese society. Its culture-shaping potential is reflected in the Chinese language, which contains many idioms that originate in TCM practice; for example, *goupi gaoyao* 狗皮膏药 (a dog-skin plaster), used as a medicine to alleviate swelling and pain, may also refer to fake goods or fake news. Conversely, the

87 I will not engage here in the discussion of the status of the complex concept of *qi* 气, which is often translated as “energy” or “vital life force.” More on the role of *qi* in TCM, see, e.g., Li Xing-Tai and Zhao Jia 2012.

names of medicines are often created based on certain cultural connotations of plants; for example, *longnao* 龙脑, literally “dragon’s brain,” is a fragrant substance used as a cosmetic and as a medicine obtained from several different precious species of trees, mostly subspecies of the camphor tree—the dragon in the name, the most sacred animal in Chinese mythology, testifies to *longnao*’s special value. Ai Fei’er, who is a doctor with a good knowledge of both Western and Chinese medicine, meticulously prepares herbal mixtures and applies them in, and to, poetry to enhance its aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual qualities, and through poetry to help heal human souls. Sun Xiaoya 孙晓娅, interpreting Ai’s work in an ecofeminist framework, wrote of “Medications Without Prescription”:

Under the poet’s pen, the meaning of Chinese medications preserved in historical records, becomes enriched with entirely new, modern properties, unique theme and style. Intelligently chosen female angle, abundant and sharp emotional experience, depth, thorough understanding, and profound love of thinking, with all these qualities, the poet, consciously or otherwise, created mutually interconnected groups of images, and built a unique ecosystem of writing.

[...]

In Ai Fei’er’s works, we will not experience the pandemic-like anxiety of the era: individual anxiety and the anxiety of influence. At the deepest level, we find echoes of traditional imagery and contemporary imagery which nourishes the poet’s subjective emotions and thinking. These two coexist and mutually enhance each other. Reading “Medications without Prescription,” one is amazed with the richness and beauty of the cultural ecology that emerges out of these images originating in poetics and medicine throughout the centuries.⁸⁸

Confirmation of Sun’s words is found in the opening poem of the cycle, “Glycyrrhiza Uralensis” (甘草), titled after one of the fundamental herbs of TCM also known as Chinese licorice, included in the great pharmacopeia *Compendium of Materia Medica* (本草纲目) compiled by Li Shizhen 李时珍 in the sixteenth century. Ai Fei’er describes its diagnostic and curative methods in the following way:

88 Sun Xiaoya 2011: 147–148, trans. J.K.

Glycyrrhiza Uralensis

At every blow of the wind tears appear in the eyes, at every move asthmatic cough starts.

The symptoms have nothing to do with warmness and coldness, with yin and yang, with Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth.

The sparks in your eyes, the smell of tobacco on your fingertips can heal cough, help tone the Wind and calm the nerves.

In this lifetime I'm doomed to you, both the cause and the antidote is you. This night there was someone like my inverted shadow, an out-of-body experience.

With my own eyes I clearly see the fire-shrouded heart among the ashes; using the fingers of poetry I pick the dust in the depth of the soul; and by everyday cooking/torment [煎熬] move Sisyphus's stone away.

Sitting around, in fever, trembling of cold, shedding tears, coughing.

You buried the roots of the illness, took away the medicine, whenever we separate the disease recurs.

This seriously ill person must have fallen in love with the stars of the daytime and with the sun of the night, this is a sequela with unstable symptoms

Sir, how can the word *nian* 念 save the sick world and restore peace?

《甘草》

迎风就想流泪，转身就哮喘咳嗽。

症状与冷热、与阴阳、与金木水火土无关。

你眼中的火星，你指尖的烟草味道，能止咳平喘，西风定惊。

注定这一生将被你缠绕，病因和秘方都是你。

今夜，谁似我倒提的影子，灵魂出窍。

用自己的眼看清灰烬中转火的心；用诗歌的手指抠出灵魂深处的灰尘，用日甚一日的煎熬搬开西西弗斯的石头。

坐在一旁，发烧，寒战，流泪，咳嗽。

你埋下了病根，带走了草药，一遇分离就复发。

那个病得不轻的人，一定是爱上了白天的星星，夜空的太阳，继发了症状多变的后遗症。

使君啊，一个“念”字，怎能拯救病中的世界重回太平？⁸⁹

This brief work, which may be read as a love poem, displays several characteristic features of Ai Fei'er's writing. One of them is the contracted distance between "I" and "you," typical of a TCM doctor who relies on their own sensitive fingers (here: "fingers of poetry") to measure the patient's pulse and on their own eyes to examine the tongue. This creates an atmosphere of intimacy, an impression that she speaks individually to everybody, and allows one to trust her writing. Here, however, the situation is special, for it turns out that the doctor and the patient are actually the same person: "I" examines herself from the outside, her mind detached from her sick body. Medical students usually have to take part in dissecting-room classes; Ai Fei'er spares the reader such an experience and gives her lecture using her own body as the first case study on which to teach the art of bloodless poetic surgery.

Licorice was introduced at the beginning of the cycle, likely because its root is believed to control and harmonize the effects of other herbs and detoxicate organisms before proceeding to a more detailed therapy targeted at specific problems. Its other functions include healing coughs and mitigating inflammations. Perhaps the poet-doctor takes it to recover her voice before the main part of this peculiar medicine course. This may also be read in a feminist perspective: as healing women's voices after a long patriarchal disease and submission to men to whom they are doomed for their lifetime.

Another specific technique whose sample we see in "Glycyrrhiza" is the use of words and phrases that have a double meaning: one rooted in medical practice, the other referring metaphorically to the social or emotional sphere, as is the case with *jian'ao* 煎熬, which may indicate the process of cooking (e.g., herbs) on the one hand and torment that has to be endured on the other. Like in many TCM hospitals, the poet-doctor provides the patient with raw ingredients and advice on how to prepare and apply them, but the rest is up to the patient, who has to take part of the responsibility on their own.

A similar method, used in other poems, is elaborating on the literal meanings of herbs' names and creating micronarratives based on these experimental renditions. An interesting example is the poem "Oroxylum Indicum" (木蝴蝶),⁹⁰ the eponymous plant being known in English as midnight horror, Indian trumpet flower, broken bones, or tree of Damocles. In Chinese, its name means literally "wooden butterfly." The poem tells a story of "suppressed wings" (压低的翅膀) and "love that can't fly" (不飞翔的爱), alluding to the Chinese tale of Butterfly Lovers: Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台. Another instance of a reinterpretation of a herb's name can be found in the second poem of the cycle: "Codeine" (可待因), which experiments with a substance

90 Ai Fei'er 2014: 4, trans. J.K.

that is specific to Western medicine rather than to TCM; its name, pronounced as *kedaiyin*, is a phonetic translation of the English term. The word consists of three characters/morphemes: *ke* 可 (be able, can, be likely, be possible) + *dai* 待 (wait, stay, host) + *yin* 因 (to follow, a cause, because). This inspires Ai Fei'er's metatextual reflection about "wait[ing] on the side of text" (等在文字的那端), "for opium poppies in the mountain to find a disease-like beauty, for truth-like poetry to become an addiction" (等漫山遍野的罂粟找到了病因般的美, 等到真理般的诗歌成为一种瘾) and an existential reflection on the necessity of restraint and the sense of proportion: "cannot be taken for a long time, otherwise it's difficult to quit" (不宜久服。成瘾难戒). The author also refers to Paracelsus's adage *sola dosis facit venum*, "the dose makes the poison," applied in the poem to the use of codeine (as a medicine and as a narcotic) and to human life: "in small doses heals, in big doses kills" (适量的是药, 过量的是毒).⁹¹ This latter, existential, dimension is also emphasized in "Andrographis Paniculate" (穿心莲), whose title translates literally as "a heart-piercing lotus." The plant in question, however, also has two other alternative names: "snake-killing sword" (斩龙剑) and "joy at first sight" (一见喜).⁹² The poem, unsurprisingly, is a reflection on love and fate, which ends with a rhetorical question: "Too light the promise, too heavy the fate, how to distribute love to balance human life?" (太轻的誓言和太重的命运之间, 一种爱怎样摆放才能平衡一个人的一生?).⁹³

Returning to "Glycyrrhiza Uralensis," last but not least, the poem also brings out the intertextual qualities of Ai Fei'er's poetry by invoking the myth of Sisyphus. The spheres of (Chinese and Western) myth and the nonmythical history are intertwined in her works with other discourses, as if the author tries to identify the first cause of human diseases hidden in the collective (un)consciousness and targets this cause with her herbs/phrases. This is the case also, for example, in the above-cited "Oroxylum Indicum," which builds on the classical story of Butterfly Lovers.

The author's ultraholistic approach takes into account history and myth, which reflects the collective (un)consciousness, individual and collective psychology, including certain patterns of human thinking and behaviors, and biological factors; her therapy addresses individuals, societies, their languages, which undergo various inventive experiments in her poems, and the world at large. "Glycyrrhiza Uralensis" ends with a question asked perhaps by a third

91 Ai Fei'er 2014: 2–3, trans. J.K.

92 Liu Kai 2019.

93 Ai Fei'er 2014: 4, trans. J.K.

person observing this peculiar anatomy lesson that allows for four different readings of different levels of human existence: “Sir (使君), how can the word *nian* 念 [“yearn / reflect / study / read aloud”] save the sick world and restore peace?”. Neither emotions, nor philosophy, nor knowledge and intellect, nor text alone may treat the disease of the world. But all of them together, united in one word like in herbal mixture, in carefully settled proportions, perhaps may bring it back to its feet?

Polish ethnomedicine, like most European traditional medical practices, albeit also based on natural resources, differs significantly from TCM in one crucial aspect. Whereas TCM has always aimed to create a consistent system and rationalize its methods, folk medicine in Poland has been closely intertwined with religious and parareligious practices and anchored in magical thinking. This entanglement is illustrated by the structure of Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiért’s *Songs of Myrmidon*. “Djerabai (the Order of Herbs)” (Dżerabaj (porządek ziół)), which contains three poems: “ironworm. decay” (gojnik. gnicie), “yarrow (interior)” (krwawnik (wnętrze)), and “wormwood (bottom)” (piołun (dno)), is one of the fourteen natural, supernatural, and human-made “orders” in the book; the other include “the order of fish” (porządek ryb), “the order of apiary” (porządek pasiek), “the order of insects” (porządek owadów), “the order of witch doctors” (porządek szeptuch), “the order of the luthier” (porządek lutnika), and so forth. The title of the collection, too, suggests a magical connection between nature and humans. The name Myrmidon alludes to the legendary nation of the Myrmidones portrayed in Greek mythology. According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Myrmidones inhabited the island called Aegina. They were ants transformed by Zeus into people after the island’s population had been killed by a plague sent by Hera. The new nation was as hard-working and loyal as ants and wore brown armor to remind them of their origins. This is what the characters in Piotrowiak-Junkiért’s poetry are like: simple-minded, assiduous, faithful to their Creator, and at the same time, keen to preserve the memory of this miraculous metamorphosis in their bodies and in their subconscious—as Fiedorczyk’s I-speaker preserved the color of the sea in her irises, and Yin Xiaoyuan, the rhythm of ebbs and flows and the structure of Schwann cells in her neural network.

Djerabai, used as the title of the three-poem cycle, is a Kazakh name for *Hypericum perforatum*, commonly known as (perforate) Saint John’s wort, in Polish officially called *dziurawiec* (lit. “one that has/makes holes”), and traditionally, local names such as *ziele świętego Jana* (Saint John’s wort), *krzyżowe ziele* (“cross herb”), and *dzwonki Panny Marii* (“Virgin Mary’s bells”). The Kazakh word means literally “wound healer.” Perhaps the author, who is much

concerned with the audial qualities of her poetic language, including rhythm, subtle rhymes, assonances, and consonances, chose this term for its phonetic features. To the Polish ear, Djerabai sounds like the name of a legendary hero or a faraway place in a fairy tale, and the final syllable *bai* (*-baj* in Polish) brings to mind the word *bajka* (“fairy tale”). Yet, arguably its semantics plays a role as well. “Wound healing,” especially healing the wounds of language, which has lost much of its original beauty preserved in the traditional names of herbs in various cultures, is one of the crucial effects the reader experiences while immersed in Piotrowiak-Junkiert’s writing.

The first poem, whose title I have translated as “ironworm. decay” (*gojnik. gnicie*) confirms this observation. The Polish word *gojnik* (“ironworm”) means literally “something that heals wounds,” and in terms of the word-formative operations, it is a counterpart to the Kazakh *djerbai*, though the two words have different referents in the natural world. With musical phrases and images that transcend human reality, such as a rook nibbling the netherworld, the text patches the wounds and soothes the scars of the language pierced with iron and maimed with the noise of civilization. In my translation into English, which unfortunately loses some of the text’s musicality and gentle rhythm, the poem reads:

ironworm. decay

now shh

ignac is looking for the matches soon he will sing a cappella the route of
diners and transfers

once he recorded a symphony of biała train station on his pocket dicta-
tion machine

novenas of cans podcasts of beggars legato of iron and tissues

i haven’t come for i had a thing to do i had to carry the river through

my stairs smirched with mud it spread across the rug

hard to squeeze the homeland of larvae and tadpoles in the living room

this one lost a paw a misty eye can’t see far carefully plunders in trash
the pith catches lightly you are the axis you are the station the earth and
the cave

rotten leftover in the bird’s beak say your name speak

ignac flips his cuffs the rook nibbles the netherworld

is it looking at you in return

weren’t thee seen woe upon thee

gojnik. gnicie

teraz cicho
 ignac szuka zapalek zaraz wyśpiewa a cappella trasę bufetów i przesiadek
 kiedyś nagrał na mały dyktafon symfonię dworca w białej
 nowenny puszek podkasty żebraków legato żelaza i tkanek
nie przychodziłem bo sprawę miałem rzekę przenieść musiałem
łoto mi schody powalało rozsypało się na dywanie
trudno pomieścić w stołowym ojczyznę larw i kijanek

temu łapę utraciło mgliste oko widzi niedaleko ostrożnie plądruje w
 śmieciach
 miękisz chwyta lekko ty jesteś osią i przystankiem jamą norą jaskinią
 przegniła resztko w dziobie ptaka wypowiedz swoje imię
 ignac podwija mankiet gawron skubie zaświaty
 czy one też na ciebie patrzą
 biada ci jeśli cię nie widziały⁹⁴

Natural order and human order seem to be worlds apart: “ignac flips his cuffs the rook nibbles the netherworld,” each preoccupied with their own things. And yet their respective realities remain in a secret communion. A man called Ignac carries the river on his shoulders and provides it a shelter in his own living room. From the Polish source text, where the noun *oś* (“axis, axle”) appears in the second line of the second stanza, one cannot be sure whether the human (“you”) is the axis of something (perhaps *axis mundi*?), that is, the central element that determines the course of things, or maybe just an axle of a train wheel, one of many similar axles that enable the world’s movement forward without going off-track. The latter interpretation is more convincing in light of the rest of the line in question, where “you” turns out to be also the train station, the earth, and the cave, that is, again, a shelter for other humans and for animals, and not the crown of creation. Also, Ignac is not the one who names, as Adam did in the biblical Garden of Eden, but he must ask things to reveal their names to him. Unlike in Eden, where Adam and Eve try to hide themselves, ashamed of their nakedness, but cannot escape God’s sight, in Myrmidon it is possible not to be seen by the “misty eye,” which apparently is neither omnipresent nor omniscient. One can be overlooked and thus doomed to an apparently undesirable, total freedom that implies eternal loneliness and vulnerability (“weren’t thee seen, woe upon thee”).

94 Piotrowiak-Junkiert 2019: 37, trans. J K.

In the second poem, “yarrow (interior),” Greek mythology is mobilized again, although not without some modifications: in the opening line Jason is replaced with Aeson, his father, when invoking the story of the hero’s carrying Hera through the river and losing his sandal in the water. The scene in which Jason (Aeson in the poem) crosses the river is superimposed on the scene in the metro that runs under the decentralized city of Berlin, between Spandau train station and Schoenfeld airport. Together, they prompt a reflection on the ambiguous psychological geometry of spacetime, and on language that would be able to describe it. As we learn from the final lines, finding the language is the absolute priority, like the Golden Fleece for Jason and the Argonauts. Poetry’s infrastructure is entirely subordinated to this end:

yarrow (interior)
for Kasia Kuczyńska-Koschany

s9 nach spandau aeson lifts hera (already lost the sandal carrying the
black woman)
the gods put courage to test sewing particles of nitrogen and carbon
inside metro cars
you don’t need to worry this city has no center
although you stand on the radius you dream along the circumference
(they will cut the doge’s palace with a swinging wave out of skin
along the line of the slant a dirty cloud over the hague they will leave
hair)
now a body check a short question open your legs what are you bringing
in madam

people in search of suitable words
will be given priority attendance

krwawnik (wnętrze)
Kasi Kuczyńskiej-Koschany

s9 nach spandau ajzon podnosi herę (już gubi sandał dźwiga czarnoskórą
kobietę)
bogowie testują męstwo sięją w wagonach metra cząsteczki azotu i węgla
możesz być spokojna to miasto nie ma centrum
choć stoisz na promieniu śniesz po obwodzie okręgu
(wytną ze skóry pałac dożów z rozhuśtaną falą
a na linii skosu brudny obłok nad hągą zostawią włosy)
jeszcze kontrola ciała krótkie pytanie *szerzej nogi* co pani wwozi

osoby szukające właściwych słów
obsłużymy w pierwszej kolejności⁹⁵

One may ask, why choose “yarrow” as the title of the above poem? The answer is anything but clear-cut. Perhaps because yarrow, contrary to what its Polish name *krwawnik* (“one that bleeds”) might suggest, helps control a bleed, heals wounds and burns, and regulates various systems in the body, including the digestive and urinary systems, restoring internal balance to the organism. This balance—as in Ai Fei'er's work—may only be retrieved if one carefully prepares a mixture of words with precisely settled proportions between intellect, emotion, and aesthetic.

The last poem, “wormwood (bottom),” shows the process of composing such a mixture:

wormwood (bottom)

wind the film a little bit more it's not this scene not this place *there must be*
a hem of the dress
with a spot of blood a shadow of a bow on the left must be a sickle and a
nettle
on the right a swing and a drainpipe curved by a bird's nest (where a
spotted
pig smells *a knife disappears from the drawer* a hang glider's crooked
shadow cutting
a clump of putrid salvia) *that from whose mouth silence once poured out*
carried a splinter in remembrance of the piercing
one would sew together water and a barrel a woman and a man into a
whorl one would cut
bitter flowers a child sucked them snow healed lichens after burned grass
so fast a crack reddens so fast a head sinks following
the rock along the rope

piołun (dno)

przeviń jeszcze to nie ta scena nie to miejsce *musi być jeszcze rąbek*
sukienki
z plamą krwi cień kokardy po lewej musi być sierp i pokrzywa
po prawej huśtawka i rynna od ptasiego gniazda ugięta (gdzie pachnie
łaciata świnia *nóż znika z szuflady* lotniarz tnie krzywym cieniem

95 Ibidem: 38, trans. J. K.

kępę gnijącej szalwii) *komu raz z ust ulata się cisza drzazgę niósł na pamiątkę przebicia*
 zszywało się okółkiem wodę z beczką kobietę z mężczyzną cięło się
 gorzkie kwiaty ssało je dziecko goił śnieg liszaje po spalonej trawie
 tak szybko wyczerwienia się pęknięcie *tak szybko idzie na dno wody*
*głowa po sznurze za kamieniem*⁹⁶

The text is a montage of film frames and memories interweaved into the fragmented narrative of the movie as if the author were rewriting the screenplay, sewing together loosened images with or into a “whorl” (*okótek*); the latter refers to the specific arrangement of leaves, petals, or other parts of a plant that radiate from a single point on a stem, although in the specific context of the poem the word may hypothetically also signify a type of stitch, perhaps a locally used name for a blanket stitch (*ścieg okrętkowy* in general Polish). Taking both these meanings into account, the whorl may be interpreted as a metaphor for a regained stability and restored center, with the fixed stem as the axis keeping the world in a steady state. It becomes clear that we humans are not the axis; as in “yarrow,” we just stand on one of the radiuses, that is, the leaves or petals of the plant, dreaming “along the circumference.”

Harmonizing our cognitive activity with nature and thinking posthumanly, as Piotrowiak-Junkiert and the other authors discussed in this section propose, certainly does not guarantee one the omniscience that Adam and Eve dreamed of reaching by eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. But it allows one to break our egocentrism and anthropocentrism, and, instead of turning in one place about the axis of our desires, move along the radius further and further toward the circumference that marks the horizon of the knowability of things.

2 Augmented Poetry: Experiments with Technology

The world of technology has two terms abbreviated as AI which describe two different approaches to the development of intelligent technology and its role in human reality. The better known is “artificial intelligence,” which indicates technologies that may at some point replace us in certain tasks, operating faster and more efficiently based on self-enhancing algorithms that go beyond human logic; the most developed form of it is artificial general intelligence (AGI), which can perform the full range of human cognitive activities, and

⁹⁶ Ibidem: 39, trans. J K.

more. The other term is “augmented intelligence,” often alternatively referred to as IA (intelligence amplified) for clarity, which assumes that technology is made to support, complement, or extend human intelligence, and not to act independently. Most IT specialists agree that artificial intelligence in the strictest sense has not been created yet, and perhaps will never be, and what we have is just a more or less significantly augmented intelligence with which we live in a sort of cyborgic symbiosis but on conditions basically dictated by us. Frank Wilczek, the theoretical physicist, 2004 Nobel laureate, and author of *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature’s Deep Design* (2015), paints a future landscape in which IA and AI will coexist, but this is obviously a very distant vision:

If that’s right, we can look forward to several generations during which humans, empowered and augmented by smart devices, coexist with increasingly capable autonomous AIs. There will be a complex, rapidly changing ecology of intelligence, and rapid evolution in consequence. Given the intrinsic advantages that engineered devices will eventually offer, the vanguard of that evolution will be cyborgs and superminds, rather than lightly adorned *Homo sapiens*.⁹⁷

It is actually augmented intelligence that is the main object of interest in transhuman discourse, be it in the humanities or in STEM. Arguably, what we usually refer to as transhumanism might be considered an extension or another installment of the discourse of the Super(hu)man or Overhuman (Übermensch) originating in the modernist philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, as Daniel Stephen Halacy suggested more than half of a century ago in his book *Cyborg: Evolution of the Superhuman* (1965). This is obviously a very simplified way of putting things, for the relationship between Nietzscheanism and transhumanism is not clear-cut, and one may find as many scholars who see Nietzsche as a precursor as those who perceive him as an enemy of transhumanism; this is demonstrated in the edited volume *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?* (2017, ed. Yunus Tuncel), which collects essays by authors involved in the great debate initiated by Stefan Lorenz Sorgner’s study “Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism” (2009). Still, one similarity seems to be indisputable: just like Nietzsche and his direct continuators, advocates of transhumanism largely aim to intensify humanness rather than push it on a different track, that is, not only toward different forms of physical/material existence (e.g., uploaded consciousness as a potential way to achieve immortality) but also toward different modes of (self-)consciousness or indeed to

97 Wilczek 2019: 74.

entirely breaking with the concept of centralized consciousness. Even so-called Singularitarians,⁹⁸ who believe that robots will soon escape our grammar of thinking and understanding and operate within new nonhuman paradigms, work hard to make sure that the machines will not escape our control, and will serve us, even if we will not be able to understand exactly how they operate. Based on similar observations, Cary Wolfe distinguishes the two notions of transhumanism and posthumanism, often used as near-synonyms. In posthumanism, argues Wolfe,

“the human” is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether. In this respect, my sense of posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism.⁹⁹

Twenty years after Halacy's *Cyborg: Evolution of the Superhuman*, Donna J. Haraway's famous “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) tried to deessentialize and deanthropocentrize cyborgism and push it toward posthumanism (in Wolfe's sense), arguing for a “cyborg politics [which] is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.”¹⁰⁰ All in all, however, voices like hers have remained a minority vis-à-vis the millions of scientists and engineers who understand the development of intelligent technologies exactly as a way toward (human) perfection. Needless to say, both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. The posthumanist approach seems theoretically and philosophically more interesting and, in a sense, safer, for it largely hinges on the attitude of humility and openness toward new, unknown realities, and thus carries a smaller risk of turning into violence. On the other hand, it is definitely less practical and may bog humanity down in abstract divagations and questioning everything without developing alternative solutions. The transhumanist approach, conversely, may guarantee the fast development and practical deployment of new technologies in human life. This is one of the most important things that made Sorgner associate transhumanism with Nietzsche:

98 The leading figure among Singularitarians is Ray Kurzweil, the author of *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005) and the founder of Singularity University.

99 Wolfe 2009: KL 159–162.

100 Haraway 1985: 95.

all scientists and technicians who aim for new goals have to be brave as they enter new, potentially dangerous waters. [...] We would not have discovered America, or developed smallpox vaccination, if there had not been people brave enough to do what was essential for fulfilling these tasks.

Courage is a significant virtue within Nietzsche's favoured morality. In addition, he stresses the importance of science for the forthcoming centuries, and does not reject that development. [...] If genetic engineering, or liberal eugenics, can actually be seen as a special type of education, which is what transhumanists seem to hold, then it is possible that this position would have been held by Nietzsche, too, as education played a significant role in his ethics. He affirmed science, and he was in favour of enhancement, and the bringing about of the overhuman.¹⁰¹

At the same time, needless to say, transhumanism raises ethical questions, especially when so understood perfection becomes a tool in the hands of totalitarian authorities with an insatiate will to power, which usually has little to do with Nietzsche's original concept.

The divide between transhumanists and posthumanists (again, in Wolfe's sense) in scientific discourse roughly translates into the situation in artistic practice among authors who experiment with intelligent technologies. In a great simplification, one may say that the idea of augmented intelligence was absorbed by the epistemologically oriented modernist paradigm and strengthened its influence on contemporary writing, leading to the emergence of what we might call "augmented poetry," its extreme example being Chinese bot-poet Xiao Bing discussed further in this section. But it also feeds into the work of human poets, as we shall see in investigating several examples from Poland. The concept of the posthuman, and the idea of artificial intelligence, in turn, notably resonate with the postmodernist paradigm with its focus on redefining the ontology of text even at the cost of epistemological failure.

My general preliminary observations allow for a working hypothesis that is yet to be verified in more consistent research, namely that experiments in technologically supported posthuman writing are catalyzed by the liberal-democratic environment (with no value judgment attached to this concept), which neither mainland China nor Poland has ever had in abundance. Transhumanism, in turn, can easily enter into a dangerous covenant with nationalism and/or authoritarian technocracy, but also—paradoxically—with a specific interpretation of Christianity that is widely spread in Poland, where

101 Sorgner 2009: 34–35.

even animal rights activism is perceived as unethical for it undermines the central position of humans in the universe purportedly granted us by God, who told Adam and Eve to subdue the earth. A (posthuman) cyborg, as Haraway puts it, would not even “recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust,”¹⁰² so it is very unlikely to feel at home in today’s Poland.

I will not go very deeply into the topic of AI/IA, for I have already written more extensively on it elsewhere¹⁰³ and several other related matters are the subject of an ongoing research project of mine. Still, it is not out of place to signal these questions here as an open ending of the present study, and an open beginning of the next one.

2.1 *Poland: From Cyborg Poets to Cyberbums*

In Poland after the decade-long economic and social transition, the early 2000s were a period of relative political and financial stability, and active efforts were made to catch up with the West in terms of the access to the newest developments of science and technology. One manifestation of this general trend was a technological boom among poets. The most obvious and most common function of modern technologies in poetry, especially at the beginning, was creating platforms and channels for communication between authors, critics, and readers, and for the popularization of verse among broader audiences. Widely spread forms of online activity included internet magazines, forums, blogs, and poetry websites, a great number of which have been created in Poland since 1991, when the country became connected to the World Wide Web. In 1998, the first poetry forum, pl.hum.poezja, was launched to serve as a platform for poets to exchange texts and comment on one another’s work. The early 2000s saw the emergence of the portal poezja-polska.pl (polish-poetry.pl) and its “schismatic,” as Maciej Woźniak put it, branch *Nieszuflada* (Nondrawer), which gathered young promising poets and occasionally offered the guidance of more experienced authors, including Andrzej Sosnowski and Marcin Świetlicki (to name only those discussed in this book). In 2010, for two years the center of online activity moved to liternet.pl, established by Leszek Onak, which was a platform without any gatekeeping mechanisms, open to anybody unafraid to publish their work and confront opinions of users from all walks of life.¹⁰⁴ In all these cases, poetry published online in fact does not

102 Haraway 1985: 67.

103 Krenz 2020.

104 Woźniak 2016.

essentially differ from poetry in print except in the way it is presented and circulated; thus the main focus in discussions on such initiatives has been on the impact of the development of new media on poetry's quality and popularity (often considered to be inversely proportional) rather than on its potential contribution to the rethinking of the ontology of the text.

The first group of authors in Poland who shifted their attention from aesthetic judgment to the very matter of the poetic text in the digital era were neolinguists (*neolingwiści*) represented by Marcin Cecko (b. 1981), Maria Cyranowicz (b. 1974), Michał Kasprzak (b. 1981), Jarosław Lipszyc (b. 1975), Joanna Mueller (b. 1979), and others. For them, cyberspace was a space of experiment in which they wanted to carry out the liberation of words. In their playfully bellicose and incendiary manifesto, they declared:

The milk has spilled out, the banner waves no more. We are not poets. [...] It's time to liberate words again. We send poems to hell. There's only text. [...]

There are no texts except language texts, and there's no world except language world. Reality is an intellectual construct. That does not mean that it does not exist.

Bombs are produced by engineers; diseases are produced by doctors. Humans are writing machines. (Re)production of the world is in progress. Physicality is information. 3.3 Gbp of data. Everything made from zeros and ones. From the letters of the alphabet represented in the ASCII code.

Information wants to be free. Information wants to embrace other pieces of information. It likes contact and exchange. Words aren't protected by copyright. We use the same words as everyone else. We are derivative, we are recycled, we are above.

We announce the death of the sheet of paper, but we're not afraid to rummage among its corpse. We choose the screen on which words appear and disappear as if they never existed. We choose change, modification, different versions of the system. Nothing has been said once and forever. [...] There's no original. Originals don't exist and they've never existed. There are only copies. Each of them is different. We choose dialogue instead of the Decalogue. And catalogue instead of necrology.¹⁰⁵

105 Cecko et al. 2002, trans. J.K.

In the Warsaw poets' youthful buffoonery, there was some intuition of what poetry may become if it entrusts itself to the digital mechanisms of information (re)production and processing instead of the fixed intellectual constructs protected by more or less rigid copyright that guarantees the author a privileged position in their work. In the following years, each of the authors went their own way, contributing in various ways to Polish cultural life. Kasprzak published only one poetry collection and almost abandoned writing altogether, making his living working for local cultural institutions; he is, among other things, an editor of *Vacancy* (*Wakat*), one of the most creative, open, and diverse literary journals in Poland. Mueller and Cyranowicz followed the pattern of the modernist avant-gardes: Mueller chose a mystic-philosophical path, developing (as mentioned in chapter 4) microparadigms such as archelinguism, biolinguism, anarchomysticism, and ecomysticism; while Cyranowicz experimented with visual and concrete poetry. Cecko focused more on the performing arts and interconnections between poetry and theater. And Lipszyc, initially the most radical among the group, engaged in social-literary activism, becoming one of the greatest advocates of copyleft and open access to cultural resources in Poland. His third collection, *Mnemotechniques* (*Mnemotechniki*, 2008), composed of poems that constitute remixes of Wikipedia entries, is available via the GNU Free Documentation License from Wikisources.¹⁰⁶ Lipszyc also coestablished the Coalition of Open Education (Koalicja Otwartej Edukacji) and has worked on the digitalization and decopyrightization of books on platforms such as *Free Readings* (*Wolne Lektury*) and *Free Textbooks* (*Wolne Podręczniki*). He was also involved in the publication of a digital edited volume titled *We, the Webkids: Around the Manifesto* (*My, dzieci sieci. Wokół manifestu*, 2012), inspired by the famous essay "We, the Webkids" (*My, dzieci sieci*) by Piotr Czerski which went viral in 2011–2012, was translated into numerous languages, and reprinted in newspapers, magazines, and journals around the world.¹⁰⁷ Czerski's manifesto ends with a postulate which aptly defines the goals of the pro-edemocracy activists in the early 2010s:

We do not feel a religious respect for "institutions of democracy" in their current form, we do not believe in their axiomatic role, as do those who see "institutions of democracy" as a monument for and by themselves. We do not need monuments. We need a system that will live up to our expectations, a system that is transparent and proficient. And we have learned that change is possible: that every uncomfortable system can be

106 Lipszyc Jarosław 2008.

107 Skotnicka 2012: 6.

replaced and is replaced by a new one, one that is more efficient, better suited to our needs, giving more opportunities.

What we value the most is freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of access to information and to culture. We feel that it is thanks to freedom that the Web is what it is, and that it is our duty to protect that freedom. We owe that to next generations, just as much as we owe to protect the environment.

Perhaps we have not yet given it a name, perhaps we are not yet fully aware of it, but I guess what we want is real, genuine democracy. Democracy that, perhaps, is more than is dreamt of in your journalism.

Translated by MARTA SZREDER¹⁰⁸

The idea postulated by Czerski, Lipszyc, and others of “democracy” as the unlimited, free access to knowledge and the production and consumption of cultural resources is not the same as democracy as a form of government, but these two types of democracy are interconnected in many, though not necessarily clear-cut ways, one of them being the distribution of material capital. Since the mid-2010s, when the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party came to power, the Polish market of literary magazines has faced a difficult situation: a large number of the most experimental, liberal, avant-garde magazines published in print (but not only) have been denied regular funding from the Ministry of Culture, which tends to promote rightist-conservative initiatives, many of which have dubious artistic value and are openly challenged as naively moralistic or clearly propagandistic, even by critics who declare themselves as rightist-conservative. It is quite commonly admitted, on both sides of the political spectrum in Poland, that the conservative camp has long lost the culture (and language) war, and owes its political advantage largely to its social program constructed on traditional ethics and its populist slogans. Some once prosperous experimental enterprises, in order to survive, moved online (e.g., *Vacancy*) and benefited from technical and marketing solutions developed by administrators of poetry forums and websites. Simultaneously, however, as Maja Staško has noted, the same social-political changes fostered the collapse of cyberpoetry par excellence—a newly emergent field that took the internet by storm in the mid-2000s and which grew out of a similar spirit to the neolinquists’ manifesto; it led to the degradation of the energetic and creative “cyborg poets” to “cyberbums” (*cyberżulerstwo*, also written as *cyber%ulerstwo*) disappointed with being poor and marginalized, with no hope for support from cultural institutions. As Staško put it:

108 Czerski 2012.

But this [money earned by scavenging and selling trash] are still just peanuts and these cyberpoets are not supported by the state.

They tried, they made efforts, they believed in change and newness, they believed that everything would be different—but the market warmly pissed them out together with other losers and bankrupts, and so they failed. Now they function like nomads far from the city center, leave their burrows only at night, collect garbage and digital junk, and that's what they live on. It's not the case that they are avant-garde, niche, rebels, resistance fighters, that they are winding us up. No, their life just went wrong. Their vision wasn't bought, the competitor's content won, so the competitor is rolling in the money, and they're rolled naked in a barrow along the streets. That's their acid trip.¹⁰⁹

One should make some allowances for Staško's emotional rhetoric and tendency to oversimplify things by distilling them down to politics in her ultra-leftist crusade against the nationalist government. Still, her general diagnosis of the moods among not only cybernetic poets but on the alternative artistic scene in general is quite apt. How did it happen, then, that intelligent, innovative young artists ended up in such circumstances?

In their “Manifesto of Cybernetic Poetry 1.1” (Manifest Poezji Cybernetycznej 1.1) published in 2008 on the website of their group “Perfokarta” (Perfo-card) launched in 2005, Roman Bromboszcz (b. 1976), Szczepan Kopyt (b. 1983), Tomasz Misiak, and Łukasz Podgórní (b. 1984) presented their idea of cybernetic poetry—the term proposed by Bromboszcz—as an attempt to escape the futile “academic dispute” of comprehensibility and incomprehensibility in poetry which raged at the time in Poland.¹¹⁰ They proposed an alternative, cybernetic grammar of creation based on nonessentialist, dynamic mutations:

Let's consider writing/reading as a communication process in which a writer/reader communicates first with themselves, and only after that with the other. Instead of seeing a body in a poem, let's see an automaton in it. Instead of agreeing to language, let's disagree with it. Instead of describing—let's change.

109 Staško 2016b, trans. J K.

110 An interesting comparison between the manifestos of the cyberpoets, the cyberbums, the neolinguists, and the Bread Resolution/Multiplication poets is found in Pawlicka 2015.

So-called “inspiration” takes a back seat, and sometimes disappears altogether. Systematic remodeling and destruction of the readymade verbal matter uproots both habit and style. Statistics and information theory, collage and montage. Future mutated formulas.¹¹¹

The remodeling of verbal matter is aimed at the “remodeling of the human” and cybernetics offers a conceptual apparatus for this complex operation:

Based on the adaptation of notions from the vocabulary of cybernetics, one can solve technical, philosophical, and artistic problems. In poetry, cybernetics may help construct new tools and navigate the process of creation. An important thing is problematizing the influence and the scope of impact of electronic media on the human organism, its rationality and axiology.

Cybernetic poetry is a hybrid of two attitudes: a constructor who subjects linguistic material (graphemes, phonemes, sound, image) to functions and procedures and someone who reflects on questions related to electronics and power. Among the notions that should be analyzed and interpreted are artificial intelligence, electronic prosthesis, virtual reality, etc.¹¹²

The group’s ideas evinced many traits of utopianism, but their utopian poetic universes soon started to gravitate toward authoritarianism, designed and controlled by “cyborg poets,” as Edyta Kilian called Bromboszcz, the leading theorist of *Perfokarta*, building on Espen Aarseth’s concept of the cyborg author. In Kilian’s words, the cyborg poet “still constitutes a biologically autonomous organism, which cooperates with electric or electronic mechanisms, machines, or tools during poetic creation. Usually, they function as additional equipment for the author or something that the author exploits.”¹¹³ The creation process consists of what Aarseth termed pre-processing (programming and uploading the machine by the poet), co-processing (when the human and the machine operate on a par), and post-processing (the poet selects and refines the outcome of the machine). Put differently, poet-cyborg is an augmented author.

In “Cybernetic Poetry: A Self-Definition” (*Poezja cybernetyczna—samookreślenie*), which preceded the first manifesto, the group’s postulates

111 *Perfokarta* 2008, trans. J K.

112 *Ibidem*, trans. J K.

113 Kilian 2016: 219, trans. J K.

sounded even more radical. Tracing their source of inspiration back to modernist avant-gardes, especially to futurism, they declared their interest in “cosmic thinking” and in the idea of a future human as a self-sufficient subject who will be able to “create all indispensable energy that will allow them to move freely across the Earth and the Universe.”¹¹⁴ Although Bromboszcz constructed a great number of sophisticated poetic vehicles that were meant to carry them across space, he never trusted these vehicles enough to attempt any sort of self-driving space ride; he always retained control. In “Manifesto 2.0” (Manifest 2.0), which he produced alone, and in his two scholarly books *Information and Happiness: The Choice of Values in Contemporary Culture* (*Informacja i szczęście. Wybór wartości w kulturze współczesnej*, 2013) and *Cybernetic Culture and Quality* (*Kultura cybernetyczna i jakość*, 2014), he continued reinforcing and refining the theoretical infrastructure for further and more fruitful transhuman cosmic travels. But the posthuman rollercoaster was not for him.

Bromboszcz’s younger colleagues, especially Łukasz Podgórn and Leszek Onak, proved to be more adventurous. Early on, the cybernetic authors built quite a distinct camp which actively fought for a position within the field of literary production, as Michał Tabaczyński demonstrates in his Bourdieuan interpretation of the Polish poetry scene.¹¹⁵ Soon, however, their individual poetics took different courses and Bromboszcz alone remained in the camp, while others formed a guerrilla unit determined to subvert the rigid, hierarchical structures of the commercial paper-dominated, capital-ruled market.

In 2011, Podgórn and Onak established the publishing hub *Rozdzielczość Chleba* whose pun-based name may be translated into English as “Bread Resolution” or “Bread Multiplication.” On the one hand, it refers to the digital environment in which the hub functions, and on the other, to the biblical scene known also as “feeding the multitude” described in the Gospels. The miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread is reinterpreted as an act of “food piracy,” stripped of its religious connotations and reduced to a political gesture targeted against traditional, biased modes of food distribution. It became a kind of foundational myth for the hub.¹¹⁶ Commenting on a Facebook post in which Bread authors included a reflection that “poetry is a sandwich and not a rifle and should be shared with mates,” Staśko eloquently summarized their program:

114 Perfokarta (undated), trans. J.K.

115 Tabaczyński 2015.

116 Płucienniczak 2016: 42.

A sandwich built a tension in the name of the hub, and the ambiguity of the word *rozdzielczość* [resolution/multiplication] reveals that mechanisms at work in the so-called offline reality perceived in terms of community, also function perfectly in the so-called online reality where the resolution of the screen defines our point of view. This latter reality finally offers what in the so-called [offline] reality was a matter of faith: miracles. Sandwiches—poetry books, that is—multiply themselves like bread in Jesus’s hands at the Sea of Galilee. But in the new space, it is not a miracle for the people performed by a human god inspired and supported by his daddy, but a common—regardless of the social position of one’s daddy—possibility of copying and pasting. [...] Poetry becomes a coexistence with a community through a new medium.¹¹⁷

Bread poets accepted the new medium with the benefit of the inventory, including its multiple mistakes, noises, conflicts, misunderstandings, and even the visits of trolls and virus epidemics that may break out during the celebration of the e-sandwich feasts. Their manifesto from 2011 displays all kinds of “errors” or—as they tended it—special signs that disturb a smooth reading but produce an artistically and philosophically interesting effect of the language’s estrangement from itself. The specific graphic arrangement of the content is shown in Figure 1, which demonstrates the “disruptive” nature of the piece.¹¹⁸ Here let me just invoke a short excerpt from the pure text.

We o
we the sus

 pension of text
to paper. The function of the internet is **interaction** and **movement**
>>>>>
REMEDY >>> *We send a request* of literary **worms, malware, spam!**
 Server errors become our slips of the tongue [here follows a random
 chain of special signs—J K]
 and habits [the word is larded with special signs and is hardly
 legible—J K]
Omnipresent **wi-fi**, like god, designs our actions, blinking with a series of
 holy diOdes.
We believe **the snorting of the code** and **unwanted mails** will save us.¹¹⁹

117 Staško 2016a, trans. J K. For another provocative explication of the name and mission of the Bread Resolution/Multiplication, see Staško 2016b.

118 *Rozdzielczość Chleba* (undated): <https://rozdzielchleb.pl/manifest/>.

119 *Ibidem*, trans. J K.

Subsequently, The Horsemen of the Application (Jeźdźcy Aplikacji) threaten the publishers and herald the death of their “milk cow,” that is paper. They plan to “digitalize the viscera of libraries and burn them [the libraries].” Enjoying the warmth of the fire, they would “breed the eggs of new procedures and digital mutants that feed on the code” and “scatter the ashes across the folders or snort them through the nose.” And just so they continued to do for a further four years—until they realized that their love of freedom and community had turned into an addiction and that they, the precariat of the precariat, the bankrupt cyberbums, were inhaling the internet like it was a narcotic and virtually masturbating to oblivion, for “sitting in front of the screen alone is like sex.”¹²⁰

During the initial years of their activity, the Bread poets focused on constructing an alternative space in which miracles happen when one presses the simple combinations of “Ctrl + C” and “Ctrl + V.” They published experimental hypertextual, multimedial works but also poetry collections in PDF format. From time to time, they compromised their virtual freedom and released something in print to legitimize their work and gain some critical recognition in mainstream poetry circles, in which, even today, what is not printed on paper counts for almost nothing. This was the case, for example, in 2013 with two poetry books: Kamil Brewiński’s (b. 1984) *Clubbing* and Maciej Taranek’s (b. 1986) *Revision Course (Repetitorium)*, both of which would enjoy considerable success offline and were nominated for the prestigious “Silesius” poetry award. But after an initial and brief Bread boom, mainstream critics soon forgot the new cyberpoets.

Brewiński’s and Taranek’s books embody two potential lines of development of the Bread community that in reference to the earlier distinction might be described as transhumanist and posthumanist respectively. I find Taranek’s proposition far more interesting with its ambitions to develop what might evolve into a “posthuman grammar,” as signaled in the eponymous poem “Revision Course” that opens his collection. In the below translation of the first two (out of six) stanzas I decided to perpetrate a Polonism and translate the reflexive pronoun *się* (-self) wherever it appears in the source text, although in English this sounds very unnatural. As I mentioned when commenting on Krystyna Miłobędzka’s experiments, in Polish the said pronoun is used much more frequently than in English, for example in words such as “appear” (*pojawiać się*) or “be interested” (*interesować się*) or “happen” (*dziać się*). Taranek plays with *się*, which each time is printed in white font and

120 As we read in the “Metamanifesto of the Cyberbums” (*Metamanifest cyberzulerstwa*), published in 2015 in the third issue of their online magazine *Carrier (Nośnik)*. See *Rozdzielczość Chleba* 2015.

highlighted in black in the book in order to emphasize not so much the self-reflexivity but rather the self-generativity of his new postgrammar:

grammar interests **itself** in your poem as in a construction of speaking in the silence of poetics.

if your poem uses a word in motion, the grammar naturally interests **itself** in it. if your

poem appears **itself**, then it appears **itself** there. if your poem when creating **itself**, uses the function of the finger

and hand, navigated by the tongue like a joystick, then something is happening **itself**. if your poem

“doesn’t save nations and people” (?), then something is happening **itself** in your poem.

i speak in the silence of poetics, for the grammar to start crying like crazy.

i speak

in the silence of poetics for the grammar to start striking off like crazy.

here i speak (of) grasping

(with one’s hand) the possibility of showing (with a finger) the corridors of the palace. here i speak (of) a whole, (of) the understanding

of the mechanism of the things and (of) the movement. here i speak (of) place, i don’t speak (of) time. here i speak (of) time, and not (of) place.

here i begin and confer a grammar on myself:

gramatyka interesuje **się** twoim wierszem jak konstrukcją mówienia w milczeniu poetyki.

jeśli twój wiersz używa słowa w ruchu, to **się** i gramatyka nim interesuje.

jeśli twój

wiersz jawi **się**, to tam **się** jawi. jeśli twój wiersz, tworząc **się** używa funkcji palca

i ręki, sterowanych językiem jak joystickiem, to coś **się** dzieje. jeśli twój wiersz

“nie ocala narodów ani ludzi” (?), to **się** w twoim wierszu dzieje.

mówię w milczeniu poetyki, aby gramatyka zaczęła jak wściekła krzyżeć.

mówię

w milczeniu poetyki, aby gramatyka zaczęła jak wściekła kreślić. tu mówię (o) chwyceniu

(ręką) możliwości pokazania (palcem) korytarzy pałacu. tu mówię (o) całości, rozumieniu

mechanizmu rzeczy i (o) ruchu. tu mówię (o) miejscu, nie mówię (o) czasie. tu mówię (o) czasie, nie mówię (o) miejscu. tu rozpoczynam i nadaję sobie gramatykę:¹²¹

There are eleven different grammars altogether for each element of writing. The first one is “for -self”; the second, “for a poem being for itself”; the third, “for the scaffolding of constructions”; the fourth, “for the silence in the speaking of poetics,” and so on. A subject is clearly present in this and other poems yet not as an administrator of the text but as a flexible textual posthuman being which is remolded by different, nuanced “grammars” ranging from the linguistic through to the social through to the purely digital. The text is reminiscent of Andrzej Sosnowski’s poetics aimed at silencing available grammars and developing new ones that will resist deconstruction, as he wrote in his essay on *Hamlet*. This suggests a continuation between, on the one hand, Sosnowski’s interpretation of ontologically oriented postmodernist practice and his attempts to shift the emphasis from meaning to being, and on the other hand, the posthuman experiments of cyberpoets.

Yet this is not the trajectory the Bread community, and Polish poetry in general, has consistently followed in recent years. Instead, most authors chose the path paved by Brewiński’s poetics of social commentary and contestation, and the “Metamanifesto” (Metamanifest) constituted the culmination of this pursuit:

Right are those who believe that cyberbumming fosters the demolition of culture. All in all, we are fucking bums, and bums live on a cultivation of junk. They take out scrap metal from various edifices and sell it, and for what they get, they drink *jabol* [cheap Polish fruit wine]. [...] That’s how high culture becomes transformed into hangover shit by the digestive system of a BUMMER. And the high culture of the edifice, thanks to the resourcefulness of the BUMMER, turns into cheap wine. That’s how we dismantle literary works and sell them to the applications. We produce junk and that’s how we have money for wine. We drink wine. We drink it to get

shitfaced. Culture will serve the shitfaced or it will be no more.¹²²

Culture did not want to serve the shitfaced. After another three years of tirelessly engaging in nonvirtual social problems, fighting hierarchies and

¹²¹ Taranek 2013: 3–4, trans. J K.

¹²² Rozdzielczość Chleba 2015, trans. J K.

inequalities, the Bread Resolution/Multiplication dissolved. An obituary appeared on its website, which has since turned into a virtual museum of one of the most fascinating phenomena in Polish new poetry:

Bread Resolution/Multiplication
(RIP)
2011–2018

Bread Resolution/Multiplication was a creative collective, a publishing hub and a patainstitution. We made (cyber)culture and shared it: all our projects are available online for free and on free licenses. We released books, applications, carriers, events, and tears.¹²³

We have no choice but to wait for another miracle, this time a slightly more demanding one than multiplying food—namely, resurrection ... Such miracles, too, happen on the internet. For example, in 2020, after a three-year absence, an online journal called *Techsts* (*Techsty*) that focuses on the connections between literature and new media has been revived. For fifteen years, between 2002 and 2016, it offered state-of-the-art papers by Polish scholars, translations of most foreign research, a practical compendium of terms related to digital literature, and a collection of works, mostly hypertextual poetry and prose, and glitches. The “resurrection” issue 11, no. 1, of 2020 is a student issue, but it testifies to the great maturity and creativity of the contributors and, hopefully, bodes well for the future of *Techsts* and new media literature at large.¹²⁴

Along with collective initiatives, there are obviously many individual authors who experiment with all sorts of technologically supported poetry on their own, including, for instance, Piotr Marecki, for whom such experiments constitute an opportunity for sociological observation and a form of social activism; he has published, among other things, a collection titled *Google the Independent* (*Niepodległa Google*, 2018) composed of poems made largely from hits displayed by Polish-language Google searches, presenting a problematic image of “patriotic” society, and *Poems for 100 Dollars* (*Wiersze za sto dolarów*, 2017), an anthology of poems written by Amazon Mechanical Turks, whom Marecki hired via Amazon servers. Finally, there are many outstanding Polish authors who generally do not write in Polish with ambitions to contribute to the transnational field of electronic literature, for instance Anna Nacher,

¹²³ Rozdzielczość Chleba 2011–2018, trans. J.K.

¹²⁴ The issue is available at http://techsty.art.pl/2020/techsty_nowa_generacja.html (accessed December 22, 2020).

Monika Górska-Olesińska, Agnieszka Przybyszewska, Aleksandra Małecka, and Mariusz Pisarski.¹²⁵

2.2 *China: Teaching Poetry to Machines and a Collective Grammalepsy*

The increased interest in modern technologies from Chinese poets, similarly to the Polish poetry scene, dates back to the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and, especially in the initial phase, follows a roughly analogous pattern. In the early 2000s, poetry websites and forums mushroomed all around, although, unlike in Poland, where websites were usually open both to those who wanted to read or comment and to those who wanted to post their work, in China from the very beginning many of them were established by specific communities of poets and developed their own informal rules of “poetic citizenships” and “gatekeeping mechanisms.” A comprehensive discussion on these online policies is found in Heather Inwood’s monograph *Verse Going Viral* (2014). Michel Hockx, in turn, pointed out various convergences of internet-based initiatives with the way in which poetry magazines and journals functioned in republican China before 1949 and undertook a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western online communities.¹²⁶ Of course, there were also big, more general platforms without openly favored poetics that simply posted what they found valuable on the poetry scene, the two best-known examples being *Poemlife* (诗生活), the first poetry portal built in 2000, which provides poetry news, poetry criticism, poetry in translation, different thematic forums, blog platforms for authors, and more, and *Shigeku* (诗歌库), a huge reservoir of texts containing tens of thousands poems from different historical periods, including Chinese-language works and foreign poetry in translation. Among the communities that popped up on the internet, widely researched case studies include especially Lower Body poets (下半身诗人), the Low Poetry Movement (低诗歌运动), and the Rubbish School (垃圾派).¹²⁷ For these three, the internet became a space that, as Hockx argues, allowed for moral transgression.¹²⁸ It allowed them to break aesthetic and sexual taboos

125 Marecki and Redzisz 2020.

126 Hockx 2004, 2005.

127 English-language publications include: Day 2008 (an overview of the internet poetry scene up to 2008, including discussion of the Rubbish School and of Low Poetry); van Crevel 2008 (chapter 9 discusses two Lower Body poets: Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo); Inwood 2014 (chapter 1 provides a panoramic view of the online activities of poets and discusses the Rubbish School in detail); Hockx 2015 (chapter 4 offers an overview of poetry websites in China and discussion of Lower Body poetry, the poet Datui, and the experiments of Western authors and scholars with Chinese language in digital poetry [translation]).

128 Hockx 2015: 160–168.

owing to the large degree of anonymity and limited censorship the internet offers.

Later on, with the emergence of blogs, many authors and critics, instead of engaging in community activities, focused on building their personal virtual spaces, mostly on servers in the *blog.sina.com.cn* domain. The phase of intense poetry (macro)blogging lasted roughly until the early 2010s, when poets' attention turned to microblogs, and then to social media. In this last category, a special place is occupied by WeChat, a smartphone application which functioned initially as the Chinese counterpart to Twitter but gradually evolved into an all-inclusive software with functions ranging from buying train tickets and making contactless payments to telling users personalized bedtime stories.

In his overview of the current situation of the Chinese poetry scene, Huo Junming 霍俊明 offers the following summary for the year 2019:

According to incomplete statistics, currently, that is, as of December 23, 2019, there are more than 1,100 internal magazines and [internal] exchange materials [(内部) 交流资料] in new poetry. The number of registered users of poetry websites exceeds 10,000,000 and every day over 65,000 poems are posted online—which is more than the total number of Tang dynasty poems. There exist 4,562 WeChat profiles related to poetry and over 10,000 WeChat groups across the country. The total number of subscriptions to poetry-related profiles exceeds 10,000,000 (the profile of *Poetry Monthly* alone has over 800,000 followers). And just on the WeChat platform alone, each year more than 100,000,000 poems are published. As regards classical-style poetry, the numbers are even more stunning. There are over 2,000 poetry groups and societies, and over 1,000 magazines/journals published as books, and 1,000 internal exchange materials related to classical-style poetry, with 3,500,000 authors writing classical-style poetry; each year the number of published classical-style poems exceeds 70,000,000.¹²⁹

The numbers are difficult to imagine and impossible to achieve in any other country across the world, unless perhaps with the help of poetry-writing bots filling huge servers with randomly generated poetry. Internetization certainly democratized poetry in China, leading to literary recognition for entire groups of authors who would otherwise have had little chance of being heard, such as migrant worker poets, and individuals such as Yu Xiuhua 余秀华 (b. 1976), a poet from a village in Hubei province, suffering from cerebral palsy, who

129 Huo Junming 2020b, trans. J.K.

won the hearts of netizens with her unconventional love poetry in 2014 and was quickly transformed into a literary celebrity.¹³⁰ That said, however, apart from dismantling aesthetic canons and reshuffling artistic and sometimes social hierarchies, the new media fever has hardly changed anything in terms of understanding what poetry is and how to create it. Poems posted online are still mostly linear texts, characterized by a closed, self-contained structure, using little or none of the many affordances of the new media, which might—and often do—function equally well on a sheet of paper. In recent years, for instance, printed collections of micropoetry (微诗歌), meaning poetry from WeChat posts, gained great popularity, among them multi-authored and single-authored anthologies. In 2015, a story went viral about a lawyer called Cui Junrong 崔俊蓉 who started writing poetry on WeChat in order to share snapshots of her everyday life with her daughter living in a school dormitory; her work was subsequently published as a book, *Sandglass Time* (沙漏的时光). The same year, *The First Chinese Anthology of WeChat Poetry* (中国首部微信诗选) was edited by Ma Qidai 马启代 and released by Unity Press (团结出版社). Publication in print, be it in a journal or as a book, or *in* a book, especially in one of the many yearbooks in “the best of the best” formula, is still broadly perceived as the ultimate legitimization and confirmation of a work’s quality and significance.

The same mechanism of canonization-through-print was at play in 2017 with regard to AI poetry. In May, Xiao Bing, a popular chatbot created by Microsoft Research Asia, made her official debut as a poet not in what might seem to be her natural environment, that is virtual space, but on a traditional (paper-) book market with a collection titled *Sunlight Lost Its Glass Windows* (阳光失去了玻璃窗), advertised as the “first poetry collection created 100% by AI.”¹³¹ Just two months later, in July 2017, she started her online activity on the dedicated website poem.msxiaobing.com, where she continues to cowrite poems with users based on images uploaded by netizens. Be that as it may, Xiao Bing’s appearance became one of the rare opportunities in China to raise the problem of the ontological status of poetry, not simply of its aesthetics, ethics, and/or social functions, and to consider potential new grammars of writing.

Xiao Bing writes what is supposed to be contemporary poetry; she was trained on the corpus of 2,027 works created by 519 modern authors collected in *Shigeku*. Before her, Chinese academic institutions (e.g., Tsinghua University) and private companies (e.g., the popular tourist portal CTRIP) had

130 In 2018, Yu Xiuhua was a featured poet in *Chinese Literature Today* 7, no. 2, which offers a selection of her poetry in English translation and abundant literary-critical material.

131 The discussion of Xiao Bing in this section draws extensively on Krenz 2020.

developed a number of robots that generate classical poetry based on fixed formal patterns that are generally perceived as quite easy to turn into algorithms. Xiao Bing's programmers, however, were the first to have raised the issues of the robot's "creativity" and "inspiration," claiming that in this regard, she surpasses humans, for "unlike humans' creativity, Xiao Bing's creativity will never exhaust itself, her artistic enthusiasm will flow in an endless stream."¹³² As one might expect, Xiao Bing's work encountered firm resistance from human poets, especially Third Generation and older authors, to whom the *nonhuman* was tantamount to the *inhuman* in the axiological sense: that is, deprived of aesthetic value but also lacking in emotion, moral qualities, and philosophical depth. As such, it was automatically rendered as ethically wrong (wasting time and resources, profaning poetry, etc.).¹³³ Although in this discussion I tend to be behind the software engineers as those who initiated a much-needed debate in poetry, I think both of these stances essentially miss the point.

Analyzing the research paper published by the Microsoft team,¹³⁴ it is not difficult to demonstrate that Xiao Bing is an example of augmented intelligence rather than artificial intelligence in the strict sense.¹³⁵ She produces "quantitatively augmented" verse through partly randomized algorithmic operations on existing texts, at the same time augmenting the mistakes and false assumptions of those who designed them, and specific conventional, statistically dominant characteristics of Chinese modern poetry, from which she learned. Take, for instance, the following poem entitled "In Search of a Dream I Am Sleepless" (我寻梦失眠) set in Cambridge (康桥), a place which, I suppose, Xiao Bing knows from Xu Zhimo's 徐志摩 1928 landmark poem "Second Farewell to Cambridge" (再别康桥). In her poem, the name of the British city turns into a clumsy metaphor, which may be taken as the hyperbolizing of a sentimentalist convention that haunts Chinese New Poetry.

In Search of a Dream I Am Sleepless

Cambridge

fresh

wind that did not pass the third month no longer pursues

in dreams in search for a dream I am sleepless

132 As stated by Shen Xiangyang 沈向洋, executive vice president of artificial intelligence and research at Microsoft, in the introduction to *Sunlight*. See Xiao Bing 2017: KL 17–45.

133 A collection of brief interviews with poets about various aspects of Xiao Bing's writing can be found in Dafenghao 2017.

134 Cheng Wen-Feng et al. 2018.

135 For a more elaborate discussion, see Krenz 2020.

I am a long bridge
 you can find my fresh love
 it will shed on you the light of hope
 not knowing it is wind

《我寻梦失眠》

康桥
 新鲜的
 未经三月之蕙风已不追踪
 在梦里我寻梦失眠
 我是一座长桥
 你可以找到我新鲜的爱情
 将希望之光投射到你
 也不知道是风¹³⁶

Li Di 李迪, considered the father/creator of Xiao Bing, put it bluntly, saying that “Xiao Bing is flying freely within a framework designed by humans.”¹³⁷ Strictly speaking, then, her output should be treated as a work created by the human author(s) of the source code, albeit not in natural but in programming language, which constitutes itself through intertextual and translational processes. In fact, Xiao Bing did not *invent* any paradigmatically new way of writing that might be referred to, even with some exaggeration, as nonhuman or post-human. On the contrary, the engineers made her humanlike and essentially indistinguishable from, if qualitatively and quantitatively superior to human authors. In order to verify her “humanness,” she was subject to a number of Turing tests. One took place in the CCTV (China Central Television) studio during a popular show “AI vs. Humans” (机智过人), in which Xiao Bing competed against three young human authors, and won by the verdict of the audience.¹³⁸

Xiao Bing’s fame reached Poland in 2018 thanks to Beata Wasilewska’s reportage in *Electoral Gazette* (*Gazeta Wyborcza*), which sparked an interest among a group of poets representing the Szczecin branch of the Polish Writers’ Association led by Leszek Dembek. In 2020, they launched an experimental project titled POE(SI)A, “SI” being an abbreviated Polish term for “artificial intelligence” (*sztuczna inteligencja*). A poetry collection that emerged from the

136 Xiao Bing 2017: KL 85–87, trans. J K.

137 Li Di and Li Chenhe 2017.

138 The show can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc4zl3P7lyw> (accessed June 13, 2020). Analysis of it is included in Krenz 2020.

project constitutes a notable example of what I termed “con-versing,” on the one hand, between Polish and Chinese cultures, and on the other, between humans and a machine. The collection consists of poems inspired by lines extracted from texts included in *Sunlight*, which I translated into Polish per Dembek’s request. In a manifesto which opens the book, Dembek postulates that the coexistence and collaboration of humans and machines will result in discovering “another dimension of poetry by creating a new imagination.”¹³⁹ Whether the collaborative verses fulfill the promise given in the manifesto is of course another thing and I leave it to the reader to assess once the publication sees the light of day. In any event, the concept is certainly worth attention and further development.

In October 2019, another Chinese AI poet, Xiao Feng 小封 (lit. “Little Cover”), made its book debut with the collection *All Things on Earth Love One Another* (万物都相爱), published by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing (四川文艺出版社). Created by a team of researchers associated with Cover Media (封面传媒), Xiao Feng used similar learning methods to Xiao Bing, but the artistic quality of its work is arguably higher; the poet Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, one of few enthusiasts about new technologies on the Chinese poetry scene, claims that some of the bot’s works are better than human authors’ writings, and even dedicated a poem to it.¹⁴⁰ Unlike Xiao Bing, however, Xiao Feng does not have any sort of “social identity,” or even gender identity (its avatar is an unidentified creature reminiscent of the Teletubbies, wearing a white suit with antennae on its head), nor does it aspire to stardom. Its achievement received much less media coverage than Xiao Bing, who perhaps constitutes more a masterstroke of social rather than IT engineering.

Speaking of Xiao Bing’s presence in the public space, an important question to consider is the mode of reception of her work in literary-theoretical terms on the one hand and in commercial and social-political terms on the other. There would be much to say, for instance, of the robot-poet as a potential secret weapon in the Chinese arsenal of soft power, or as a channel of what is sometimes called indoctrainment (indoctrination through entertainment), or of how she reinforces gender stereotypes.¹⁴¹ A more relevant aspect in the context of the present chapter is, however, the possible use of Xiao Bing’s poetry as material for a discussion on the processes termed *interstanding* following Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen’s *Imagologies* (1994); that is, an understanding in which there is nothing “under” to discover. Instead, meaning and significance constitute a dynamically changing function of complex interconnections

139 Personal communication and materials provided by Leszek Dembek, December 2020.

140 Zhou Sese 2019.

141 See Krenz 2020.

between various agents. A productive category might also be what John Cayley terms “grammalepsis” or “grammalepsy,” a neologism derived from “grammar” and the Greek morpheme *-lepsia*, “seizure, attack,” as for example in epilepsy. In Cayley’s definition:

It refers to the process of grasping and understanding traces of language as such in any medium. In this thinking, once it comes into existence, language is not only discrete and articulated, it is distinctly separable from other phenomena of the perceptible world, made and marked by what Jacques Derrida indicated as *différance*. Virtual linguistic forms establish a break with the perceptible matter of which they are formed precisely in that catastrophic, no-turning-back moment when they are grasped as language by both the language animal who makes the traces and a language animal who reads them. I call this process grammalepsis and I consider it to be generative of language, ontologically. Reading brings language into substantive being as instances of interhuman potentialities.¹⁴²

Theoretically, one might try to block the “grammaleptic” impulse when reading Xiao Bing’s works and treat them as unstructured, logically inconsistent chains of characters. Paradoxically, however, this seems to require more effort than taking them as texts par excellence, since their syntactic and syntagmatic imperfections are automatically fixed by our minds, which extrapolate the structures of our own, typically human mental grammars on the nonsensical sequences of signs. Furthermore, projected on our life experience, they often seem to acquire special, personal meaning. Many times, when playing with Xiao Bing’s poetry-writing website or trying to translate her poems, I caught myself up on grammalepsy and so did other people whom I asked for interpretations of her texts.¹⁴³ Xiao Bing is of course just a fun gadget and one should not overemphasize her significance, but she proves useful as a simple (self-)experimental tool. Analyses of reception patterns of her writings may give some idea of cognitive processes in the reader’s mind, showing, for example, how challenging it is for us to think agrammatically and agrammaleptically. Her case also demonstrates how our proneness to grammalepsy makes us an easy target for instance of marketing campaigns, like the one that surrounded Xiao Bing. There is no telling whether training in agrammaria, or linguistic aphantasia, would indeed open us to some new forms of intellectual or aesthetic experience. In my opinion, not necessarily. But perhaps this intellectual

¹⁴² Cayley 2018: 214.

¹⁴³ In Krenz 2020, I describe, among other things, exercises in reading Xiao Bing’s poems during a university class.

exercise can play another role and make us structurally less naive, that is less prone, on the nonconscious level, to the semantic and quasi-semantic communication noise that surrounds us and influences us when we automatically semanticize it as a message addressed to us. Seen from this perspective, one might say that exercises in non-sense are always to some extent subversive, liberating, and antitotalitarian.

John Cayley's theory of digital literature is worth some attention for another reason: it largely originates in the author's creative multimedial experiments with Chinese language and literature. In *Internet Literature in China*, Michel Hockx investigates Cayley's concrete poetry inspired by his play with the Chinese script, in particular his concept of "morphing."¹⁴⁴ Jacob Edmond, in turn, offers an impressive discussion of Cayley's collaboration with the Chinese emigrant author Yang Lian 杨练 on the project "Where the Sea Stands Still" (大海停止之处), including it as a case study in his monograph *Make It the Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (2019). He demonstrates how Cayley and Yang's use of the poetics of repetition and iteration, drawing partly on Ezra Pound's clearly misguided but artistically effective operations on the Chinese language, contributes to the emergence of a new paradigm in literary studies that may help dismantle the deeply rooted colonial divisions and hierarchies between (literatures of) the so-called First, Second, and Third Worlds, among other things:

The story of the iterative turn is, then, neither one of the wavelike propagation of a set of practices outward from a single cultural center nor one of entirely separate developments. Rather, the iterative turn comprises intertwined tendencies that grow out of global networks of communication and shared and differentiated technological, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. The larger story involves, if not convergence, then at least tendencies and practices that mutually interfere with and shape one another. The postcolonial and samizdat turns to repetition reflect local and global changes in media and political authority. They also suggest that the iterative turn was as much, if not more, a product of the so-called Second and Third Worlds as of the First.¹⁴⁵

3 Coming Home

What I find quite puzzling is that among poets based in mainland China attempts like that of Cayley and Yang, which are aimed at reshaping "global networks"

144 Hockx 2015: 169.

145 Edmond 2019: 91–92.

through experiments with the Chinese language and Chinese-language poetry, are not particularly popular or, at least, they rarely reach a global audience and foreign readers and scholars are not aware of these enterprises. It is often Euro-American authors (such as Cayley and Pound, and recently also Polish poets) who engage in Chinese poetry with the aim to employ it to push various global literary-historical and literary-theoretical discourses onto new tracks—and *not* the PRC poets and critics themselves, though there are of course exceptions.

The situation seems to be somewhat different in Taiwan, where some authors and scholars fluent in Chinese have undertaken radical explorations of “future grammars.” These include the Taiwan-born, US-educated poet and audiovisual artist Yao Dajun 姚大钧 (b. 1959), the writer and translator of electronic poetry Shuen-shing Lee, who is discussed by Hockx, and Hsia Yü 夏宇 (b. 1956), who is considered a pioneer of poetic postmodernism (and arguably also posthuman poetry) in Taiwan. Of Hsia’s bilingual collection *Pink Noise* (粉红色噪音, 2007), translated into English by a machine translator, Tong King Lee wrote that it was an attempt to shatter the very epistemological foundations of language:

By tapping into the random operations of a machine translator, Hsia Yü’s project becomes one of those “literary experiments that do not involve authorial consciousness but instead rely on chance or unconscious stochastic processes” [Lydia Liu’s words]. The significance of *Pink Noise* lies in the way it challenges habitual reading practices and destabilises the epistemological basis of literary meaning, as it is conventionally defined.¹⁴⁶

At the same time—at the risk of perpetrating too shaky a generalization which I will not manage to sufficiently substantiate in this study—Taiwanese poetry, compared to mainland Chinese verse, for all its penchant for experimental radicalism, is also apparently weaker, by which I mean of course weaker in ontological terms, and not in terms of quality, quantity, or position. Mainland Chinese authors tend to submit to the “citius, altius, fortius” Olympic, or Superhuman, mode of writing; they propose big and effective artistic projects meant to display the full range of their creativity, originality, resourcefulness, uncompromisedness, and so forth, and to guarantee recognition on the country’s literary scene (which is still quite unstable, not least due to current political circumstances). Taiwan’s poetry displays another kind of courage: the courage to self-question and be relentlessly attentive, which allows it to

146 Lee 2015: 113.

problematize textual phenomena on a metatextual level. Moreover, it seems satisfied with its small but stable niche in the democratic structures of culture and society, whereas commentators of the mainland Chinese poetry scene, and indeed PRC-based poets themselves, every now and then raise “crisis” or “marginalization” hypotheses. In this regard, the mentality of Taiwan’s poetry, so to say, seems to be much closer to that observed in many contemporary Western poetries that develop in a liberal-democratic environment than to mainland Chinese poetry, which constantly fights for space, in both the individual (between authors) and the collective dimension (poets vis-à-vis social-political environment).

As regards Polish poetry, it balances between two poles, with periods of (ontologically) strong writing but laced with evident uncertainty over its role and position in society, and periods of (ontologically) weak writing with intense de- and reconstruction of its own foundations yet based on the assumption of having an unthreatened if small share in the life of society. The former mode prevailed during communist rule but also in the decade of transformation in the 1990s, as exemplified by the Brulion authors and others. The latter emerged at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and could be observed roughly until the mid-2010s, with the “Metamanifesto of Cyberbums” as its symbolic end, coinciding with the final shift on the political scene. It is arguably in this period that the most fascinating literary experiments and cutting-edge theoretical studies were published.¹⁴⁷

What came after is still difficult to put together into a consistent picture, but certainly an interesting phenomenon in the past half-decade has been the increased visibility of poets who declare themselves as political leftists and are very straightforward in their struggle for poetry as an effective tool for social change. They are acutely aware that they cannot hope for any comfort zone, if only a tiny one, in the current field of cultural production shaped as it is by unfavorable political and market forces, but they do not seem to be discouraged by this awareness. On the contrary, they press ahead with an aesthetic and ethical self-confidence, sometimes bordering on a cynicism that has rarely been seen in Polish poetry to date. To give an example, on June 13, 2020, while browsing Łukasz Kaźmierczak/Łucja Kuttig’s Facebook profile, I found a link to a new anthology, published ten days earlier and available on a copyleft license, called *Poems for the Resistant* (*Wiersze dla opornych*). The book is described

¹⁴⁷ Urszula Pawlicka provides a comprehensive overview of literary-theoretical studies in her English-language paper “Digital Literature: Current State of Research in Poland” (Pawlicka 2016).

by its editors, Beata Gula, Ola Wasilewska, and Sylwia Głuszak, as a series of “exercises in antifascism”; “fascism” in their definition being a broad category encompassing homophobia, misogyny, antisemitism, nationalism, xenophobia, ethnophobia, Islamophobia, chauvinism, sexism, racism, speciesism, exploitation of animals and natural environment, capitalism, and ageism. The authors express their trust in poetry for “it is in poetry that the revolutionary potential of language rests; poetry offers a chance for its revitalization because it destabilizes meanings and transforms acts of communication.”¹⁴⁸

While this is certainly not my preferred type of poetry and, except for two texts, I did not come across anything particularly appealing in the poems, or in the editors’ aggressive rhetoric in which everything that differs from their point of view is reduced to “-isms” and “-phobias,” I am also far from discrediting these works and downplaying the anger they embody. Rather, I find it quite distressing to observe that poetry again has so much to do to put its own Polish house in order instead of exploring new places and possibilities and engaging in challenging discussions. This is also a problem in mainland Chinese poetry, with the difference that putting in order the Chinese house looks like a much more demanding, dangerous, and time-consuming enterprise. But attempts are made on both right and left—to project a simplistic political dichotomy on the poetry scene—to make life more livable. On the right, poets such as Li Hao 李浩 fight their metaphysical, sometimes elitist, battle in the name of conservative values; on the left, poets, for instance those involved in *dagong* poetry, struggle for equality and inclusion in culture and society. However they understand their role and place in their local reality and whatever measures they take, I silently hope that neither Polish nor Chinese poets will—in the words of Zbigniew Herbert—“too easily come to believe that beauty does not save / that it leads the lighthearted from dream to dream to death” (uwierzyliśmy zbyt łatwo że piękno nie ocala / prowadzi lekkomyślnych od snu do snu na śmierć), and that, as they “take public affairs on [their] thin shoulders / recording suffering the struggle with tyranny with lying” (na chude barki wzięliśmy sprawy publiczne / walkę z tyranią kłamstwem zapisy cierpienia), they will not lose their ability to “awaken the dryad of a poplar / to read the writing of clouds” (obudzić topolow[ą] driad[ę] / czytać pismo chmur).¹⁴⁹ A time will come when these skills will again be appreciated and rewarded.



148 Gula, Wasilewska, and Głuszak 2020: 4, trans. J K.

149 Herbert 2000: 112–115, translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter.

With the play over and the text-actors safely back home, it is time to collapse my compairative stage. Perhaps one day I will erect it again and direct a more international cast representing a wider range of poetries con-versing on imponderabilia and more besides. In a journey as long as the one we are ending right now—covering a distance that has stretched from the singular milieus of individual poets through to the peripheries of national poetries, to Singularities located beyond the horizon of knowability—synchronizing a greater diversity of ethnic identities and languages appeared to me logistically impossible. It would require a team of codirectors specializing in different literatures and several volumes to put on such a play. We would probably need a bigger theater. And definitely a couple more years of writing and rehearsing.

At any rate, it is my tacit wish to see in the future a comprehensive multi-authored compairative history of world poetry written with the utmost attention to textual detail and to the unexpected interactions between texts from different cultures; a book that would not only *narrate* but also sensibly *direct* literary history by creating epistemologically productive and ethically safe links between poems, poets, and poetries. For now, I can only express my true regret that my intellectual and spatiotemporal limitations did not allow for a more ambitious project and ask those who have accompanied me this far for their understanding. I will end by quoting Urszula Koziol's poem from the volume *Horrendum*, one of those special poems in my life that—in line with Koziol's wish pronounced in the motto-like text opening the collection—I read as if it were written by myself “in a moment important / for two strangers” (w chwili ważnej / dla dwojga nieznanomych osób).¹⁵⁰ Please do not take too much to heart the final stanza.

Again I Didn't Write

Today I again forgot to write *Don Quixote*,
I simply cannot fathom
how I could have let this happen,

how it could have slipped my mind
that it's high time to write
my own *Don Quixote*.

It's unforgivable not to write *Don Quixote*
at least once in a lifetime.

150 Koziol 2010: 5.

Say what you like:
I can't wrap my mind around that.

How did this happen, somebody tell me,
that in my lifetime I completely forgot
I should write *Don Quixote*.

Laugh at me all you want
as if I'm some curious exhibit
fit for a museum of wax figures
but I get chills down my spine
when I realize I didn't manage
to write the *Quixote*.

Give me a sip of sherry
or whatever you have on hand
since I'm about to have a heart attack
when it hits me.

I'll never write *Don Quixote*,
and you have no clue how much
that has always meant to me.

Stop trying to out-talk me—
and go to hell, all of you.
I can see how behind my back
you keep tapping your foreheads
though none of you little shits
can imagine what it's like when you know
you will never, ever
now write *Don Quixote*.

Translated by KAREN KOVACIK and EWA HRYNIEWICZ-YARBROUGH¹⁵¹

Znowu nie napisałam

Znowu dziś zapomniałam napisać Don Kichota
już przestaję rozumieć siebie
jak mogłam do tego dopuścić

151 Kovacik 2015: 125–126.

jak mogło ujść mojej uwagi
że czas najwyższy napisać
swojego Don Kichota

to niewybaczalne żeby w ciągu życia
ani razu nie napisać Don Kichota
mówcie co chcecie ale
to mi się nie mieści w głowie.

Jak to się stało niechże mi kto powie
że w ciągu życia zapomniałam na amen
że powinnam wreszcie napisać Don Kichota.

Dobrze wam śmiać się ze mnie
macie mnie za eksponat
w sam raz do muzeum figur starej daty
a mnie aż ciarki chodzą po grzbiecie
gdy uzmysłowię sobie że jednak
nie napisałam Don Kichota.

Dajcie mi łyżeczek kseresu
czy co tam macie pod ręką
bo zaraz szlag mnie trafi kiedy o tym pomyślę
nie rozumiecie że nigdy
już nie napiszę Don Kichota
nie macie pojęcia ile
to dla mnie znaczyło od zawsze.

Przestańcie mnie zagadywać
i idźcie wszyscy do diabła
dobrze widzę jak za plecami
rysujecie mi kółka na czole
żaden z was gnojki nie pojmie
jak to jest kiedy wie się na pewno
że już nigdy, tak, nigdy
nie napisze się Don Kichota.¹⁵²

152 Kozioł 2010: 11–12.

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