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Yang Lian's Exilic Poetry: World Poetry, Ghost Poetics, and Self-dramatization

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Yang Lian's Exilic Poetry:
World Poetry, Ghost Poetics, and Self-dramatization

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你们已无言, 而石头有了呼声.

This stone stands as a witness for those who can't speak.

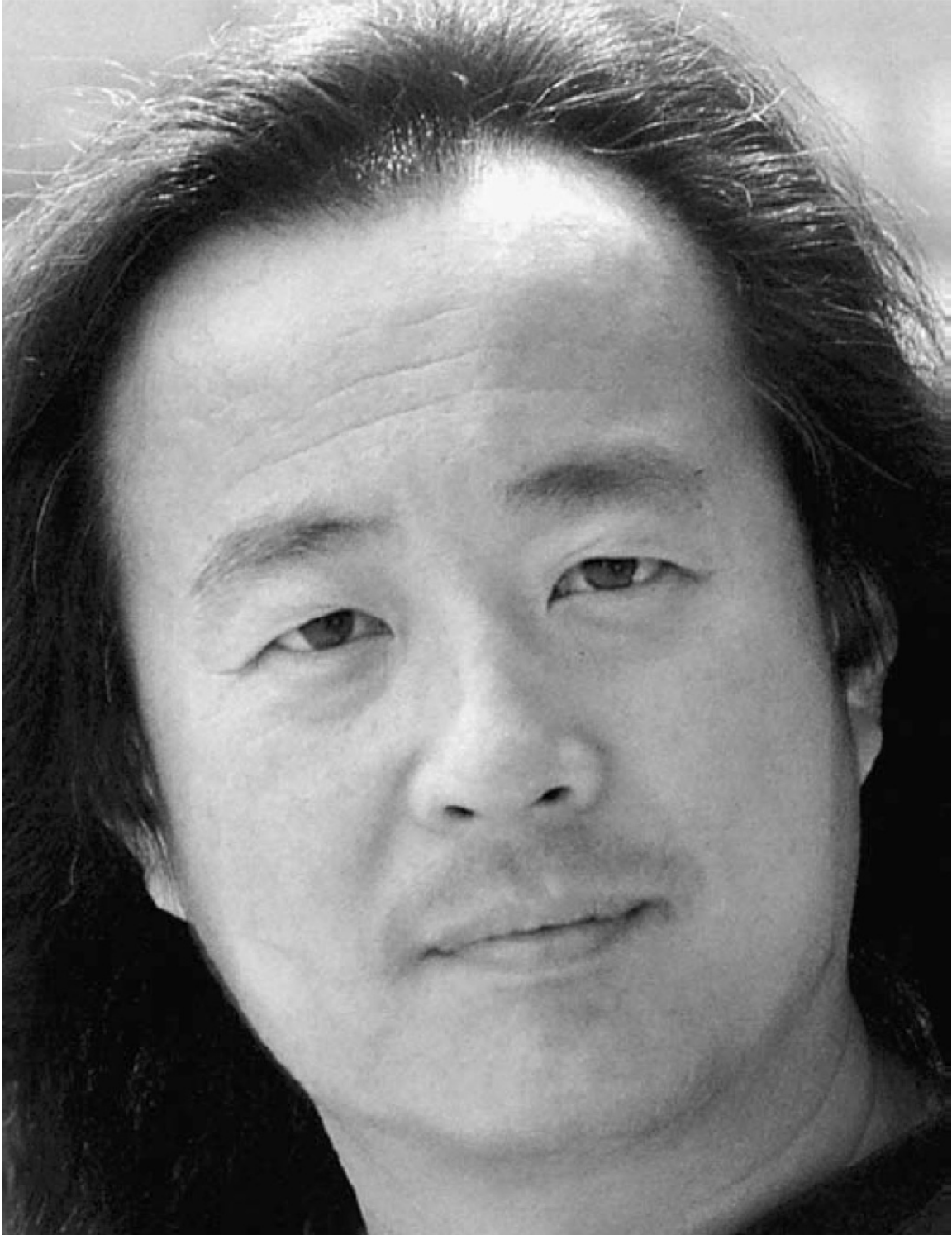
This dedication was composed by Chinese poet and author Yang Lian 楊煉 and translated by John Minford, then head of the School of Asian Studies at the University of Auckland. It is inscribed upon a stone memorial hewn to resemble the geographical shape of China, dedicated to the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. The memorial stands outside St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church on Alten Road in Auckland, New Zealand. It was chosen by two Chinese poets, Yang Lian and Gu Cheng, who were then organizing demonstrations against the Chinese Communist Party's declaration of martial law at the time they were attending an international conference on non-mainstream Chinese poetry at the University of Auckland. They were denied reentry into China, and their works were blacklisted. The two settled down in New Zealand, and in 1993 Gu murdered his wife and committed suicide, while Yang left his base in Auckland and started his second period of exile elsewhere in Europe.

Incorporated into the white stone slab is a globalized poetic resonance: world poetry, one of the striking literary features of the post-Cold War era, an era also famously characterized by great historical changes including the rise of the free market and political upheaval. World poetry has been the subject of much debate. Both established and young scholars, such as Stephen Owen and Jacob Edmond, have contributed to the topic with great energy and sharp criticism. Owen explains world poetry as an invention propitious for the poetry of the Third World, because world poetry is able to provide those

poets with an opportunity to be recognized by international critics — in particular, Western critics — so that their poetry and that of others of their nation can enjoy the world's attention, at least for that moment (28). He contends that world poetry writers must claim their nationality in an intricate manner, providing readers with a refreshingly “exotic” sentiment, but not in such a profound way that readers will lose interest (28). While Edmond recognizes world poetry as a new model and an opportunity for post–Cold War literary revitalization, his argument highlights “the multilateral cross-cultural referents and personal encounters that are neither local nor global, but that reveal the historical origins and contingencies of the local/global dichotomy” (3). He is more confident than Owen in the middle ground between local and global, which poets may explore to discover their true identities, rather than abuse to conceal their hypocrisy regarding alleged colonial Western values and their poor mastery of local literary conventions. The question of whether there is a middle ground between local and global — the supposed foundation of world poetry — remains contested.

In order to avoid discussing world poetry in solely theoretical terms, this paper turns to the particular case of the modern Chinese poet Yang Lian. It focuses on his poetic collection *Non Person Singular*, a selection of short poems written between 1981 and 1991, including the cycle of poems entitled “Scenery in a Room,” which can be considered the prelude to his later exile poetry (Yang, introduction). Yang is typical of dissident Chinese poets after 1989 in that he garnered a transnational reputation for political engagement and later became a strong domestic seller with worldwide recognition. His *Non Person Singular* is also typical of world poetry in the sense that it centers on his exilic life, intertwining past Beijing with present Auckland. Most importantly, his extensive use of images corresponds to the world poetry tradition, in that it wisely seeks to decrease translation difficulty and to transform untranslatable words into translatable images. However, Yang also stylistically differs from other Chinese modernists due to his immersion in Chinese classical poems and his late start in reading Western literature in translation. This paper will investigate the stylistics of Yang's short poems written during his period of exile in Auckland and deconstruct them under the tension between dissidence and accommodation to point out that world poetry should go beyond mere exploitation of the brutality of the state to produce dramatizations that stand on their own and that are successful on their own terms.

LIAO, “YANG LIAN’S EXILIC POETRY”



Yang Lian, 2004.

The photograph, by Song Zuifa, appeared in Maghiel van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Brill, 2008), p. 138.

BIOGRAPHY OF YANG LIAN

Yang Lian was born into a diplomatic family on February 22, 1955, during the period his parents were stationed at the Chinese embassy in Bern, Switzerland. His grandfather had accumulated great wealth, but Yang's parents were radical idealists who donated all their belongings to the Chinese Communist Party. Before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, they left the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and retreated to universities to teach English, but Yang refused to learn even one English word, a decision he deeply regretted during his exile in Auckland, according to his interview with ifeng.com. However, his father forced him to study classical Chinese before he was even seven years old, requiring him to recite poems (whose meanings were then obscure to Yang) at the dining table (Yang, interview). Yang's given name, "Lian" (炼), conveys his father's literary expectations for him: the word refers to the process of refining coal or metals through the application of intense heat, and also denotes the refinement of words into finer combinations.

When Yang was six years old, his parents brought him back to Beijing to live in the Yuanming Yuan neighborhood. His first poem "Apologia: To a Ruin" (*Zibai-gei yizuo feixu* 自白—给一座废墟) was dedicated to Yuanming Yuan. In the poem, he transforms the ruins of Yuanming Yuan into the graveyard of Chinese dynastic history, traditional culture, and myriads of lives. He wrote, "this testament becomes a curse muttered at my birth" (Yang, *Renditions: Chinese Literature Today*, introduction to Yang in 2001, he was separated from his parents in the 1970s and sent down to the countryside, following Mao Zedong's "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" movement, which aimed to purge bourgeois sentiments among Chinese youth through hard labor alongside peasants and workers. From 1974 to 1977, Yang served as a coffin-bearer and grave-digger in the suburbs of Beijing. He took as one of his first poetic subjects his experience of working in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, focusing on his interactions with such elements of nature as the sun, moon, earth, river, night, etc.

Yang's preference for natural images was shared by the Menglong ("Misty" or "Obscure") poets, who also abandoned the grandiose, meaningless words of political propaganda that had worn out China since the Cultural Revolution. Menglong poetry is conventionally translated as "Poetry of Shadows" or "Obscure Poetry" and gained its name from Chen Jingrong's 陈敬容 translation of Baudelaire's work "Dawn" (*"Le crépuscule du matin"*) from *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les fleurs du mal*) (Edmond, "The 'Flâneur'

in Exile," 380). Edmond explains that Chen translated "Dawn" as "朦胧的黎明" ("Shadowy Dawn") and that the formulation emerged as the product of an active misreading, alluding to the misty sun in the post-Mao era as a metaphorical eclipse of Mao, a rejection of the mainstream image-making tradition that foregrounded the distinguished character of Chinese modernism (380).

However, Yang differed from other Misty poets in that he included archaic, often non-Han indigenous mythological images in his poems (Twitchell-Waas, 350). This feature may have developed out of Yang's experience in 1977 as a program editor for the Central Broadcasting Cultural Work Group, a state-run company. As part of his job, he traveled to remote areas, including Guangxi in 1978; Shanxi, Sichuan, and Hubei between 1980 and 1981; Gansu in late 1981; and Qinghai and Tibet in 1983 (Tan, 124). After he returned from Tibet, he wrote an epic poem, "Nuorilang" ("诺日朗"), which he titled after the blood-thirsty, Mao-like Tibetan god of virility (Barnstone, 203). "Nuorilang" gained Yang widespread attention, including that of the government. As a result, Yang Lian was strongly attacked during the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign in 1983 and was denied access to official publishing houses throughout 1984.

Another facet that deeply distinguishes Yang from his fellow Misty poets is that he came under Western influence much later than most. It was in 1979, after he was introduced by Gu Cheng to Mang Ke and other members of the group of poets who wrote for *Today* magazine, that he encountered Modernist experimentalism and decided to abandon writing classical poems.¹ *Today* was transparent in its rejection of immediate history and active in social-political criticism, contextualized within the background of a more tolerant political climate for freedom of speech. Yang inevitably was influenced by the *Today* group and joined many pro-democracy movements in the early 1980s. By 1986, he had become so influential that he was named one of the "top ten poets" by mainland Chinese readers that year, though he depicted that award event as "full of horrible poetic passions" in his interview (Yang, ifeng.com). Meanwhile, Yang's international fame also grew, as countless letters arrived inviting him to give lectures abroad. He accepted the invitation of the Australia Council for the Arts to go to Australia for half a year. His translator John Minford was then head of the School of Asian Studies at the University

¹ It is important to note here that Yang wrote more than two hundred classical poems before his engagement with modern poetry (Tan, 125).

of Auckland, and thus he was invited to visit the university.

At last we return to the memorial stone. When the Tiananmen debacle took place in 1989, Yang was with Gu Cheng in Auckland. Knowing firsthand the extent of the Chinese government's violent oppression, Yang organized several political protests in New Zealand and wrote poems denouncing the CCP. Afterwards, he was denied renewal of his passport and thus became a political refugee. Yang's exile immediately after the June 4 incident "reinforced the designation of these writers as dissidents" (Edmond, "Dissidence and Accommodation," 113). In 1993, the tragic demise of Gu and his own depression due to his inability to return to China pushed Yang to apply for New Zealand citizenship, though he was permitted by the administration to visit China later that year. In 1994, he initiated the next period of his exile by settling down in London. After a long period spent wandering between Auckland, Berlin, and other European cities, he currently splits his time between London and Beijing.

GHOST POETICS OF THE EXILIC POEMS

According to Chee-Lay Tan, Yang Lian has a clear awareness of the influences of exilic experiences on his poetry (153). Yang even published a prose collection called *Ghostspeak/Lies: Yang Lian and Yo Yo's Notes on Overseas Exile* that, through a second person narrator, elaborates on his life in Auckland. Here I examine the stylistics of Yang's exilic poetry, with reference to his reputation as a dissident poet and the trend in Western scholarship to over-politicize his work.

Within the limited Western scholarship on modern Chinese literature, there is a strong tendency to contextualize Yang's work within a highly political framework. However reasonable that may be with regard to Yang Lian's activist poetry and dissident themes, over-politicization threatens to eclipse the real aesthetic value therein and the evocation of Stephen Owen's critique. That is, Yang is not unaware of being accused of exploiting the brutality of the state for his literary purposes. According to Chinese literary critic Wang Dongdong, who gives Yang a higher status than another poet, Bei Dao, the great majority of Yang's works struggle to reveal the inner workings of poetic politicization in modern Chinese poetry and resist it (*chuanyue / Zhongwen de bianjie* 穿越中文的边界).

Through a detailed examination of the features of Yang's ghost poetics, I strive here to give nuance to contextual interpretations of Yang's exilic poems so that a multi-dimensional exploration of the poems can be achieved. Yang's ghost poetics are manifested through use of a ghost persona,

repetition, and the mood of haunting stasis. First, I analyze these features within the context of June fourth. I then deconstruct Yang's ghost poetics according to his self-contradictory claim of oneness — the dual identification of flesh-and-blood author and implied author, as well as the tension between dissidence and accommodation.

In the poetic cycles titled "Behind the Lies," "The Dead in Exile," and "The City in Daydreams," Yang's ghost wanders through a foreign city, a city onto which the ghost — all but invisible to the locals — stubbornly imposes the images of past Beijing and present-day Auckland. Yang's esoteric interest in ghosts has been repeatedly examined from various perspectives in the work of Niall McGrath, Jacob Edmond, Simon Patton, Cosima Bruno, Brian Holton, and Tony Barnstone. McGrath portrays the poet's "exile state as a kind of living death" that antagonistically reacts to dictatorship and its falsifying of the historical memory of the Tiananmen Square massacre (30). Edmond notes that the ghost in exile serves as a form of temporal and spatial dislocation by revisiting Baudelaire's *flâneur*, a lonely wanderer in the European cities who flees Paris but insistently superimposes Paris onto every city that he encounters (Edmond, "The 'Flâneur' in Exile," 385).

Contrary to McGrath's reading of the ghost as an active description of the reactionary attitude towards dictatorship, Patton in his review of Yang Lian's *Non Person Singular* condemns the constant image-making of death as the mere hypnotic repetition of a dislocated past passively stuck in "there" without an active extension of "here" and "now" (871). Cosima Bruno, too, notices the "quasi-perceptual way to those places" but argues that "the resulting images are so strictly personal that they say very little about Auckland and much more about Yang Lian's poetic experience" (811). Brian Holton, the translator of *Non Person Singular*, explains the motif underlying Yang's exilic poems as "a larger conception of human potential" and "a transcendent vision of our place in the cosmic scheme" in his afterword (121). The dehumanization indicated by the work's title prefigures the disengagement of the corporeal body, aiming for a transcendence in which "now" and "past," "here" and "there" are unified and furthermore corresponds to the traditional maxim of "*yanwaiyouyi* (言外有意)" — "meaning lies beyond words" (121).

A GHOSTLY PERSONA

The dehumanization of the persona obviously is manifested throughout all of Yang Lian's exilic poetry.

Even in the beginning of his exile, Yang had started to deploy stylistically a ghostly persona to stand in for him. Writing about his lifeless experience in the early exilic years in “The Dead in Exile,” Yang conjures the separation between body and spirit. Here, Yang refuses to give peace to the dead who can exit the world neither by descending to hell nor by ascending to the heavens, but rather are deployed in an endless, torturous cycle of darkness and pain. This ghostly persona is exemplified in the last stanza of the poem:

no one can break out of the prison of lies
 no one knows who are the dead
 as the sun bursts open sleeves
 are utterly empty
 everywhere is a foreign land
 in death there is no home to go back to
 so a corpse-laden line of poems drifts away
 so it drifts away
 on rotten leaves the rainstorm
 continues its roaring
 lying in exile in tombs
 pupils of the dead white as snow
 are filled with invisible stars
 flesh white as snow pools of blood inside
 they crawl from the filthiest tunnels of the mothers' bodies
 screaming as they slide towards hell
 every single morning
 a deeper death

the day isn't real but day after day.
 we leave ourselves further and further behind
 (Yang, *Non Person Singular*, 44; trans. Brian Holton)

谁也不能从谎言中越狱
谁也不知 谁是死者
当太阳迸裂 衣袖
空空如也
到处是异乡
在死亡里没有归宿
一行诗满载尸体就这么漂走
就这么漂走
暴风雨在腐烂的叶子上
继续咆哮
躺在坟墓里继续流浪
死者瞳孔雪白
盛满看不见的星辰
酒肉雪白 里面一片血污
爬出母亲身上最肮脏的隧道
像地狱尖叫着滑落
在每天早晨
更深地死去

日子不是真的 可日复一日
我们原来越远地离开我们

Yang describes the body parts of an anonymous dead person in a disembodied way: each part is given its own moment, without an overview of the corpse as a whole. Reconfiguring bodily outlooks and functions ("pools of blood ... crawl from the filthiest tunnels of the mothers' bodies"), Yang defamiliarizes and redefines readers' perceptions of the physical dead body — a corpse is not irrelevant to life and death, but bears the birth of a deeper death. Yang's ghostly persona is thus born out of the bloody filth, not conforming to the convention that a corpse cannot intervene in the spiritual process

of afterlife. The ghostly situation in which a corporeal body is disengaged from its spirit indicates the extent of Yang's disengagement with his homeland, and Beijing. It also metaphorically describes the torture of living like a ghost in a lonely city, traceable to Yang's sudden break with domestic connections and the fact that he spoke no English at that point and was unable to connect with local people. Furthermore, the persona is also tortured by writing poetry that is hemmed in by lies ("no one can break out of the prison of lies"), as if what Yang narrates are ghost stories that have been negated by "authentic" official history.

REPETITION OF DEATH

With the constant theme of dehumanization running through his exilic poems, Yang's ghost persona is cursed to die repeatedly — "every single morning/a deeper death" (*Non Person Singular*, 44). The reiteration of death constitutes a protraction that hinders the completion of unfinished death and thus prevents rebirth. This prolonged process is a common signal for a mourning that will remain in a suspended state until a more complete working through of the past occurs, as is noted by Charles Armstrong in his examination of Yeats's use of a ghost (176). What underlies the logic of completion is a desire for catharsis that saves the ghost from his half-dead condition. The repetitive dying experience serves as an unresolved fixation, which is reinforced by the poet's feelings of horror over the hateful images of death. Yang's accounts of trauma, repetition, and the uncanny indicate an unresolved state of being.

What helps to explain Yang's repeated evocation of death is the fact that the CCP administration attempted to erase June fourth from historical memory by refusing to release information and forbidding writing about the Tiananmen massacre. In this way, the repeated dying experience also references the death of words and characters, as Yang writes in "City of Dead Poets" ("*Si shiren de cheng* 死诗人的城"), death "unstintingly deletes/wolfishly deletes" (73). With his accounts condemned as "fake" history, Yang's poems "go wrong when written down ... broken apart day after day/poets who leap into a poem deserve only to be broken apart" (117). Aside from the corporeal dislocation wrought by his banishment, the persecution against truth-telling poetry further afflicts the wandering, traumatized ghost. Consequently, it dies again and again.

Another understanding of Yang's repeated references to death may be derived from Yang's

attitude towards Taoism and Oriental mysticism, as noted by Xinyue Xu (51). Zhuangzi viewed death in relation to life: "what makes my life a good makes my death also a good" (故善吾生者，乃所以善吾死也). According to Xu, a life with meaningful values grants a preferable death, revealing a paradox in which concerns about death ultimately point to concerns about life (51). She corroborates her argument by referencing Yang's opinion that the creative character of human beings is what distinguishes them from animals. Death is intertwined with existence through the creativity of life; it is part of being and perpetuates itself in various ways (52).

THE MOOD OF HAUNTING STASIS

Creating the mood of haunting stasis is another core element of Yang Lian's ghostly poetics. The compilation of death images and lack of dynamic interaction prominently contribute to the stony, dark, and haunting mood which envelopes the reader. The haunting stasis corresponds to Yang's obituary style, through which the living world is reconceptualized as death. Yang has been familiar with images of death since his work as a grave-digger and coffin-bearer in his youth, as well as his sharp perception of death evident as early as in his first poem, about Yuanming Yuan. His death images are sensationally concrete with thick descriptions. The sterile environ he creates without life breeds few interactions between the ghost persona and the living world. His eternally transparent physicality evokes his powerlessness to endow himself with substantiality — an unchangeable condition of dying "a deeper death" every day.

COMPILATION OF DEATH IMAGERY

Yang's imagery of death is obviously intertwined with his exile, and his linguistic experiment in the period of *Non Person Singular* further enriches his poetics, as my close reading of his exilic poem "Banned Poem" will demonstrate.

Banned Poem

to die at thirty-five is already too late
you should have been executed in the womb

like your poems no need
for a sheet of white paper to be your grave

children not permitted to be born
lock up their hands in crime
fingers rot like snakes coiled in winter sleep
eyes rot escaping the tempest that bites
your face at first touch is a current of water
bones tracing out white scars line by line

it's a shoal of eels down in the deep waters of the flesh
threading through white seaweed
among still-paler shouts you hear only darkness
coldly wiped clean by another hand
coolly turned into a misprint
placenta wrapping you ever tighter
your last words dying with you

to die today
is to be turned into a stinking news story. (39)

死在三十五岁已经太迟
你早该在子宫里被处决
像你的诗 无须
一页白纸作墓地

不准诞生的孩子
把手锁在罪恶里
五指腐烂像冬眠里纠缠的蛇

眼睛腐烂 逃开噬人的风暴
你的脸一摸就是一汪水
骨头画出道道白痕

是肉体深海下一群鳗鱼
在白色海藻间穿游
更苍白的呼喊间只听见黑暗
你被别的手无情抹平
淡淡改成一个错字
胎衣越裹越紧
遗言和你一同死去

死在今天
变成一个臭恶的消息

The title "Banned Poem" appears to be an elegy for a poem — a poem by a poet who is persecuted. It also naturally evokes a possible accusation of the CCP's brutal falsification of the history of June 4, 1989. The poet's frustration at his poetry being banned and his shaken faith in poetry are supported by Yang's self-elucidation:

This was my first period of exile abroad, during which time I was based in Australia and New Zealand. In terms of the pressures and poignancy of existence, these first few years of being "sent down to a foreign land" really can be compared with the calamities of the Cultural Revolution. But perhaps the true question for myself as a poet was: could I carry on writing in this linguistic environment, distanced from my mother tongue? If so, how could I continue writing? And how could I continue to push my writing towards previously unattained depths? (Yang, "Introduction to Yang Lian's 'Literary Works Section'")

Here, the white paper is transformed into an image of death, a grave. Furthermore, the white paper in combination with the grave combine to evoke the image of a white shroud, hospital, mortuary, etc. The first stanza communicates a violent eruption of torrential anger — a wordless life for a poet is worse than never being born (“you should have been executed in the womb”). Compared to much more tranquil poems written later in his exile, “Banned Poem” speaks in retaliation to the Chinese government’s denouncement. Here Yang translates himself into a piece of the poem, as both destinies are intertwined, echoing his pursuit of “one consciousness.” He explains in “Welcome to Yang Lian and Yo Yo’s personal literary website”:

This website is a whole. It offers a structure that brings together all that we have thought and done at each layer of thought and at each place in the world. When you click through the site, moving freely between our creations, thoughts, actions, and opinions accumulated over many years, do not forget that they all come from one consciousness and that they continue to build that consciousness. Spanning time and space, life and writing join together in a single work at last. (Yang, *Yang Lian & YoYo*)

The sentimentality in the lines of “Banned Poem” is perhaps evidence of what Stephen Owen critiques as “self-conscious posing,” the disease of modern Chinese poetry (Owen, 30). The self-dramatization in Yuan’s online welcome seems to conform with his life to the proairetic code, a structuring principle which Roland Barthes invents to imply a further narrative action based on suspense felt by the reader (Barthes, 19). A famous example is that of Chekov’s gun: a gun that hangs on the wall in the first chapter of a story must be used by the end of the narrative, based on the structural principle that every part of the text has a function. Yang is conscious of his self-dramatization or, more precisely, his generation’s self-dramatization, which has been contextualized in a revolutionary drama (Yang, ifeng.com).

Offering far more horrible images than those in the first stanza of “Banned Poem,” the second stanza further explores the brutality of an administration that does not permit the birth of unauthorized children, or poets, or poetry. With hands locked up in crime, rotting fingers like snakes hibernating in winter, a face melted into water (perhaps blood), bones, and scars woven into a poetic

texture, the ghostly persona evokes an image of disembodiment as eerie as Picasso's *Guernica*. In the final stanza, the recurrence of the color white not only structurally echoes the first stanza, it also is a revelation: the metamorphosis of death is recognized, cooled down by the reluctant poet, while the fixation of death still exerts psychological pain in his exile. Contrasting the paling of shouts, whitening of paper ("coldly wiped clean by another hand"), and the tightening of placenta, Yang creates motion beneath stillness and conflict beneath compromise, as it introduces an exilic world full of external suppression and internal collisions. All of these death images combine to reinforce the tension between the dead body and the constricted spirit that is denied its characteristic transcendence.

Another feature of Yang's compounding of death images is the decrease of transitive verbs. It is characteristic of modern Chinese poetry that it aggregates images rather than states sentences that are fully formed with subject, predicate, and object. One reason is that the fragmented syntax is the result of highly abstract classical Chinese poetry that often omits the subject to indicate a transcendental voice, neither personal nor communal. Another is that the focus on image-making and the marginalization of verbal constituents eases the difficulty of translation, and therefore nothing is lost in the translation of poetry. Another reason, as Stephen Owen comments regarding the poet Bei Dao, is that the success of a poem is achieved not through words, because words are confined by the borders of linguistic nationality, but by the envisagement of images with words (31). Using few transitive verbs, the poet is able to create a sense of haunting stasis that is similar to groups of death images being brought together without dynamic convergence. In the lines, "it's a shoal of eels down in the deep waters of the flesh / threading through white seaweed (是肉体深海下一群鳗鱼在白色海草间穿游)" Yang's predicate choice "是" and Brian Holton's choice of "is" rather than "thread" reflects their intention to minimize the motion of the verb "thread." Therefore, the relatively still imagery of a shoal of fish replaces the motion of the eels through seaweed, giving readers the haunting feeling that real entities exist in unreal states of stasis. Furthermore, in "your face at first touch is a current of water bones tracing out white scars line by line," Yang decreases the transformative motion by deploying "is" instead of "become," "turning into," etc., and de-emphasizes the power of "trace" by adding "ing," stylistic choices that all combine to create a haunting feeling of stasis in his exilic poems.

DISAPPEARANCE OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PERSONA AND THE LIVING WORLD

Besides imagery and linguistic renderings, Yang's ghost persona lacks vitality in that he does not speak to the living world. Rather, Yang's second person designation implies his self-communication in Auckland. Yang admitted in his interview with Hong Kong publisher Ye Hui that his lonely situation was the main reason for his inclusion of a second person narrator in prose. The extensive use of second person pronouns and possessives is a self-dramatic psychology that is internalized within his own mind. In terms of communicating with real entities in Auckland, "Grafton Bridge" (*Gelafudun qiao* 格拉夫顿桥) is widely viewed as characteristic of Yang's post-exilic writing, as Yang seldom refers to foreign elements in his early writings; however, in this poem he takes Grafton Bridge, a foreign landmark, for his title (Tan, 139). "Grafton Bridge" records the ghostly persona's visit to Australia, during which he passes by the cemetery beneath the bridge and takes note of the pine trees, the ocean, the sunlight, etc. A close reading of the first stanza will elucidate the ghostly persona's inertia.

Grafton Bridge

as you cross the cemetery beneath the bridge close in
 pinetrees raise suspicious faces
 an ocean of the dead like iron, giving off a fishy smell
 the rusty sunlight has passed by
 sniffs at you like an old dog
 a dog staring the scene is particularly clear from the bridge.
 (Yang, *Non Person Singular* 65)

格拉夫顿桥

桥下的墓地 在你过桥时 逼近
 松树抬起一张张狐疑的脸
 死者的海面 铁块般散发腥味

铁锈色的阳光绕过去
像一只老狗嗅嗅你
一只狗眼盯着 风景在桥上格外清晰

Once again, as Patton suggests, Yang's death imagery-making resurrects a dislocated past that is static, caught between time and place. In the first stanza, the ghostly persona does not interact with the real entities around him, even though he is interested in looking at them. While walking over Grafton Bridge, the persona notices "the cemetery beneath the bridge" and that the pine trees, like the epitaphs on the tombstones, "raise suspicious faces." He connects himself to the real fishy smell of the ocean, but he senses more than that, as the real ocean has been transformed into an ocean of the dead. Thus, he perceives the iron-like smell of a superimposed ocean of blood. From the ghost's point of view, everything is tinged with a dark, rusty red, even the sunlight. He feels uneasy about the sunlight of the southern hemisphere and paranoically imagines the sunlight to be surveilling him ("the sunlight ... sniffs at you like an old dog"). He suddenly realizes that the dog eyes staring at him are real; there is indeed an old dog, which he spies from atop the bridge. Yang's poetics verge on magical realism as he concludes with "the scene is particularly clear from the bridge," for what he perceives and then internalizes — an ocean of blood smelling of iron, rusty sunlight, etc. — renders the persona unreliable and thus his verification of authenticity becomes utterly confused.

In reality, what hinders Yang's ghost from direct communication with the living people, is perhaps the poet's limited capacity to speak English. After being expelled from China, Yang has to this day not published a single English poem, which may shed light on his imperfect communication in Auckland. In most ghost stories, the ghost narrator would speak to the living so that they could seek aid, atone, and be released from their endless wandering (177). The fact that Yang's persona stares rather than speaks could be explained by his refusal to reconcile with the Chinese government's abnegation of the truth of history. Consequently, his poetry becomes "a prison of lies," and he is sentenced to dwell in exile. Or is it possible that, being fully aware of his hopeless situation, the ghostly persona gives up all attempts at redemption and recoils from it through the passivity of imagery distortion?

A SACRIFICIAL PERSONA AND A SUCCESSFUL FLESH-AND-BLOOD AUTHOR

Yang's persona could be characterized as highly sacrificial, delivering the message that if his death could wake up the suppressed people, he would give his life to his enemies in order to redeem the Yuanming Yuan-like, cursed homeland. Yang's obsession with death and rebirth is demonstrated in his early epic poem "Nuorilang," in which a sky burial is achieved through sacrificing the persona's corporeal body to the evil, Mao-like god of virility. Redemption is thus made possible in that a new world could be reborn out of the bloody and disembodied body (Barnstone, 204). Yang alarms his readers in "Reading the Gates of Hell" ("*Du diyu de men* 读地狱之门") when he reveals, "the creator of hell isn't God, for sure — but a ghost" (83). In another poem "This Sky that buried Van Gogh," he writes:

our voices are only a razor
 severing every ear that seeks to hear your silence
 the stars are a flock of unbleeding beasts
 enraging you giving you a pure heavenly scorn for these humans.

after death you go on creating a void in the living
 the blue static sea like a single lonely piece of work
 you stiffen on the painting's surface those bones
 baked dry by night things scattered all around unnoticed. (85)

我们的声音只是另一把剃刀
 割 每只企图聆听你寂静的耳朵
 星是一群不流血的动物
 激怒你 是你纯粹从天上轻蔑这人类

在死后 继续创造生者的空白
 蓝色固定的大海 像一件孤独的工作

你 在画面上变硬 那把骨头
被黑夜烤干 水也不知道的撒在到处

In the first stanza, Yang concentrates on the tortures that the peoples' voice has inflicted on Van Gogh, with whose persecution he, as a dissident poet, can be fully empathize. Yang clearly identifies with Van Gogh, whose smeared body engenders "a void in the living," and "the blue static sea." Van Gogh's life and his painting — other examples of "one consciousness" — bolsters Yang's ghostly persona's resolve to give his life over to a hopeless, meaningless end.

However, Yang's self-alleged greatness and integrity in his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of others is undermined by his accommodation of the official publishing system and commercialized culture. Observed by Edmond in his case study of Yang Lian as an example of Chinese poets' combination of dissidence and accommodation throughout publishing history, Yang has never been completely rejected by the official publishing system since the earliest point at which he began to write. Even in the late seventies when the eponymous magazine of the , poetry group was eliminated, Yang still published his poems through official publishing houses thanks to the connection of his formerly diplomatic family (113). After 1989, Yang wrote some overtly political poems and engaged in high-profile demonstrations. He was unsurprisingly rejected by the publishing system for a short time following the terrible events and his exile. But, in 1991, a collection of his poems titled *Sun and Man* (*Taiyang yu ren* 太阳与人), including a long essay by Dong Yufeng, Yang's business collaborator, was published by an official publishing house located in Hunan, far from Beijing and with little promotion (Edmond, "Dissidence and Accommodation." 122).² Moreover, Yang began to make regular visits to China beginning in December 1993. By contrast, Bei Dao was turned back at the Beijing airport in 1994. He was eventually allowed to reenter China in late 2001 under official surveillance. In a sense, Yang's personal accounts of persecution are not completely reliable.

Edmond has pointed out the obvious misapprehension of the Human Rights Watch when it awarded Yang Lian a Hellman/Hammett grant in 1999. The grants are distributed to "writers around the

² *Taiyang yu ren* (*The Sun and Man*), with an essay by Dong Yufeng (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi, 1991).

world who have been victims of political persecution and are in financial need” (“Dissidence and Accommodation,” 125). Yang was portrayed in the report as follows:

Chinese poet and essayist, took part in the 1979 Beijing Spring democracy movement and edited an underground literary magazine. In 1983, government authorities attacked an epic he wrote about Tibet and banned his writing for one year. Lecturing in New Zealand at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, he organized demonstrations. Since then all his work has been banned in China, and he fled to England, where he has been living in exile. (“Dissidence and Accommodation,” 125)

The fact is that Yang had published his collected work in Shanghai in 1998, a year prior to the grant, via a major publishing house. Yang’s self-marketing as a dissident poet on the one hand helps him to gain an international reputation that can in turn open up the domestic market by hailing him as a world-class poet. On the other hand, his dissidence and worldwide reputation garnered him official tolerance and sympathy, which has persuaded the PRC to display more lenience towards political defiance. According to the section of “Yang Lian” in his personal website, in 2013 Yang became a guest professor at Nanjing University of the Arts and The Arts College of Hebei University (Yang, *Yang Lian & YoYo*). Also in that year, he nominated a peasant poet, Guo Jinniu, for a poetry prize in China, and in 2015, Guo was invited to attend the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam, Holland, the biggest poetry festival in the world. This essay does not intend to discuss Yang’s intentions and the quality of the poetry written by Guo; however, it is salient that, following his recommendation, Yang was praised for promoting provincial poetry in a 2015 interview with an official magazine, *Global Magazine*, a branch of *People’s Daily* (Yang, *Global People*). We may conclude that Yang’s alleged independence and utilitarian dissidence are quite insubstantial themselves, and it turns out that the ghost persona is in fact far more solid than it appears to be.³

³ For more information concerning Yang’s dealing with his critiques of the Tiananmen Square Massacre when the poems were published in mainland China, please refer to “Dissidence and Accommodation: The Publishing History of Yang Lian from ‘Today’ to Today,” by Jacob Edmond.

CONCLUSION

The tension between accommodation and dissidence illustrates the poet's dilemma between being independent from authority and staying in connection with it, between staying underground without exposure to the market and self-promoting to squeeze into the commercial world. When praising the resistant and defiant spirit in Yang's poetry, it is also important to note the materiality of the ghostly persona that declares its repeated death penalty and sacrificial divinity for the sake of awakening the collective.

Yang's stylistics display a keen awareness of his exile and an active exploration of it. The ingenuity of Yang's ghost poetics is manifested through a ghost persona, repetition, and the mood of haunting stasis is undeniable; these features, independently and in combination, contribute to the construction of the exilic state, constituting a globalized locality, with the superimposition of China onto Australia. However, his one consciousness identifies his life with poetic dramatization or "self-posing," indicative of his later exploitation of international recognition and domestic commercialization. Yang is thus left suspended, like his ghost, between poetry and world poetry. International audiences should not be lured into a questionable story involving the sensational violence of any state, and audiences at home should not uncritically admire any poetry simply because it is recognized by scholars in a foreign university. A close examination of Yang Lian's poetics makes it evident that early twenty-first-century readers should not extol a poet's work simply by virtue of its being hailed as a "world something."

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