THE POETRY OF MU DAN (1918–1977)

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DECLARATION

Except where references are given in the text, this thesis is my own work carried out during my PhD study at the Australian National University.

Xu Wang
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to delineate the main characteristics and development of Mu Dan’s poetry in the context of the modernization of Chinese literature, and from the perspective of the self-completion of an individual poet. My four chapters cover Mu Dan’s creative life, emphasizing the “problem areas” that cut deep into his writing: his choice of subject matter, his use of form, and the profound biographical, aesthetic, moral and socio-political implications of his poems. The overall assessment of Mu Dan’s achievement will be supplemented by detailed discussions of an array of “isolated elements” of his poetics: genre and rhetoric, wit and emotion, the use of irony and satire, symbolism and realism. These elements together forged Mu Dan’s idiosyncratic style and his formally coherent method of expressions.

My research will also explore the intriguing subject of influence and continuity in Chinese poetry, which I believe is one of the key problems for the study of Mu Dan, and how it was that Mu Dan achieved the highest order of “self-understanding” through the creation of an authentic poetic language.

This study will start with revaluations of the critical and popular reception of Mu Dan, the so-called “Mu Dan Phenomenon,” against the background of our pragmatic, consumer society where lyric poetry has become increasingly marginalized. How are we to respond to the hostilities brought forth by today’s hedonistic culture? This is the challenge confronting the conscience and creativity of all contemporary poets. Any study of Mu Dan must be concerned to pass on his legacy, for the sake of the uncertain future of lyric poetry in today’s world.
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CHAPTER THREE: OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF MU DAN’S POETRY
LIST OF ABBREVIATION

The following abbreviations are used in the main text and footnotes throughout the text, and in the Bibliography:

$MD$ 穆旦传 Mu Dan: A Biography

$CP$ 穆旦诗全集 Collected Poetry of Mu Dan

$JXJ$ 穆旦精选集 The Best Writings of Mu Dan

$SWJ$ 穆旦诗文集 Poems and Other Writings of Mu Dan

$YWJ$ 穆旦译文集 Translated Works of Mu Dan
Introduction

The Mu Dan Phenomenon

The Life of Mu Dan and the Reception of His Poetry

Few people in the history of modern Chinese literature have enjoyed the sudden, almost unwelcome attention that comes from having the dubious suffix “phenomenon 现象” attached to their names. Mu Dan 穆旦 the poet is one of those few. This sort of fame, as the experience of our present-day consumer society often suggests, is incited by the mass media, and tends to fade quickly once the novelty factor inherent in it diminishes.¹ Generally, it is more of an indication of popular taste or behaviour than the embodiment of genuine historical and critical acclaim and value. Jing Wang’s illustration of the “spurious” Chinese literature of the period since the 1990s seems to vindicate this observation.² In the case of Mu Dan, the fever (热), another term associated with the phenomenon, is linked with the posthumous honour granted to a poet who was for the most part of his lifetime in constant awareness of the precarious state of poetry itself and of his own place in literary history. The same irony may also extend to writers such as Wang Xiaobo 王晓波 (1952–1997) and Hai Zi 海子(1964–1989), whose popularity was

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¹ William Kornblum, Sociology in a Changing World, 8th ed. (Belmont and California: Wadsworth Publishing, 2007), 213. According to Fredric Jameson, our present-day consumer society is saturated with signs, messages, and images; he further states that “the priorities of the real become reversed, and everything is mediated by culture to the point where even the political and ideological ‘levels’ have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is culture.” See F. Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” Social Text 1.1 (1979): 139.

² Jing Wang, High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China (Berkeley: University of California press, 1996), 192–93. Wang’s observation is based on the drastic changes taking place in Chinese society in the 1990s, during which time it “becomes more and more obvious that it is the economic, rather than the ideological, political, or cultural that delimits the Chinese social imaginary.”
only spurred by their premature deaths, or Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) and Eileen Chang
(1920–1995), whose reputation was only restored after decades of strict censorship under
the Communist regime.

Mu Dan’s life was unremarkable, if not altogether uneventful. Pang Bingjun 龐秉鈞, his close friend and former colleague at Nankai University, gives a brief account of
the poet’s life as part of the introduction to a group of Mu Dan’s poems he translated into
English in 1984:

Mu Tan [Dan], poet and translator, wrote also under his real name Cha Liang-cheng [Zha Liangzheng], or his other pen name Liang Chen [Zhen]. He was born in 1918
in Tientsin [Tianjin] into a family of Chekiang [Zhejiang] origin. After completing primary and secondary schooling he went at the age of seventeen to Peking
[Beijing]'s Tsinghua University where he studied geology for half a year but later transferred to the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. During the War of Resistance against Japan, Tsinghua University was united with Peking University and Nankai University to form the South Western Associated University. Mu Tan graduated from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of SWAU and worked as a teaching assistant for two years. Then after a few unstable years involving several changes of job, he went in 1948 to Chicago University as a graduate student.

In 1951 he received his M.A. degree and at the end of 1952 came back to China together with his wife Chou Yü-liang 周與良 [Zhou Yuliang] (now Professor of Biology at Nankai University). In 1953 he became an associate professor of English at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of Nankai University. Five years later, however, he was unjustly labelled a rightist and was demoted to clerical work in the university library. On Feb. 26, 1977, he died of a heart failure at the age of 59. He was posthumously exonerated in 1981. A special memorial service was held in his honour and his ashes were laid in Tientsin's Revolutionary Martyrs' Mausoleum.3

The terseness of the record is an apt reflection of the public perception of Mu Dan, whose life and work were at the time (the early 1980s) still largely unknown to even the most erudite poetry lovers. However, two pivotal elements that had drastically changed the

course of his life are omitted from this brief biography: his recruitment and participation as a soldier in the Burma theatre fighting the Japanese during the Second World War, and the full significance of his return from the US to mainland China in early 1953. The first event, when he narrowly escaped from the bloodbath of war, changed his life forever; the second virtually condemned him to the collective fate of all Chinese intellectuals in the treacherous political environment of Communist China. There is no first-person record of these episodes from the poet himself, and very limited accounts from those who were directly engaged in, or witnessed any of the events. The lack of archival materials relating to Mu Dan’s life and the general neglect of his poetry seem to justify Xie Mian’s characterization of Mu Dan as essentially a forgotten poet: “A star that was forever obscured by the dark cloud. We can only feel the gleams of immense splendour which at times penetrated the dense layers of darkness.”

Mu Dan is not a poet noted for the size of his oeuvre. Of his one hundred or so poems preserved today, composed in three phases spanning over forty years, most are short lyrics written before 1948, when the poet was in his 20s. This was followed by a brief and faltering “resurrection” during the year 1956–1957, which saw a mere eight short poems, some unpublished at the time. These were neither particularly good poems in their own right, nor were they politically correct. They did not save him from being designated a Counter-revolutionary Rightist. A string of subsequent events hit him hard: he was deprived of his teaching post (1958); he had to do supervised labour, first in the university library (1958–62), then, in a series of labour camps (1966–68). He endured

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4 MD, 91.
6 Xie Mian, “Yì ke xìng liang zai tianbian” (A Star in the Sky), in SJW, 335.
many rounds of persecution during which he was the subject of open criticism and
denunciation in mass rallies; had half his hair shaved off, in the humiliating manner
known as the Yin-yang hair style; and his home was constantly searched, with his
personal possessions being either destroyed or confiscated. Later, from 1969 to 1972, he
was sent to do three years of hard labour in a number of rural places as part of a forced
re-education program. His diaries and correspondence with his family members during
this period record the numerous physical hardships and illness he suffered. His died
prematurely in February 1977—due to heart failure as a complication of thighbone
surgery (femoral shaft).

But what separated Mu Dan from most Chinese writers and intellectuals at the
time was his unwavering dedication to his art, which demanded exceptional resolve and
commitment in a difficult situation. Mu Dan’s translations of the poems of Pushkin, and
especially of Byron’s *Don Juan* at a later stage, were carried out and completed at a time
of severe physical strain and mental anguish, inflicted on him by the political situation.
This painstaking effort, which continued till the very last months of his life, contributed
to the revival of his own poetry, and transformed it at a profound level.

The last spurt of creation—twenty-seven poems or more—came from 1975 to early 1977, when the Cultural Revolution was coming to an end and many signs of
renewal were being felt throughout China. This period represents another burst of
spontaneous invention and creativity, expressed in a more mature and modified style
combining vision and simplicity of form—a burst that was only to be cut short by his
unexpected death. This peculiar trajectory of poetic development is extraordinary among
his contemporaries, and indeed, among all Chinese writers in modern literary history.

Mu Dan is generally recognized as one member of the Nine Leaves group of poets. Other members of this grouping of young poets, loosely formed in the 1940s, include: Du Yunxie 杜運燮 (1918–2002), Zheng Min 鄭敏 (1920–), Yuan Kejia 袁可嘉 (1921–2008), Xin Di 辛笛 (1912–2004), Hang Yuehe 杭約赫 (1917–1995), Chen Jingrong 陳敬容 (1917–1989), Tang Qi 唐祈 (1920–1990), and Tang Shi 唐湜 (1920–2005). As the most avant garde poets of their time, they developed and matured in the 1940s, rallying round two literary magazines, Shi chuangzuo 詩創作 (Poetry Creation) (July 1947–June 1948) and Zhongguo xinshi 中國新詩 (Chinese New Poetry) (June 1948–October 1948). As a group, however, their fame was not established until 1981, when the first anthology of their works was published under the title Jiuye 九葉. By that time, most of the members had ceased writing any form of poetry for over three decades. The reason behind their collective silence was more political than aesthetic. Their ideas were incompatible with the officially sanctioned “literature in uniform 穿制服的文學,” and they ran a high risk of being purged or persecuted.

Amid their collective silence during the post-1949 period, it was Mu Dan who was heard as the lone voice of the group, even though his own output was so slight, until his last burst of creation in the late 1970s. During this “silent” period, he mainly devoted himself to the translation of certain foreign poets such as Pushkin and Byron. Through the portrayal of characters such as Don Juan, he recorded his personal fall and recovery; his sufferings and remorse were further represented in in his own late poems against the

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broader picture of state and power, of social amelioration, and of the revival of the human conscience.

The reception of Mu Dan’s poems can be conveniently divided into four phases:

1. 1946–1948: Reviewers at this time included Wang Zuoliang 王佐良 and Yuan Kejia from the Nine Leaves group, with their emphasis placed on Mu Dan’s modernism assessed against the background of the evolution of Chinese new poetry. Wang Zuoliang’s essay, “A Chinese Poet,” first published in the London-based periodical *Life and Letters* in 1946, is the only full-length analysis of Mu Dan’s early work from this period, and set the tone for the critical reception of Mu Dan until recently. Wang’s panoramic survey of Mu Dan, covering some main characteristics of the young poet’s creative practice (imagery, language, lyrical mode, source of inspiration), is at times sharp and perceptive (for example, his reference to Mu Dan’s “thought with the body” and his use of fresh colloquial language that produces a spectacular “razor edge” sharpness).  

10 But generally, Wang’s reading of Mu Dan is impressionistic and lacks a clear, systematic approach.

Later, Mu Dan appeared briefly in Yuan Kejia’s series of expositions of modern poetry, which emphasized the blending of poetic imagination and realistic illustration.  

11 Yuan Kejia, *Xinshi xiandai hua* (On Modernization of the New Poetry) (Beijing, Sanlian: 1988), 8–9, 219–23. Yuan’s influential essays on the modernization of Chinese poetry were published in a number of magazines and newspapers, such as *Wensue zazhi* (Literary Magazine) and *Da gong bao*, during the period between 1946 and 1948.

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However, Yuan’s essays give more of a generalized view of the characteristics of modern poetry than an analysis of any particular poet.

2. 1949–1978: These three decades were the invisible years. Mu Dan’s work in this period is preserved in the very private memories of a small group of friends. Upon returning from the US in 1953, Mu Dan shifted his energy to the translation of foreign poetry and literary theory. The poet Mu Dan is supplanted by the translator Zha Liangzheng, with few even realizing that the two were actually one person. The only reminder beyond China of Mu Dan’s poetic identity in this period is the inclusion of his two poems (“From Hungry China” and “There Is No Nearer Nearnness” (excerpted from “Eight Poems”) in *A Little Treasure of World Poetry* (1952), published by New York-based Scribners.\(^\text{12}\)

3. 1979–1988: These years saw the re-emergence of Mu Dan’s poetry marked by the publication of *Selected Poems by Mu Dan* (1986) and a commemorative volume, *A Nation Has Risen* (1987). The latter book contains articles and short essays from the poet’s former friends and colleagues: commemoration and a new recognition of the poet’s life and general achievement are the dominant theme. The poet Mu Dan is reunited with the translator Zha Liangzheng, who produced truly exceptional masterpieces of translation such as *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin*.\(^\text{13}\)

4. 1989–present: This is the period in which Mu Dan’s work began to be widely and favorably received. The key event is the publication of *Twentieth Century Literary Masters of China*, a voluminous anthology compiled by the influential Hainan Publishing


\(^\text{13}\) Du Yunxie, Yuan Kejia and Zhou Yuliang, eds., *Yi ge minzu yijing qilai* (*A Nation Has Risen*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin, 1987), 78–85, 86–93.
House in 1994, which ranks Mu Dan first (i.e. most significant) in the list of all Chinese poets in the modern era. There was a wave of articles and essays, encouraged by the newly found manuscripts and materials relating to the poet’s life, reflecting a dramatic rise of scholarly interest in Mu Dan. Studies of his poetry broadened their scope to cover wider areas of his writing: motifs and implications (political, social, cultural, religious), style and form (language, imagery and metaphor, lyrical mode), and the assessment of his contribution to Chinese modern poetry (tradition and modernism, westernization and vernacularization). To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the poet’s death three books were published: *Collected Poems* (1996), *Allusion of the Snake* (1997), *Abundance and Its Pain* (1998). *Collected Poems* is fully annotated to give each poem the exact time of completion and publishing details; a chronicle of Mu Dan’s life is appended to the end of the book. In the meantime, a special website, “Mu Dan Memorial Hall,” was set up to pay tribute to the poet.

Entering the new millennium, major publications include a two-volume *Collected Poems and Writings* (2007), an eight-volume *Translations of Mu Dan* (2005), *Rebirth of the Poetic Spirit: Studies of Mu Dan’s Translations of English Poetry* (2007), *Annals of Mu Dan* (2010), to name but the most important. More essays and articles appeared in academic journals, literary and popular magazines, and websites. Mu Dan started to attract immense interest from overseas translators and sinologists, among them, Michelle

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Yeh and John Minford,\textsuperscript{16} others among the young generation of overseas scholars also devoted significant amounts of time and energy to the study of Mu Dan.\textsuperscript{17}

Yi Bin, author of the most comprehensive book so far on the poet, \textit{Mu Dan and the Historical Reconstruction of Chinese New Poetry} (2010), gives an overview of the study of Mu Dan over the past two decades, and the prospects of comprehension and reception of his poems within the broader context of the development of Chinese poetry. The questions he raises include: a) What subjects and issues does Mu Dan raise in relation to modern Chinese poetry? b) What perspectives and visions does Mu Dan have on Chinese literary history, and how do they contribute to constructing a new poetic tradition and fostering a new imagination? c) What subjects and areas are yet to be uncovered, or have been subject to misreading and miscomprehension in current studies of Mu Dan?\textsuperscript{18} In view of the deepening passion for Mu Dan, Yi calls for the participation of more social groups (poets and writers, general readers, Chinese and linguistic researchers, overseas sinologists) and the engagement of as many channels of communication and media as possible (secondary education, present-day periodicals, forums and blogs on the internet, etc.)\textsuperscript{19} The key is to maintain the intensity and the

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\textsuperscript{17} Among them, Huiwen (Helen) Zhang, who contributed some fine translations of Mu Dan’s poems, and Yanhong Zhu, the author of \textit{Reconfiguring Chinese Modernism: The Poetics of Temporality in 1940s Fiction and Poetry} (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2009).

\textsuperscript{18} Yi Bin, \textit{Mu Dan yu zhongguo xinshi de lishi jiangou} (Mu Dan and the Historical Reconstruction of Chinese New Poetry) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue, 2010), 417–23.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Mu Dan’s Poetry and Translations

As a group the Nine Leaves poets share a set of formal and stylistic characteristics. They are preoccupied with the Self and its inherent paradoxes and struggles, they use metaphor as a principle of organization, and frequently draw references from Western thought and literature. They prefer light satire and irony, a witty and skeptical urbanity, and apply a complex approach in order to achieve a dramatic poetic expression. At the centre of their spiritual enterprise are a “sense” and “truth” that transcend everyday reality. As firm followers of the New Criticism, they echo in their spiritual approach and poetic methodology the new critics’ exploration of the “world’s body” of concrete experience.

The modern art of poetry, like all forms of modern art, undergoes a process of “transition and chaos, creation and de-creation.” Thus one of the primal concerns for the modern poet is to create coherence out of incoherence through recording their own fragmented experience. This understanding has also underpinned the collective poetic undertaking of the Nine Leaves poets.

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21 The expression was originally used by John Crowe Ransom, in his book The World’s Body (1938), in which he takes the position that poetry and science furnish different but equally valid knowledge about the world. In James Magner’s interpretation of Ransom, poetry as an aesthetic representation can lead the reader to a surer and deeper knowledge of its correlative—the world, in the fullness and realness of its “body.” From the critic’s point of view, a critic always wishes to be faithful to the reality of “the world’s body.” See James E. Magner, Jr., John Crowe Ransom: Critical Principles and Preoccupations (The Hague: Mouton & Co., Publishers, 1971), 11–12.

Mu Dan experimented with a number of methods and styles in his early effort to embrace and express his “constantly amalgamating disparate experience.”\textsuperscript{23} His practice in general conformed to the overarching rule of modern poetry as, in the words of T. S. Eliot and Yuan Kejia, something “more comprehensive, allusive, indirect.”\textsuperscript{24} It proved a difficult task for the young Mu Dan. His still limited understanding of the range and the possibilities of Chinese poetry was reflected at various levels and in various aspects of poetic writing: subject matter and form, mode and style, language and emotion, sign and symbol. The depicted plight of modern life and the internal landscape of modern consciousness in many of his early poems are compellingly fresh but also give the impression of being rigid, awkward, or over-elaborated.

In his later representations, his world experience is mediated by a deepened and modified historical consciousness to accommodate fate, social conflict and evolution, and to protest against the evil manifestation of power. Past tumult is absorbed into a calm, reflective mode of narrative; past and future, tradition and the modern converge into the irresistible moment of the present in poetic perception. The revived self, with its more secured place in human history, suggests the rebirth of a poet coming out of a prolonged aphasia—a poet furnished with a reinforced sense of both the past and the present. To cite Eliot’s proposed role of the modern poet:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 247. Eliot’s views on this subject are reiterated in Yuan Kejia’s series of essays, which will be discussed in detail in the third chapter of this dissertation.
timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.  

Some poets grow, some simply unfold. Mu Dan falls between these two categories: while there are constant changes and modifications in his technique, in his attitude and notion of life and aesthetics, there is also something unique, unchanging, and recognizable in his poetry—in the tone of his rhetoric, in his rhythm and syntax, in his imagery and metaphor. His poems may sometimes give the impression of being self-indulgent or overwrought, but they never appear flaccid and dull. At their best, they exhibit immense verbal energy and metaphoric vividness to master the depths and heights of human experience; they show strong formal principles operating beneath the surface of the poems in the exploration of a variety of themes—love and death, self and society, time and nature, God and transcendence. In his less successful moments, he can be overwhelmed, and undone, by his own intelligence or wit, as these are incorporated into a dubious metaphysic. These are the moments when he appears keener to make a point than to be a poet, to represent a specific poetic experience. But in either case, Mu Dan never fails to present the self-motivated, sincere, unaffected voice of an independent poet.

Satire and irony are important features of Mu Dan’s lyrics. They are used as the main weapons, in his exposure of a corrupted society and of human vice. His use of satire, however, underwent significant changes throughout his career, and was only truly

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mastered in his last creative years. To appreciate fully the richness of this poetic use of satire, as genre and as rhetoric, the reader must look into almost every element of Mu Dan the poet—his native ability, his motivation, his temperament, and his own experience, the raw materials that he had to work with.

Satire in his poems is typically intellectual, and its ends are in constant danger of being defeated by its means—by his own use of allusion, by the limit of his understanding, and on many occasions, by his wit. The reading of this type of satire relies on the engagement of the reader, on his or her own wisdom and judgment. In Mu Dan’s last poems, the incisiveness of thought is retained, and its roundabout method of expression seems to engage the readers automatically through carefully elaborated dramatic scenes. While he habitually speaks through a persona, he also succeeds in transforming a morbid social experience into a grueling poetic entertainment. Poems such as “Performance 演出” and “Self 自己” raise uneasy questions for readers who have suffered from the experience of comparable horrors, questions that impose an indelible burden on the reader—how people submit to power, how they act, and have acted, in complicity with evil, how they have traded their “hearts of gold” for a life of slander, fear and disgrace:

But no one knows how many hearts of gold have been betrayed. Everywhere fake notes are in circulation. What they buy is not a resounding cry of sympathy, But numb indifference beneath the sound of loud applause.

(The last stanza of “Performance 演出,” CP, 317)
Meanwhile another world was posting bills for a missing person.
His disappearance surprised the vacant room,
Where another dream was waiting for him to dream,
And numerous rumours were ready to give him a shape
Hinting at an unwritten biography:
was that the real me?

(Another world was posting bills for a missing person,
His disappearance surprised the empty room,
A dream was waiting for him to dream,
And numerous rumors were ready to give him a shape
Hinting at an unwritten biography:
Was that the real me?)

(The last stanza of “Self 自己,” CP, 335; tr. Pang, 264)

With their political undertone and strong moral implications, these poems remain challenging even to present-day readers. Although Mu Dan did not give answers to these questions, readers were and still are at once amazed by his bleak views and their relevance to their own lives, and feel compelled to explore solutions in their own way. The relentless relevance of Mu Dan’s poetry to the reader lies in the shared perception that irony is “in the eye of the beholder.” Readers feel they belong in the same company and respond accordingly, wishing to acquire further knowledge of the historical context both of the poet and of their own age.

This is how Mu Dan’s poems, especially his last poems, affect readers’ way of thinking. They invite readers to develop a more complex and forthright attitude to life, and encourage them in their own pursuit of truth and meaning.

27 In his discussion of irony, Muecke identifies four elements that constitute an ironic situation: formal qualities, the duality, the opposition of its terms, and the element of alazony. The last element concerns the victim’s confident imperception or ignorance of there being anything in the situation beyond what he sees. By contrast, the observer of an irony must have a sense of irony. See D. C. Muecke, Compass of Irony (London, 1969), 100.
The Goddess of Destruction, Death at your feet,
Proliferate in our hearts, day after day:
Beliefs, they wither, take shape or die
In our ever growing doubt.

(The last stanza of “The Symbol of Anguish 苦悶的象征,” CP, 209)

O! Each and every sense sinks into the material world—
What message can I project through this window?
What heaven can save me from “Now”?

(The last stanza of “Drowning 沉没,” CP, 341)

Mu Dan is painfully aware of the infinity of world experience and of his own limitations, and comes to the conclusion that any comprehension of life and society must be open to multiple interpretations. It is necessary to maintain the co-existence of incongruities, as part of one’s survival in a corrupt society.

Mu Dan is, however, not a standard satirist. He never hurls himself into the fray, he remains “a remote enemy, a sphinxlike counselor, a spectator both involved in and detached from the human comedy.”²⁸ His last poems give the impression of a man who returns from an intense and direct confrontation with the very evils to which he has fallen victim. He defiantly proclaims, as would any real satirist, that as a poet he can never be

indifferent to good and evil. Thus he declares that all that exists is rational.\textsuperscript{29} At least in his poetry, he puts himself at the centre of conflicts and tumults involving the individual, the state, and the larger human community, which together constitute the plot of his “unwritten biography” (\textit{CP}, 335). The fierceness and intensity of the way in which he depicts the wretched condition of the average people around him is itself the testament of an era when poetry was still a matter of life and death. Mu Dan was a splenetic satirist reminiscent of Beaty’s reading of Byron:

\begin{quote}
But the satirist, unlike the less complicated comic writer, is obliged, if he strives to rise above the level of mere denunciation, to put his comic talents in the survival of splenetic tendencies, for he must debase some target so that it becomes absurd in the eyes of the world. He cannot, like the writer of comedy, suspend his moral judgment and observe with detached amusement the follies of humanity.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Throughout his life, Mu Dan had always taken a stand for genuine, unfettered literature by following his own heart in the revaluation of truth, ideals and norms in our society. The events that became figures in his poems serve not only as a record of past folly and atrocity, but also as a corrective force and source of inspiration toward the future. His poetry was not meant to be cathartic, but was driven mostly by a thirst for truth and for amelioration. And exactly because of this thirst, his acute awareness of old age, a debilitating illness, and a prevalent feeling of loneliness and disillusionment channelled his remaining energy into the new cause, in which poetry would regain its previous lofty moral stature. Mu Dan’s self-assigned mission was to save the “sinking

\textsuperscript{29}“Being a writer, the satirist wages a phony war on human vices and follies. In addition, he is an adversary who scrupulously respects commonly accepted conventions by shunning extremes (e.g., excessive violence, excessive accepted didacticism, and excessive sophistication), and he is a moralist who hints at, or briefly states, his norms and prompts the reader to infer them from his cues. Like the ironist, he asks us to fill in the blanks.” Ibid.

boat 沉船 of poetry (from a letter, *JXJ*, 227) in a time of human calamity. By so doing, a poet could be an indispensable figure, indeed perhaps the indispensable figure, in the history of Chinese self-consciousness.

Mu Dan also saw translation as part of this mission. The unprecedented passion for Mu Dan in recent times is fuelled partly by the recognition of his achievements as a prolific literary translator. Among his Chinese contemporaries perhaps only Bian Zhilin can emulate him in terms of the quantity and quality of foreign poetry they translated into Chinese. The range of Mu Dan’s translations includes Pushkin, Tyutchev, Blake, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and more recent names such as Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Auden. The list can be extended to the then pre-eminent Russian literary critics such as L. I. Timofeev and V. G. Belinsky, to complete the repertoire of a truly remarkable translator.

Under Communist rule, poets such as Ai Qing 艾青 and He Qifang 何其芳 strove to explore a way through the political minefield in the hope of emerging safely on “the other side.”³¹ After 1951, Mu Dan almost stopped writing poems altogether and dedicated himself to the translation of others. In hindsight, it was a wise decision that helped him survive an intense physical and mental ordeal. Not only did it offer a means to “please a shadow,” to placate his creative impulse,³² it also laid the foundation for his resurgence in the last two years of his life, when a flood of new poems testified to his restored poetic vigour.

For any real poet-translator, the act of translating is never a casual enterprise. Rather, it is always a deliberate part of the poet’s programme—a discipline in poetic

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³¹ Loewen writing of Soviet poets, in *Most Dangerous Art*, 91.

language, and a source of nourishment for the development of congenial themes.  

Symbolically, the poet-translator has to negotiate what Paul Celan called the “dark relationship” between two poetic languages and means of expression:

The individual language of the poet and the individual language of the translator stay in the realm of darkness, of the “evening land;” both languages remain excluded from light … Darkness being a positive and constitutive quality of poetry that has its origin in the opacity of individual language to each other.

For Paul Celan, the conversation partnership between the poet and the translator, as he identified it in the relationship between himself and Mandelstam, is based on the articulation of individuation through the language of another—by overcoming the intrinsic nature of linguistic opacity: “This obscurity,” Celan says, “if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter.”

The two minds communicate by making the perceptions and impressions of the teller visible and intelligible to the hearer; it demands that translation be expanded into the realm of poetic creation to incorporate the primal means of composition: words and sentences, images and symbols.

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33 Frank Wood discerned this tendency among modern poets such as Rilke. See Rainer Maria Rilke: The Ring of Form (New York: Octagon Books: 1970), 131.


In the Chinese context, foreign poetry had served as a vital reference in the development of modern Chinese poetry.\(^{37}\) Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, for instance, proposes that a translator should be very mindful of the richness and variety of the resources that can be used by the “native” Chinese language; that a translator should avoid the narrow conception of “national form” in language.\(^{38}\) Despite their fundamental difference on principles and practical methods of translation,\(^{39}\) Mu Dan’s own practice shows agreement between the two in regard to their emphasis on the “clear, rhythmic feeling” expressed in the “internal musicality of the language.”\(^{40}\) In terms of music, Mu Dan is perhaps more versatile and effective at combining the “spoken melody” with the “written melody” advocated by Bian.\(^{41}\) The result is a more balanced, plain, and solemnly elegant form.

Mu Dan maintains that the criterion whereby a translator’s production should be judged is the overall level of faithfulness to the original, together with a comparatively free treatment of details; it is up to the translator’s discretion to alter the source text by either expanding or compressing it in a bold and creative way to avoid “replication of a

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\(^{37}\) Bian Zhilin, in his “Shinian lai de waiguo wenxue fanyi he yanjiu gongzuo” (The past decade of translation and research work in foreign literature), *Wenxue Pinglun*, No.5, (1959): 59, proclaimed that formal aspects of modern Chinese verse were still in an undecided state: “if we use what common features may exist as between the basis of our nation’s traditional poetic formal principles and the basis of foreign poetic principles, as such as possible using comparable formal principles to translate foreign poetry, if we are successful, this will serve as a valuable reference point for our establishing formal principles for New Poetry.” Quoted from Lloyd Haft, *Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry* (Dordrecht and Cinnaminson: Foris Publications, 1983), 115.


\(^{40}\) Haft, *Pien Chih-lin*, 59.

\(^{41}\) Ibid, 112.
film negative 照相底片的翻印。”

Such a notion conforms to the general principles laid out by Andre Lefevere on the same subject. Mu Dan’s translation of Pushkin, on which his argument hinges, shows exactly how he placed the spirit, meaning, and style of the poetic texts ahead of the assemblage of the correspondent words, in order to achieve the same effect as the original. The principle is, in the words of Chukovsky, “smile for smile, music for music, emotional tone for emotional tone.”

Translation is one more way in which art declares its presence. It begins like original poetry in an experience, but the experience takes the form of re-creating what has already been created and trying to repeat the unique and unrepeatable. This rather subtle and complex practice is concerned with the subject matter, symbols, diction and rhetoric of the source and target text that together constitute “a universe of interacting strains and tensions.” And as a source of reference attained through reading and treatment of the poetic texts and symbols of others, translation lends a great deal to the poet’s creation of his own verse. The creative practice tends to feature stealing, rather than mere borrowing,

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43 “[A translator should] possess the ability to understand the source text as a total structure, to measure both its sense and communicative value and to replace both by their equivalents in the target language, to topicalize culture-bound and explain structure-bound elements, and to select a form within their literary tradition which is as closely equivalent as possible to the form of the source language.” See Andre Lefevere, “The Translation of Poetry: Some Observations and a Model,” Comparative Literature Studies 12.4 (1975): 384, 392.


by the poet-translator from the one he or she has translated. To cite a famous passage from T. S. Eliot in his comments on Philip Massinger:

One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.\textsuperscript{46}

The creative process is highly selective and adaptable, and this contributes to the cultivation of the poet’s own style. The indelible personal imprint of the poet means that a poet’s translation is likely to become an intrinsic part of his own poetry, rather than running parallel to it.\textsuperscript{47}

One great example is Mu Dan’s “Autumn 秋” (1976), a late poem that recalls Keats’s famous ode bearing the same title. According to Albrecht, the dominant theme of Keats’s ode is the resolving of pain and suffering into truth which is beauty.\textsuperscript{48} This observation is passionately reiterated by Mu Dan in his own brief exposition of Keats.\textsuperscript{49} In his own poem “Autumn,” there is the same fulfilling union between the ideal and the real. Mu Dan’s autumn, like Keats’, is represented as a time of growth and maturation,

\textsuperscript{46} Eliot, \textit{Selected Essays}, 206.


\textsuperscript{48} W P. Albrecht, \textit{The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy: A Study of Critical Theory from Dennis to Keats} (The University Press of Kansas, 1975), 143.

\textsuperscript{49} Mu Dan, translator’s note on \textit{Selected Poetry of Keats} (1957), JXJ, 145.
but also as an omen of approaching death. This omen of death finds expression in the image of the impending chaos and destruction:

This is the gentle adieu before he takes his leave,
Before his words wither and fall like rain.
...

O, the chattering of waves, the dancing of tree shadows,
The wheat fragrance, permeate my soul.
But stern winter is issuing its declaration of war
From this peaceful, autuminal harbour.

這是他遠行前柔情的告別，
然后他的語言就紛紛凋謝
...

呵，水波的喋喋，樹影的舞弄，
和谷禾的香才在我心裡擴散，
卻見嚴冬已遞來它的戰書，
在這恬靜的、秋日的港灣。

(“Autumn 秋,” CP, 337–38)

Death proclaims itself to the poet as a “gentle adieu,” to endorse—in the words of Harold Bloom—“an acceptance of process beyond the possibility of grief.” There is no open conflict, there is no “dramatic debate, protest, and qualification.” There is only the restated matrimony between truth and beauty and its superiority to time and space. The mood of Mu Dan’s “Autumn” is one of calm introspective anticipation, facilitated and guided, as with Keats, by the “ordering power of the poet’s mind.” Still, there is a

52 Bate, John Keats, 583.
53 Ibid, 135.
flicker of sadness playing over the poet’s awareness of his own senescence—only to be superseded by his concern for the plight of humanity, and for its fate, which can be detected over the uncharted waters beyond the “peaceful, autumnal harbour.” With this, he makes it clear that although he is in no position to prevent further sufferings on his own part, he is at least better prepared for it. Beyond the cycle of death and renewal, mankind needs to be, and will eventually become, more determined and stronger. This shows Mu Dan’s creative extension of Keats’ original work. His poem should not be read as a substitute for his predecessor’s, but as a developed and meaningful extension of the previous model. He follows his own designated path and passes Ezra Pound’s “test of sincerity” by adapting Keats’ rhetoric and material for his own use. As a genuine poet, he allows his imagination to take wing, and makes his creation “richer in shared association.”

This process of poetic creation, of poeticizing, is facilitated by the intervention of the unconscious, as in the creative process of translation. And this intervention is especially so in the realization of Mu Dan’s last poems. I refer to Sliz’s remarks on the evasive nature of poetic creation:

The supreme moment of it, with its intense concentration and self-forgetfulness, is not suited to self-observation … one must rely on memory and as far as the process is unconscious, it is beyond the reach even of the poet’s mind.


55 Albrecht, Sublime Pleasures, 142–43.

56 Walter Sliz, “Otto Ludwig and the Process of Poetic Creation,” PMLA 60.3 (1945): 861. Some scholars maintain that the authority of the unconscious provides the “very dynamic of poetic inspiration,” as illustrated in the works of Jung. See Perk Tyler, “Jung’s Emblems, the Poet’s Enigmas,” Poetry 77.3 (1950): 171.
What has been borrowed or learnt, is at most a plan, an abstraction. There is a need to “put flesh on these bones.”\textsuperscript{57} If borrowed elements are involved, it is the poet’s obligation to erase all traces of intention to imitate, by following first and foremost his own instinct.

Mu Dan’s last poems appear much simpler and more entire than his earlier work, organized in a way that expresses most effectively what he had to say. He was less concerned with techniques, with the propriety and decorum of modernism, which he had so eagerly adhered to in his early writings. He retained a sharp eye for the phenomena of life, not allowing himself to be carried away by his own misfortunes, which could potentially have paralyzed his imagination. It is this special mode of working that deserves praise, because it gives the poet what Lydia Ginzburg describes as an “orientation towards authenticity.”\textsuperscript{58} It is this authenticity that not only brings forth the multitude of forms,\textsuperscript{59} but also the sublimation of the materials he had to handle.

\textbf{Revaluation of the Mu Dan Phenomenon 穆旦現象}

\textsuperscript{57} Sliz, 861.

\textsuperscript{58} Lydia Ginzburg, \textit{On Psychological Prose}, trans. and ed. Rosengrant Judson (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 105. Ginzburg’s view is not predicated on the truth of fact, but rather the transformation from fact to significant taking place in literature such as memoir.

\textsuperscript{59} As Mandelstam observes of the great masters of poetry: “There is not just one form in Dante, but a multitude of forms. One is squeezed out of another….He himself says: Io Premerei di mio concetto il suco (Inferno, XXXII, 4) – ‘I would squeeze the juice out of my idea, out of my conception.’ That is, he considered from something that is squeezed out, not as that which serves as a covering … In this way strange as it may seem, form is squeezed out of the content-conception which, as it were, envelops the form … But only if a sponge or rag is wet can something be wrung from it … we will never squeeze any form of out of it (the conception) unless the conception is already a form itself.” Quoted from Osip Mandelshtam: Selected Poems, tran. James Greene (Penguin Books: 1989), xx.
Mu Dan’s poetry demonstrates how inseparable public events are from the course of literature. Unlike Mandelstam, he did not attract immediate recognition from either his well-wishers or enemies. The reasons behind the oblivion into which Mu Dan sank are complex. They might be concerned with his own temperament, his social connections, his aesthetic assertions, or his moral and political convictions. It is equally hard to tell how long the recent attention given to his poetry will be sustained. But one thing is indisputable—he will never enjoy the cult status once enjoyed by the Misty or Menglong poets and their immediate successors in the 1980s and 1990s. That “cult of poetry,” as Michelle Yeh observes, reveals the almost religious significance of poetry in the Chinese context of that time and the concurrent image of the poet as the high priest of poetry. Since the fading of this cult, poetry no longer presents itself as a powerful force shaping people’s thoughts and actions.

The attention paid to Mu Dan is neither built on the news value of a best-selling author, nor on the public response to any particular ideas or experiences of the poet—the sudden enthusiasm for his work and the praise awarded it are more about the recognition of a humble, modest man who is the very emblem of true poetry. It is concerned almost exclusively with the naked existence of the poetry alone, which functions, in the words of Frye, with the force of the “contemporary primitive.”

Although his work was originally written in the context of a totalitarian socialist society, it can now be read as the raw and

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62 Poetry may appeal to readers with no specific literary training or interest as an imaginative verbal experience. See Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 141.
uncompromising voice of a poet, summoned to hold off the incessant assaults of today’s pragmatic, hedonistic culture.

The rise of Mu Dan has coincided with the decline of high idealism in the past two decades, as consumerist culture has increasingly taken hold of Chinese society. With the new ethos, there are new challenges to society—social injustice, alienation, historical oppression, and the loss of a sense of meaning that was guaranteed in the previous social and ideological system. We are now living in a time when truth is more elusive than it has been in the past. The prevalent anguish, the pervasive fear and sickness of this sterile new era were foretold by one of the Misty cult members, the theorist, Zhou Lunyou (b. 1952):

“Commodities are more gentle, more direct than violence. More cruel too, pushing the spirit toward total collapse.”

According to Michelle Yeh, the cult of poetry thrives on the clash between the ideal and reality, unfolding around a number of polarized forces: the profane world versus the divine realm of poetry, “material beggars” versus “spiritual aristocrats,” marginalization versus the official mainstream. The ascendance of one pole since the 1990s, namely the secular, materialistic one, has virtually seen the debasement and disintegration of poetry and the cult of poets toward the pole it once fiercely opposed.

The “cult of poetry” in the post-Mao China is a paradox. It advocates creative freedom and individuality; however, in elevating poetry to the status of a supreme religion, it imposes arbitrary limits on poetry. It defies the official ideology, yet it is unable to escape entirely the absolutist, Utopian mentality in its worship of the poet

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63 Zhou Lunyou, Feifei (Sichuan): 42. Quoted from Yeh, “Cult of Poetry,” 58.

64 Yeh, “Cult of Poetry,” 62.
and deification of poetry. It resists and detests consumerism, yet it is by no means immune from itself becoming a commodity.\textsuperscript{65}

Yeh’s observation is echoed much more recently by another scholar with an even bleaker view of the status of poetry:

Many poets have made efforts towards this goal [re-establishing the connections of poetry to society]. Some did it as a means of objecting to the deification of politics. However, their efforts are more likely to end up in illusion: in the minds of many people, the subject of poetry has for long ceased to be important … poetry has become something innocuous … having quickly lost its aggression [power to affect lives], and thus its political relevance. In the face of the current raucous and rampant reality, the illusions evoked by word are indeed simply banal.\textsuperscript{66}

The poets of the early 1980s expressed in poetry their moral and intellectual rebirth, as a liberation from long oppression. They were a public phenomenon. By contrast, Mu Dan’s rebirth must be seen in terms of solitary self-preservation and individual self-vindication in an overwhelmingly adverse social and cultural environment. As the result of his painstaking and persevering efforts, readers today can discern in his poems a quintessential image of a “keeper of the flame”—a flame preserved in the dark corners of a secularized and spiritually impoverished society, a flame which has not gone out, but is always “there for all to see.”\textsuperscript{67}

Vaclav Havel once declared: “Without a profound inner longing for sense, there could not then be any wounding by nonsense.”\textsuperscript{68} The deeper experience of life, along

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 77.


\textsuperscript{67} Mandelstam, Hope against Hope, 333.

with the graver challenges confronting the people, will lead to a more desperate search for sense and meaning, for truth and expression. The significance of Mu Dan lies first and foremost in his persistence in his beloved art, which he used as his only weapon to safeguard the endangered qualities of sense and conscience. As a writer and an intellectual, he did what he could by—to cite Havel—“thinking in general terms about the affairs of this world and the broader context of things … professionally.” In his own way, he endeavored to translate philosophical thought into simple principles of action, into writing, writing like a free, indomitable man of conscience. He did not go mad or attempt suicide, like some of the later cult poets did, but always maintained his conscience, his modesty and dignity as a human being, not as a hero or a saint. Though there is an indelible feeling of sadness in his last poems, resulting from his cruel destiny, his defeat at the hand of a vice-ridden society, he made sure that as a survivor he did not “squander” his pain, but that he absorbed and amplified that pain as an integral part of a broader life experience; he refused to bow to the combined forces of society and individual fate, and resisted the tendency toward an “increasingly cold philosophy” (From the poem “On Parting,” CP, 332). Poems such as “On Hearing that I Am Getting Old” (1976) and “Winter” (1976) are the work of a poet who was determined to save a “sinking boat,” with its cargo of the poetic imagination and the human conscience.

Mu Dan’s remained an idealist rather than an ideologue. He did not claim himself to be, like Lermontov, “the possessor of singularly keen insight, pervasive knowledge,

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70 Rilke, “Duino Elegies,” The Tenth Elegy.
and infallible rectitude,” but adhered to his designated role in contrast to the essentially self-pitying, self-gratifying and self-deceiving stereotype of a certain kind of poet. He showed with his writing that there is always a sanctuary for the solitary and the suffering individual. As a person, he may have been modest and unremarkable, but readers can find greatness in his poetry.

In this respect, Mu Dan is the epitome of the collective mission of Chinese poetry in the modern age. The mind of a true poet should be equipped, to use Hart Crane’s words, with “gigantic assimilative capacities, emotion—and the greatest of all—vision.” He or she should be capable of fusing the most intractable forces of our age into a universal vision. As time goes by, this vision will take on additional significance in the future. Though the challenges facing today’s poets are different from those that faced Mu Dan, the role of the poet remains unchanged: he still is, and is destined to be, a mediator “between the most sacred core of the culture and the profane masses.” He is the eliminator of what Mandelstam labels the “poetry disease,” and a fierce opponent of the destructive trend of detachment, self-centredness, and narcissism characteristic of today’s poets. If present-day poets have lost their privileged status, they must learn to earn it again while looking both backwards and forwards. With these considerations in mind, I believe future studies of Mu Dan will become more fruitful and relevant: they will bring


74 The term was coined by Mandelstam to refer to “an army of poets” who show the symptoms of arrogance and self-gratification, along with a lack of respect and general understanding of poetry. See Loewen, Most Dangerous Art, 43.

75 Freidin, Coat of Many Colors, 177.
forth a deeper and more thorough understanding of what poetry can do for people and society, a perspective that is both old and new, private and public, elusive and revealing.

**Method of study and organization**

Mu Dan’s lack of interest in theory and his limited comments on other poets mean that his ideas on poetry can only be implied from his poems themselves. Any attempt to comprehend Mu Dan’s poetry must be first and foremost based on the minute and comprehensive reading of his poetic texts. As Wallace Stevens says: “Poetry is the subject of the poem.”

My proposed study of Mu Dan will be grounded precisely on this act of reading. It is designed to be carried out at two different and interconnected levels: in terms of text and textuality. In terms of textuality, the study will attempt to discern and analyze the main characteristics and implications of his poems, as a whole and in distinctive periods; in terms of text, the focus will be on the social and literary context in which his poetics was conceived and received, on the manner in which he has influenced successive poets. In this sense, the poetry of Mu Dan will be treated as the simultaneous scene of reading and of writing. This “readerly” view of text and textuality is, I believe, revealing and exciting, if one considers the complex and profound social and political context of

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76 Compare T. S. Eliot: “[the] only ideas that the poet can deal with are those directly involved with, and implied by, his own verses.” See *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1957), 26.


78 In literary works, things cannot be understood in isolation: they must to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of. See Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd ed. (Manchester University Press, United Kingdom, 2009), especially chapters 1, 8, and 15.
Mu Dan’s prolonged oblivion and subsequent rebirth as a prominent poet. To cite a famous passage from McGann’s acclaimed study:

“Well, of course texts are written or spoken. No one denies that. But texts have to be read in order to be understood. Textuality is a scene in which readers respond to the texts they encounter. If one locates the reader at the center of textuality, it is because the text is passive and silent, because it needs the reader’s activity to infuse it with meaning, to bring it back to life.”

“So reading is a textual activity.”

“Most definitely.”

“But tell me, when and where – and how – does the activity of reading take place? Is it an affair of the mind alone, of the individual standing silent before the mute text, building invisible cities of meaning to unheard melodies of truth? If so, how do we engage with those secret interior texts – if in fact we can call them texts at all?”

While hermeneutics insists on unveiling the true meaning hidden beneath a superfluous one, the texts of Mu Dan’s poetry always encourage extra perspectives and views, precipitating discoveries other than those found in the normal act of interpretation. The reader is encouraged to be more alert and to participate, when confronted with a text that is no longer deemed purely “mute”: “silence is neither our best nor our oldest model of textuality.”

To understand Mu Dan as a phenomenal event, a complete readerly view will be useful and inevitable.

This does not necessarily mean that each reader—the interpreter of the text—is expected to be what Riffaterre proposed to call “the super-reader.” It merely suggests that while Mu Dan’s text draws out a series of “interpretative paths,” the individual reader


81 According to Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 37, the super-reader is not a modest extension of Riffaterre himself. As a reader and interpreter who is willing to pore over the verbal structures of a poem, he is “multiple and void.”
should be encouraged to follow a personal route, to deform or to neglect at will the paths indicated by the text, according to his own objectives and historical situation. These individual efforts combined will lead to a more percipient and more thorough comprehension of Mu Dan, even if it means that this collective input may in fact surpass the initial range of his writing. One reason for this collective widening of scope and enlarged perspective is that, from the viewpoint of psycholinguistics, the author is but one reader among many, one who nonetheless “travels through the same labyrinths,” and yet is capable of “count[ing] his steps, so as to preserve the hope of drawing up the plan of his journey.”

The highly irregular pattern of Mu Dan’s creation—in terms of the number of poems, prolonged hiatus, volatility of productivity and quality—reveals subtle but dramatic shifts in aesthetic orientation and the creative use of external influences. Consequently, the assessment of his poems in one particular period and his poetry as a whole will rely on the readers’ ability to establish connections between the gaps left by the textual existence of his poetry. It is only through this specific approach that a holistic view of Mu Dan’s poetry can be attained. “Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text.”

82 Rastier, Meaning and Textuality, 7.
83 Ibid, 7.
According to Iser, the text is inexhaustible, infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations because it is capable of so many different realizations. Each reader, in filling the gaps in a particular way, necessarily excludes other possibilities. Any reading is inevitably selective and exclusive in that the text necessarily reflects the reader’s “preconceptions,” that is, the baggage the reader brings with him to the text: “the text refers back directly to our own preconceptions.”\textsuperscript{85} The text acts like a “mirror,” reflecting the reader's own “disposition.”\textsuperscript{86}

This act of reading is in essence “the game of imagination” to be played equally, and successively, by the author and the reader. While the text presents itself as a set of rules that guide the playing of the game, it is up to the reader to decide whether to play the game, and how he will enjoy the game, depending on the balance between the blanks and what is explicitly stated in the text.\textsuperscript{87} Consequently, the reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game.\textsuperscript{88}

Mu Dan’s poetry is in this respect an ideal specimen for the game of imagination. It presents itself by oscillating constantly between one pole, of the clarity and tidiness of its form, on the one hand, and the incoherence and unfathomability of its reference on the

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 280.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 281.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 108.
other. On the level of pure hermeneutics, many of his poems tend to be exceedingly obscure: words may be misused, grammar deployed in an awkward way, images too personalized and far-fetched, and the emotions rendered are sometimes either too loose or too heavy-handed. It does not come as a surprise that some scholars such as Zhou Yuliang maintain that a translated version of these poems is sometimes better than the original, in terms of clarity of the messages conveyed. And it is at this point that the concept of “problem areas” will be introduced into this study. As a useful tool in his extensive study of modern Chinese literature, Haft has used it to discern and discuss some of the major subjects of Chinese modern poetry—“traditional versus modern,” “Chinese versus Western,” language and form, thematics and imagery, and the social roles a poet assumes at different ages.

Despite his resourcefulness and innovative flair, Mu Dan has more “problem areas” than most of his contemporary poets. This reflects the very strength and characteristics of his poetry—its complexity, evasiveness, irony and obscurity, qualities which constitute the core of Mu Dan’s modernity. Robert Penn Warren’s description of tension is a fitting illustration of Mu Dan’s “inclusive” texts:

Can we make any generalizations about the nature of the poetic structure? First, it involves resistances, at various levels. There is the tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech … between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language; between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between the beautiful and the ugly; between ideas…; between elements involved in irony…; between prosaisms and poeticisms.

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89 The scholar mentioned here is 周玉良. My interview with Prof. Pang Bingjun on 24 April, 2009.


This is not to say that Mu Dan has always succeeded in creating this sort of tension in his writing. It points rather to the fluctuations and flaws exemplified by his idiosyncratic, richly textured poems. As a body of text, his poetry has established itself as good, but each poem must be judged individually.

One problem area that instantly springs to the mind is the “modernist” tag attached to his poetry in its popular reception. While this affirms the predominant feature of his creation, it also overlooks another important element and source of his imagination: romanticism. Mu Dan immersed himself in the romantic works of Shelley and Byron in his early days, and a thorough reading of his oeuvre shows the influence of the romantic imagination throughout his career. The “problem” is that his romantic disposition has often been tempered by the cold, skeptical “realistic” mind of a modernist. In “A Dream of Nature 自然底夢” (1942), composed upon his return from war, we can sense a romantic alienation from nature, in the remorseful lines “I know that [nature] has awoken, and is weeping without reason;/Bird song, the song of water, unceasing memories 我知道它醒了正無端哭泣./ 鳥底歌，水底歌，正綿綿地回憶” (CP, 154). Romantic illusion expects infinitely more than life can give, until the cruel force of the world intervenes to destroy that dream. On other occasions, he ruefully admits that his exalted blue blood is tainted by human vice and that our world is overshadowed by a giant wheel, that fetters all people as slaves:

The passenger alights from a phantom flight,  
Forever arrives at a wrong station.  
But he, sacrificial victim beneath an iron hand  
Surrenders to the wishes of others.
These early poems show Mu Dan’s transformation from an inborn romanticist to a bitter cynic, through expressions of sadness and horror, protest and submission. In his later years, he developed a more complete, plain style to accommodate the two narratives, the romantic and the modern, to mould a truly personal style. It is for this reason Mu Dan remained partly a romanticist, albeit a crypto and subtle one, “parading as a realist.”

Another problem area is related to the “un-Chinese” character of Mu Dan’s poetry—a quality that affirms his thorough-going modernism. However, a thorough reading of Mu Dan’s poems, especially the late ones, suggests that the spirit of Chinese classicism has never been totally dispelled from his poetic endeavour. His revived passion for classical poetry in fact played a vital role in the forging of his richer, reformulated late style. The exceptional multi-faceted richness of his poetry as a whole is often neglected by scholars, who tend to restrict themselves to a simplistic notion of poetry and of the making of a strong poet like Mu Dan. Mu Dan’s development as a poet underwent continuous change and modification of both principle and form, resulting in a rich corpus of creative work. And the reading of this corpus requires “good judgment.”

To cite I.A. Richards:

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93 This revived passion can be seen in his letters. See Chapter 2 and 4.
Critical certainties, convictions as to the value, and kinds of value, of kinds of poetry might safely and with advantage decay, provided there remained a firm sense of the importance of the critical act of choice, its difficulty, and the supreme exercise of all our faculties it imposes... Only by penetrating far more whole-mindedly into poetry than we usually attempt, and by collecting all our energies in our choice, can we overcome these treacheries within us. That is why good reading, in the end, is the whole secret of “good judgment.”

“Good reading” is a rationalized search for principles to be carried out when reading at the intellectual and moral level—simultaneously unifying and systematic, leading eventually to “self-completion” in the act of critical reading. The “treacheries” indicated in this account are similar to Haft’s “problem areas,” both posing themselves as impediments to a “whole-minded” reading into poetry. They stand in the way of “good reading.”

“Good reading” and “good judgment” are fundamental in the study of Mu Dan, in regard to his poetics, his position and legacy in the context of Chinese literature. My proposed study is not driven by any impulse to idealize, redeem, or justify Mu Dan’s poetry; rather, the inquiry aims to further, through “good reading,” our practical understanding of the relations between Mu Dan’s life and writing, and the sociopolitical context in which they both took place.

Reading of this kind, I hope, will create a criticism that unfolds—in the words of Geoffrey Hartman—as a kind of “echo-chamber,” one that will not only give the reader a glimpse of the true character of Mu Dan’s poetry but also capture its significance, and its power to unsettle our understanding of poetry in general. This approach suggests a “life-situation of the interpreter,” who is also challenged by the same riddles and puzzles

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that once confronted the author.\footnote{Geofferey Hartman, Saving the Text: Literature/Derida/Philosophy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 137.} In other words, as reader and critic, I will inevitably expose my own “hidden life,” which “echoes responsively” to that of the author.\footnote{Hartman, The Fate of Reading and Other Essays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 289.} The subsequent risk of such reading, which is at once intuitive and personal, is worth taking (as Hartman wrote of his own method of reading).\footnote{Hartman, The Unremarkable Wordsworth. Forward Donald G. Marshall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 35, 131.} It is concerned with more than just a set of rules or techniques aimed at converting all expression into a series of generative codes. It is in stark contrast with the almost unreasoning passion of a sophisticated technician, which reflects the barbarous or parochial narrowness of today’s culture.

One problem which immediately arises in the reading of Mu Dan is the lack of biographical materials about the poet. This problem is further complicated by the very few remarks he made about his own work and the work of others. This sometimes makes his poetic motives difficult to detect. To resolve this problem readers need to consider carefully and accept the incoherent and contradictory nature of Mu Dan’s poetry, his own rumination on the impure, mutilated, and fragmentary nature of modern experience, and also his own self-restrained, laconic, in a way enigmatic, personality.

The notion of the intentional fallacy offers partial solution to this problem. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their seminal study, The Intentional Fallacy, maintain that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”\footnote{Wimsatt, William K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. “The Intentional Fallacy,” Sewanee Review 54 (1946): 468.} While a text’s internal evidence, its...
words and meanings, are always relevant to literary analysis, information about the poet's life belongs to literary biography, not literary criticism.\(^{100}\) John Watson echoes with view by saying that art “may disguise the life so effectively as to fool readers merely searching for an interpretative key.”\(^{101}\) This means that, while the work of art can stand alone, information about a writer’s life sheds more light on the creative process, seeing it as moving towards objectification.

Mu Dan’s life and creative work is a vivid illustration of the intentional fallacy. Reading some of his most important poems, the reader may have a strong feeling that what the poems are saying is something beyond the poet’s intention, something which break the bounds of his original design. This is partly because of the working of the subconscious which takes place in the course of poetic creation. Poems have a life of their own. Poems such as “Dream Murmuring of An Old Man” (1976), “The Forming of ‘I’ ‘我’的形成” (1976), and “Winter” open with a depiction of the fierce disagreement between dream and reality, hammering away at the poet’s sober consciousness. But as the poems proceed, the narrative focus shifts to the realm of the subconscious, which offers consolation to the mind in the form of another illusion or dream. As a result, the agonies and pains that beset the poet are overcome and transcended even without his own knowledge.

\(^{100}\) Wimsatt and Beardsley divide the evidence used in making interpretations of literary texts into three categories: internal, external, and contextual. It is the contextual evidence that presents the greatest potential for intentional fallacies of interpretation, and analysis using this type of evidence can easily become more concerned with external evidence than the internal content of the work.

As if in the sleep of a madwoman,
A weird dream flashes and fades away.
She wakes to a brilliant world,
But the same grotesque dream has impaled me.

仿佛在疯女的睡眠中，
一个怪梦一闪就沉没；
她醒来看见明朗的世界，
但那荒诞的夢釘住了我。

("The Formation of ‘I’ ‘我’的形成,” CP, 345–46)

And this old fan, this broken watch, these receipts…
There is no answer now to their riddles.
Ever since she left this world,
Their messages cannot be explained.
But these still objects have retained a lingering warmth
In which dwells her soul.

還有舊扇，破表，收據……
如今都失去了迷底，
自從她離開這個世界，
它們的信息已不可解。
但這些靜物仍有余溫，
似乎居住著她的靈魂。

("Dream Murmuring of An Old Man 老年的夢囈,” CP, 349)

This intricate process shows that Mu Dan’s own intention, implied or explicitly expressed, sometimes serves as a “conditioning” factor rather than the “determining force.”102 The amazing collaboration of the conscious and the unconscious leads to the creation of some truly profound and idiosyncratic poems.

Todorov says: “To isolate an element in the course of an analysis is only an operation; its signification lies in its relation with others.” The act of isolation is particularly desirable in the analysis of Mu Dan’s poetry—isolated elements can include a wide range of subjects such as specific genres, recurring themes and motifs, rhetorical devices, images and metaphors. While some of these elements have been identified and discussed by scholars, many have been neglected or subject to grave miscomprehension.

One such element is the God figure in Mu Dan’s poems. Most scholars have followed Wang Zuoliang, who asserted that Mu Dan has “created a God.” But one must bear in mind that Mu Dan was an atheist throughout his life, coming from no religious background whatsoever, and that he showed little interest in religious matters beyond his poems. Judged by the “internal evidence” acquired from the poems alone, the use of God only reflects Mu Dan’s psychological complexity, as he struggles for meaning in the context of the harshness and chaos of modern experience.

The isolated element may take the form of one single word in Mu Dan’s poetry. A word may occur repetitively and may function as the keystone of a poem’s theme and of its dynamics as they are picked up by other poems. But such a word may assert itself too forcefully and overstretch its normal range of reference. This may result in obscurity of the relation between the word and its literal context. I. A. Richards’s observation on this subject is revealing:

The range of variety with a single word is very little restricted. But put it into a sentence and the variation is narrowed; put it into the context of a whole passage, 


and it is still further fixed; and let it occur in such an intricate whole as a poem and the responses of competent readers may have a similarity which only its occurrence in such a whole can secure.\textsuperscript{105}

One such word that springs to the mind is “abundance 豐富,” which Mu Dan uses in a number of early poems to delineate his worldview and life philosophy, and the relationship between self and society in a specific historical period. As a single word that carries with it enormous weight, it is never explicated and thus causes considerable confusion and misinterpretation among Mu Dan scholars. This is perhaps related to the closed nature of symbolist poetry in general (closed within itself) where meaning tends to elude both the poet and the reader: the self-enclosed world, with its wonderful flights of the symbolist imagination, cannot escape from its symbolic mode of expression. As a word, \textit{fengfu} barely partakes of reality, of life itself—it is obscure, exaggerated, overladen, and poorly articulated. This too, will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Mu Dan’s “self-completion” as a poet reveals strong aesthetic principles and a strong sense of moral judgment. His poetry as a whole shows his own unmistakable and idiosyncratic style, and his readers are informed of the rare quality of many-sidedness, the multi-dimensionality of his art, both from what he has sought and from what he has avoided, both from what he has achieved and from what he is yet to achieve. As his

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Principles of Literary Criticism} (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), 9–10.
former colleagues have written, he could have easily become “another type of poet,” and could have been more accomplished if he had survived longer.

The proposed four chapters of this study will provide readings to address a variety of subjects and characteristics of Mu Dan’s poetry. The first two chapters will be focused on two of the most characteristic and productive periods of Mu Dan’s career, each spanning roughly a single year: 1942 and 1976. These two years, as I will duly reveal, also highlight most intensively the “problem areas” in Mu Dan’s development as a poet: with the first period, we see his psychological dilemma as a typical Chinese writer and its representations in poetry; with the second, we see the “sinking boat” of poetry and the sense of failure and despair depicted and transcended in his post-traumatic reflections. A “good reading” of the poems will be supplemented by an analysis of the sociopolitical contexts of these specific periods.

Chapter three gives an overview and assessment of the entire corpus of Mu Dan’s poetry. The “problem areas” take the form of the specific challenges faced by Mu Dan at different phases of his career: the credo of the Nine Leaves poets set out by Yuan Kejia, Mu Dan’s own purported “new lyricism,” and the synthesizing approach that remolds his practice in the last years. A number of “isolated elements” will be discerned and discussed in lengthy detail: wit and emotion, satire and irony, and the symbolism which thrives especially in his love poems.

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Chapter four will aim to project the poetry of Mu Dan against the wider canvas of the evolution of Chinese poetry, of the continuation between modernity and tradition. My argument will be founded on the revaluation of the popular label of Mu Dan as a downright modernist, which in my view is a potential impediment to the understanding of his poetry. In this chapter, I will try to demonstrate that while the classical spirit may have been out of fashion, it keeps emerging and reasserting itself in the modern text as motif and raw material, as outlook and perspective, icon and image, to be inherited and creatively developed by today’s poets. This will be supported by a number of examples drawing references from Mu Dan and other classical and modern poets.

My reading of Mu Dan will concentrate on the drama of consciousness and maturation embodied in Mu Dan’s poetry. The development of his art echoes Ortega y Gasset’s remarks on Goethe: “the matter of the greatest interest is not the man’s struggle with the world, with his external destiny, but his struggle with his vocation.” In my view, it is the authenticity of that struggle that accounts for the greatness of Mu Dan’s poetry.
Chapter One

Mu Dan’s Poetry in 1942: Transformation and Repudiation

Nineteen forty-two was a special year in the development of Mu Dan’s poetry. With the war against Japan locked in stalemate and the focus of the mainstream Chinese literati solely on the national cause of salvation, the year was a fairly productive but nonetheless monochromatic period for literature. It was the left-wing writers who dominated the literary scene, as observed by Hong Zicheng, and their status was vindicated, in May that year, by Mao’s “Talks on Art and Literature in Yan'an.” Artistic creation, according to the Yan'an talks, must conform to the greater goals of revolution and must remain subservient to the needs of politics. Elitism and the detached pursuit of individual aspirations should hold no place in the making of the people’s history. In light of this prevalent ethos, it should not come as a surprise that Mu Dan remained a largely unnoticed poet whose splendour, in the already quoted words of Xie Mian, barely “penetrated the dense layers of darkness” of wartime Chinese literature.

But it was in this year that Mu Dan proclaimed himself as the worthy heir of the modern trend in Chinese poetry. With his unique voice, he also revealed himself as an exceptionally creative, contradictory, and dispossessed young man. Overall, this most eventful year of his life can be recapitulated briefly in terms of fantasies of love and

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108 Hong Zicheng, Wenti yu fangfa (Problems and Methods) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010), 167–69.


110 Xie Mian, “Yi ke xing liang zai tianbian” (A Star in the Sky), in SWJ, 335.
external forces: in a time of spirited ramble and pleasure, love occurred amid swells of “divine” inspiration; war happened; love was lost to the combined assaults of war and other inimical social forces. Through his physical and spiritual ordeal, the poet Mu Dan finally affirmed and redefined his own humanity.

If Mu Dan suffered immensely in that particular year, he had nonetheless decided to write little about his suffering. Only seven poems were published in the year, all short verses except for one longer eight-part suite. Among them, the first three poems, almost certainly drafted in the previous year, are about love paying tribute to youth; the rest are on the subject of war and its devastating consequences. Despite the paucity of writing, these poems were presented with such remarkable vividness, intensity and depth that they still tap into the imagination of today’s readers. Through these poems, Mu Dan embraced a range of important themes in antithesis—body and soul, mankind and its god figures, the profane and the ideal, illusion and reality. The burst of creative energy propelled his search for the self, but the search was severely hampered by his own hesitation, self-contradiction, and hidden lethargy.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the dramatic change in Mu Dan’s poetry during this particular year, by combing through this small trove of poems. Relevant key themes and problems of writing will be identified. This will be followed, in the second part, by an analysis of Mu Dan’s aspirations and challenges, as assessed against the broader sociopolitical context and the ethos of Chinese literature since the May Fourth period. As a radical experimenter in form and style, Mu Dan set himself apart from most of his contemporaries. But despite his natural gift and flair, he struggled to fit his talent into the society of his time, to mediate between his intellect and his emotions, between
sense and reason in his poetry. And in this context, Heidegger’s remarks on the co-belonging of poetry and thought sound ominous: poetry stretches upward towards supreme heights while thought plunges to the abyss to gain depth; only occasionally do the two conjoin to form insurmountable twin summits. Whether one element prevails over or precondition the other depends on the individual poet. In the case of Mu Dan, this constant rift between poetry and thought was characteristic of his writing career, and thus forged his particular style, his subject matter, and his sensibility.

We shall start with the perusal of these poems.

The Poems

“The Advent of Spring”

How Mu Dan reached that personal height of creativity in this particular year is, in a sense, inexplicable. As is the case with all great poets, the hidden mechanism for sudden transformation tends to evade even the most perspicacious mind. A survey of some forty poems he composed in his college years shows diverse influences that had possibly inspired his poetic undertaking in terms of method and selected subject matter. One can easily discern from his rigorous experiments of this period references to various sources: romantic themes and sentiments that are in the vein of Shelley and Yeats; wit and irony that recall directly Auden; there are Prufrock-like soliloquies which hark back to Eliot; there is Whitmanian parataxis, there are motifs and images borrowed possibly from Rilke; there are also shreds of classical texts and allusions woven into the modern context in a mood of playfulness and mockery. Earnest, perhaps also impatient, the young poet

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showed that he had the potential and flair to communicate his moods with passion, despite the technical flaws and immaturity exhibited in these poems.

Conventional Chinese wisdom tends to attribute the transformation of art to an “exquisite hand,” which haphazardly acquires a well-wrought gift from heaven.\(^\text{112}\) One modern interpretation of this cryptic process is from the perspective of spontaneous creativity: when the creative mind is filled to the brim with exuberant emotions or ideas, their expression should not be fettered by present norms and idioms.\(^\text{113}\) Helen Vendler also observes that much in the formation of style takes place unconsciously: “In both random and directed reading, the young poet is insensibly drawn to some predecessors, finds others uninteresting, is unaware as yet of ones soon to be discovered, rejects others as unappealing.”\(^\text{114}\) For Mu Dan, this sense of emancipation, and the exhilaration that follows, comes from an encounter with a world which is at once benevolent and generous to anyone stumbling onto its path:

Thus the world is replete with a myriad circumstances
Peach trees, plum trees, sipping from their diminishing destiny.
Wayfarers roam in the confines of an aromatic garden.
Since we walk under the emblem of a fresh star
The dead wish to be born again from our bodies.

於是世界充滿了千萬個機緣，
桃樹，李樹，在消失的命運裡吸飲，
是芬芳的花園圍著到處的旅人。
因為我們是在新的星象下行走，
那些死難者，要在我們底身上復生；

\(^\text{112}\) Lu You 陸遊 (1125-1210): “Wenzhang ben tiancheng, maoshou ou de zhi” (Literature is heaven-wrought, and acquired by an exquisite hand 文章本天成，妙手偶得之 ). See Qian Zhonglian, *Jiannan shigan jiaolu* (Collation and Annotation of Jiannan Poetry Manuscripts) (Shanghai: Guji, 2005), 4469.


\(^\text{114}\) Vendler, *Coming of Age*, 2.
The “exquisite hand” that holds the goblet of life invites the reader to savor the nectar of flowers. The travelers’ wandering in the sensuous garden, a beatific scene itself, is the begetting from pure chance. They look to a “fresh star” for guidance, their forthcoming voyage blessed with wonders which will rouse the dead from their tombs, and youth from its prolonged slumber.

Although overshadowed by the ongoing war, the image of rebirth brings forth bucolic visions of peace and joy, amid the sufferings of the ordinary people: the moon, the chirping birds, the breeze and waves, and the joyful laugh, join in a jubilant song of gratification. This diorama echoes with the poet’s proposition that “pristine love” is “thicker than ideals,” that love’s sweetness supersedes the taste of blood, and that from this point, the inherent sins of man shall no longer haunt the lovers’ pursuit:

The beast in humanity will no longer devour us,
Just one leap, there where the trail of Morpheus stretches.

人性里的野兽已不能把我们吞食,
只要一跃，那里连续着梦神底足迹；

(“The Advent of Spring 春底降臨,” CP, 143)

It is this bestiality, abandoned in the bellowing sea of human desires, and under the pale violet light of a new world, that calls for a secret companion in love. Love, however, is only illusion, a fallen angels’ daydream: the angels are slightly weary of the “impassive leisure,” of the propriety and the “modest elation” that have flourished in the enchanting

115 All translations of the cited poems in this dissertation are mine unless stated otherwise.
garden. A sense of isolation and ennui emanates from this light satire, against the grave reality outside the garden.

"Spring"

The very title of the next poem, "Spring 春," suggests heightened experience in which the excitement and joy of youth will unfold to the full. This poem is Mu Dan’s own “Song of Myself,” by Whitman, or “To Celebrate Myself,” by Rilke, conceived in the light of the Baudelairean conception of “correspondence.” Its expression is astonishingly new and modern:

Spring

Green flames flicker over the grass;
They yearn to embrace you, flower.
The flower pushes against the earth
In the warm breeze, bringing sorrow, or joy.
If you are awake, push open the window,
And see how beautiful are the desires that fill this garden.

Beneath the azure sky, bewildered by the eternal mystery
Our closed bodies, twenty years old,
Are like the songs of a clay bird;
You are on fire, curling and spiraling
With nowhere to call home.
Oh, light! Colours, sounds and shadows,
All writhing in naked pain
To enter into new combinations.

春

綠色的火焰在草上搖曳,
他渴求著擁抱你，花朵。
反抗著土地，花朵伸出來，
當暖風吹來煩惱，或者歡樂。
如果你是醒了，推開窗子，
看這滿園的欲望多麼美麗。
藍天下，為永遠的迷迷惑著的
是我們二十歲的緊閉的肉體，
一如那泥土做成的鳥的歌，
你們被點燃，卻無處歸依。
呵，光，影，聲，色，都已經赤裸，
痛苦著，等待伸入新的組合。

(CP, 145)

Earlier Mu Dan had uttered a sigh of unrequited yearning in another garden, where the same grass and flowers wavered in sweet isolation (“The Garden 园,” CP, 41). With “Spring” the transfigured world has new implications: “if you are awake, push open the window,” implies that the dreamer is still in the dream and that the burgeoning scenes outside the window are possibly illusions from the dream; the little inner monster is stirred into action. The slumberers’ naked bodies, lying together like closed shells, resemble the songs of the bird subject to the same oppression. Striving to break away from this oppression, the dreamer unravels his identity in sequence: it is “he” who yearns to embrace “you,” the flower, and another “you,” the anthropomorphic new breed, arises from “our” primordial shells. All along, the narrator’s singular identity evolves in ecstasy and pain, before it propagates the “us” and the “you,” who let out an anguished cry over their imminent, uncertain fate. The transformation is also reflected in a metaphorical set of movements: the flickering flames of the green grass touch the frail but persevering flower, the flower breaks through the possessive soil where it has grown. The bodies then merge into the songs of the composite bird, waiting, seemingly indefinitely, for the eternal fire that will transport them to their unknown destination.

Readers of Baudelaire and Mallarmé may be amazed to find this constant motion and distortion of objects, in which intricate and highly-charged metaphors converge into a
smooth metonymic flow of narrative. The outer and inner worlds interfuse to elevate the present existence of life to the realm of pure idea. The poem’s dynamic is embodied and transferred through a carefully elaborated but simple and compressed form—a truncated version of the sonnet—but nonetheless retains the skewed beauty of the genre by the internal tensions created between the lines and their syntactical elements. The sharp-rhymed couplets that close each sestet further heighten the illusions of the dreamer or the just-awakened, inviting him on further adventures.

At this riveting moment, a world of things is on full display, to be recreated in the poet’s own consciousness: they flood the senses triumphantly, ominously. Only the unhindered coalescence of the youth’s body and soul, in his “infinite loneliness” and in the unsettled silence of waiting “like the lute,” possesses the power to embrace in full the world’s impending experience. The shell-like latent body, with its agitated yearnings and amazement, presages a passage of life through stupor or death. Like a new-born baby, the body is immersed in the first ablution of the world’s fused senses.

Symbolically, the transfiguration is precipitated by the upstretched movement of bird and fire, vying with each other for life or ascendance over height. The spirit of the bird as a celestial creature—formless, primordial and mystic—is at odds with with its own earthly material, as against the creation tale of the Goddess Nü Wa 輔 who made the first men and women in her own image out of clay. Here the clay bird, with its

116 Li Zhangbin, “Mu Dan de yinyu yu shige ganxing” (Mu Dan’s Metaphor and Poetic Sensibility), Journal of Changsha University of Science and Technology (Social Socience) 27.6 (2012): 33.


118 According to the study undertaken by Daphne and Charles Maurer, newborn human babies are attracted to an intermingling waves of sight, sound, touch, taste, and, especially, smell. See Diane Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses (London: Phoenix, 2000), 289.
ecstatic song and movement, yearns to return to its spiritual home of fulfillment. However, it must first overcome its innate tension between its mundanity and the ideal, between its incarnated/proposed shape and its material, to achieve a transcendental state of being that is at once light and agile, turbid and heavy. This double binding of life is characteristic of the ordeal of youth, as illustrated in a poem by Osip Mandelstam:

Here is a creature that can fly and sing,
The word malleable and flaming,
And congenital awkwardness is overcome
By inborn rhythm!  

The same embarrassment and agony felt by Mandelstam resounds in “Spring,” as the metamorphosed new self is endowed with a first taste of its own sexuality. Thematically, we are also reminded of Norman Brown’s illustration of suppressed human love: “Symbolical consciousness, the erotic sense of reality, is a return to the principle of ancient animistic science, mystical participation….” In “Spring,” the call of the primitive and the divine has reached a tremulous moment of communication with the mystic. The primordial state of desire is discovered and revived by fully-fledged perception, which operates at the centre of the universe in the poetic creation. The allusion of this poem to Rilke (“You my sacred solitude,/you are rich and pure and open/as a garden awakening./My sacred solitude—/hold the golden gates close/where desires wait.”) is also profound and interesting. They both show that with particular

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form the poet may express something he cannot grasp, and therefore foster an intimate relationship between his life and poetry.

“Eight Poems”

No real evidence whatsoever suggests that the sequence “Eight Poems” was inspired by the poet’s romantic encounters in real life; judged by its sober, sometimes satirical tones, and its largely dim views on the prospect of love, the poem hardly serves as a real-time account of a love affair. Composed almost at the same time as “Spring,” the sequence further explores the theme of romantic love, taking advantage of the pristine wonders revealed by the new world. In this series of immaculate love poems, he sees, feels, contemplates, in the company of his imagined lover, the way in which his love is born, grows, matures and decays along a designated path of changes.

There is a strong indication in these poems of the Platonic idea of love and self, as a result of Mu Dan’s reading of Plato during his college years. In some passages, references to Plato are immediately recognizable. This is in spite of the sensual moments of the lovers’ intense physical attraction, as illuminated in the third section: the lovers’ breath is infused with the breath of the delicate grass, and the place is permeated with the lovers’ odour, colour and voluptuousness. The little inner monster we encountered in “Spring” is set free by the lover’s tentative touch:

The tips of our fingers touched a patch of grass,
Therein lay its obstinacy and my blissful surprise.

The passionate love, the Platonic *eros*, rouses the inner little monster’s desire for sensual pleasure, as suggested by the lover’s ambivalent gestures. However, the discovery of the lover’s body triggers instantly the process of “beautiful reasoning,” aiming to be non-physical and purely intellectual.\(^{123}\) An overwhelming sense of exigency is presented with the image of a looming calamity:

Your eyes have seen this disaster of fire.
You don’t see me, although it is for you that I am alight.
O! It is ripened age that is burning.
Yours, mine, we are separated like mountains!

One lover’s blindly coming on the scene is, in the eyes of the other, a sheer, unfolding disaster. The lover is instantly aware of this disaster, as if “seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror.”\(^{124}\) A chain of events sees the lovers’ cry, as they are enchanted and thrilled,

\(^{123}\) Plato, *Symposium*, 210a. In David Towsey’s interpretation of Plato, physicality gives way to the rational as “one body” of the lover is repeated in and displaced by “every single body.” The unique, repeated body of appreciation represents both the common and universal existence. See David Towsey, “Platonic Eros and Deconstructive Love,” *Studies in Romanticism* 40.4 (2001): 514.

\(^{124}\) Love “enters through the eyes” and follows “the natural route to the soul.” See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 46.
and finally estranged from each other. The whole episode is part of a game conducted by an ambivalent God:

In this process of natural metamorphosis,
I still fell in love with a temporary you.
Though I cried, crumbled to ash, to ash and was reborn,
Girl, this is only God’s game with himself.

從這自然底蛻變底程序里，
我卻愛上了一個暫時的你。
即使我哭泣，變灰，變灰又新生，
姑娘，那只是上帝玩弄他自己。

(Romantic love, as this opening verse suggests, derives from the morbid attraction of an “eye disease,” and the lovers’ enterprise is of a haphazard, precarious nature. The lovers inquire into their own whims and fantasies:

Quietly we embrace
In a world illuminated only by words;
The unformed darkness is frightening.
We are bewitched by the possible and the impossible.

We are suffocated
By sweet words, dead before they are born.
Their spectre looms over us, pulls us apart
As we drift into love’s chaos of liberty and beauty.

Quietly we embrace
In a world illuminated only by words;
The unformed darkness is frightening.
We are bewitched by the possible and the impossible.

静靜地，我們擁抱在
用言語所能照明的世界裡，
而那未成形的黑暗是可怕的，
那可能和不可能的使我們沉迷。

那窒息著我們的
是甜蜜的未生即死的言語，
它置幽靈籠罩，使我們遊離，

125 Ibid.
游進混亂的愛底自由和美麗。

(Section 4, CP, 147)

The inquiry evokes in the lovers indulged feelings of fascination and bewilderment, in a strange world of unspeakable marvels and chaos. The lovers’ embrace, their touching and fumbling in abstruse darkness, recalls Roland Barthes’ fancies of love, of the lover’s language, their fingertips and words. Here in their attempt to sustain an impossibly enduring human love, the lovers are aware of the limitation of words and the fickleness of sensation.

From this point, the lover’s quest for truth and meaning shifts to a mission of self-redemption and reconciliation. In section 5, one of the lovers traces the passage of time to the primeval moment when his love, along with other living things, lapses into prolonged hibernation. He sees his lover being tamed and transfigured into a sleeping beauty, waiting for the first initiation. Love’s passion is petrified into trees and stones, as the lover wishes to learn in his vigil the essence of love: the “way of loving you, makes me change 教我愛你的方法，教我變更” (CP, 148).

These remarkable revelations and scenes echo with Shelley’s Alastor, in which a young poet sees in his sleep a dream-vision of feminine perfection. The poet in Alastor is perplexed with an “excess of love” (“His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess/Of love”), and sets out on a further search for the dream-woman—a search that can only

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end in death, in the extinction of the lover’s fatal passion (“Lost, lost, forever lost,/In the
wide pathless desert of dim sleep,/That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of
death/Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,/O Sleep?”) \textsuperscript{128} “Eight Poems” seems to follow
this line of ideation, as the lovers are tossed into a violent journey through time and lost
memories. They ultimately lie peacefully as two identical leaves among a myriad of other
leaves. In eternal derision, their spatial closeness and homogeneity erase the lovers’
immanent strains and differences.

An underlying skepticism with regard to love’s justice and worth is apparent in
“Eight Poems.” As the “sea of desires” gives way to love’s anticipated estrangement and
austerity, the rationality of human love is gravely challenged. Not only does Mu Dan
denounce the use of “science” and “wisdom” in directing love’s cause, he also foresees
love’s vulnerability in a tumultuous society symbolized as “storms” and “winding
paths.” In the end, only the tree of life stands aloof, overlooking the vicissitudes of human
life. This rather bleak view suggests that human love is evaluated and presented as
essentially a dark metaphor.

Poets tend to have a special sense of truth expressed in their works. According to
Cleanth Brook, this truth is not concerned with the physical laws of the universe, the laws of
time and space, but with man’s characteristic relation to these laws and to “the kind of world
that is subject to them.”\textsuperscript{129} The truth revealed in Mu Dan’s allegorical tale of love is
disturbingly real, moving, and ambivalent, in view of the purported relationship between
man and God, between man and nature. And although allusions to God and the Platonic

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{129} Cleanth Brook, “Metaphor, Paradox and Stereotypes,” \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics} 6.4 (1965): 322,
ideas seem at times to lack spiritual or emotional investment, the fascination and myth of human love are explored and presented in a tense, enchanting drama. The whole poem is ingeniously conceived and under immaculate control, proclaiming Mu Dan’s own poetics of becoming.

“Departure”

The fanciful world of the lovers, grimly fickle and perceived eventually as inane, is a reflection of Mu Dan’s idealization of life and experience. Love’s cause, which is carried out independent of the lover’s social engagement, can be seen as part of the self’s quest for truth and enlightenment. However, moral judgment and social commitment, which are the primary motifs of war literature, would inevitably dominate Mu Dan’s work of this period. Characteristically for Mu Dan, this change of subject took place in the name of justice, with implications of political oppression and administration. The lack of any first-person account by Mu Dan of his ordeal during the war complicates the matter, leaving scholars to speculate on what psychological impact it had on him, and how it was reflected further in his own writing.

At any rate, Mu Dan’s joining of the Chinese expeditionary army to Burma as a volunteer translator was an unforced act, albeit a belated registration for recruitment. A hearty young man with strong patriotic pride, he was unlikely to have a complex motivation behind his act, as compared with Auden in Spain or during the Second World War. Yet one poem Mu Dan composed on the eve of the army’s departure strikes a jarring note, in regard to his views on the righteousness of war and his participation as a soldier.

130 Of the eight hundred-strong list of volunteer names etched on an obelisk to commemorate the campaign, Mu Dan’s name was not included. MD, 79.
In a ferocious outburst of protest, Mu Dan claims that “we,” the soldiers, were coerced into the situation of killing and being killed, and that their plight was caused by God or a corrupted authority:

Departure

Tell us of peace, but also of the need to kill,
That things we detest we must first learn to like.
Knowing “humanity” is not enough, we must also learn
The art of destruction. Assembled in mechanical array,
Intelligence and physical strength writhe like a pack of beasts.

Tell us that this is a new beauty.
Since what we once kissed has lost its freedom.
The good days are gone, and still as we approach the future,
Give us disappointment and hope, give us death,
Since what creates death must itself be destroyed.

Give us a sensitive heart, but let it sing
With a harsh voice; the grief and joy of the individual
Are mass produced, they deserve contempt,
To be negated, to be ossified, these are the meaning of life;
A poisonous link in your scheme of things.

Imprison us in the present, O Lord!
Following a dog-toothed, zigzag passage, time and again,
We advance. You make us believe your delirious talk
Is true. We are converted—you have given us abundance
And the pain of abundance.

出發

告訴我們和平又必需殺戮，
而那可厭的我們先得去喜歡。
知道了“人”不夠，我們再學習
蹂躪它的方法，排成機械的陣式，
智力體力蠕動著像一群野獸，

告訴我們這是新的美。因為
我們吻過的已經失去了自由;
好的日子去了，可是接近未來，
給我們失望和希望，給我們死，
因為那死的制造必需摧毀。
給我們善感的心靈又要它歌唱
僵硬的聲音。個人的哀喜
被大量制造又該被蔑視
被否定，被僵化，是人生的意義;
在你的計劃裡有毒害的一環，
就把我們囚進現在，呵上帝！
在犬牙的甬道中讓我們反复
行進，讓我們相信你句句的紊亂
是一個真理。而我們是皈依的，
你給我們豐富，和豐富的痛苦。

(CP, 150–51)

For the general reader, this poem is particularly obscure and ambivalent. Translating it into English is difficult, for the simple reason that it contains significant grammatical flaws which hamper proper reading. It is almost totally unrhymed and semantically fragmented; and its impetuous tone and mishmash of strong images cause further confusion as to the poet’s exact emotional mood. Structurally, the poem operates on a series of contrasts, and a dense layer of opposed ideas and images: promise of “peace” and the urge to “kill” imply opposing realities, and an evil scheme; “intelligence” and “physical strength,” “beast” and “beauty,” “create” and “destroy” portray a dilemma imposed on the subject by authority; the mind, oscillating between “disappointment” and “hope,” “sensitive” and “harsh,” “sorrow” and “joy,” struggles to justify its own cause and purpose. This series of contrasts culminates in the linking together of “abundance” and “pain,” by which a sense of purpose is established in the quest for truth or enlightenment through experience. There is a secondary schema which creates further interest in the poem: strong political jargon and metaphorical language interfuse with
rhetorical elements of abstraction and personification, giving the poem a fragmented, even slovenly appearance. Most notably, with the imperatives “tell us,” “give us,” “imprison us” that open and propel each stanza, their subject pronouns—that is, the real culprits behind the enumerated evil-doings—are curiously, and unjustifiably, absent from the utterance.

However, the messages of this poem are obvious: people are amenable to and victimized by false education and state propaganda; humanity is ravaged in the constant scheme of evil; and yet, although life is all conflict and misery, it also carries hope in the form of spiritual fulfillment for the individuals.

Some scholars maintain that ”Departure” is a manifestation of Mu Dan’s historical views on man and society, that in the cycle of creation and destruction, hope and despair, man lives a life of contradiction and paradox. However, this interpretation does not justify the poet’s vision of a richer and fuller life for the individuals. I would argue that, despite its sense of hope for the future, these views on man and history offer no real insight, let alone remedy, neither for the individual’s cause of self-fulfillment, nor for their sufferings in the context of social struggle. I would cite another poet from the Nine Leaves group, Chen Jingrong 陳敬容, whose statement on the individual’s social commitment is timelier and more to the point:

We are in the midst of a grand epoch in which the old gives way to the new. We, the young of this generation, suffer more and face more hardship than any generation before us. Half of our bodies are buried in the tombs of the past, while the other half are growing anew from the earth. There is not a moment that we cease to dream of breaking away completely, like a cicada, from our old shells.

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131 See, for example, Yanhong Zhu, “Reconfiguring Chinese Modernism: The Poetics of Temporality in 1940s Fiction and Poetry” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2009), 232.
Therefore, we have fresh thirst.\textsuperscript{132}

From the “tomb” to the metamorphosed “cicada” there is a logical connection, based on the self’s sense of mission and resolution in time and society. By contrast, Mu Dan’s semi-theistic notion expressed in “Departure” is at odds with the spirit of the time, and with the dynamic of people’s history. There is no indication of “the crystal spirit” of a resilient soldier.\textsuperscript{133} Instead, it is an overly “sensitive” heart (\textit{CP}, 198) which strives to grasp and interpret a vast present. Consequently, the poet, when suddenly and embarrassingly running out of rational thought, succumbs to fits of violent emotion. These emotions not only exacerbated his moral dilemmas, but also severely jeopardised his poetic undertaking: the poem is simply not well written, it is oblique and laboured; it shows the mechanics of his art, but not the fruits thereof.

\textit{The Intrusive God}

In Mu Dan’s early poems, there are serious concerns over the religious allusions and viewpoints incorporated into his lyrical voice—the problem of the recurring all-powerful, omnipresent, and uncalled-for presence of God is instantly recognizable. With no religious background whatsoever and having never shown an enduring interest in religious matters throughout his life, the apologist voice Mu Dan sometimes assumes


lacks real theoretical or emotional investment, and therefore puts his sensibility and coherence of thought at great peril.

Reading some of these poems we feel that God is introduced into the discourse as a mediator of the conflicts of man, as an ultimate judge or reason for the entangled moral and social problems. But while God gives a sense of purpose and meaning to the poet’s argument and lyrical utterance, his own role in human society is highly suspicious. His divinity is obscure, his appearance is contingent and enforced, and in most cases, seems irrelevant to man’s moral or social predicament. Mu Dan never made any explicit remarks on his concept of God besides these poems. God was addressed in these poems as God, Lord, Master, Almighty, the third person Him, or, when his justice is challenged, the more confronting “you.” God never inspires a divine communion, or shows his will to save mankind from its miseries. In “Eight Poems,” God prompts the lovers’ initial move, but the divine motive fizzles out quickly and eventually gives way to a Taoist predominance of universal emptiness and oblivion. In “Departure,” God surprisingly is embroiled in—and seemingly bears the brunt of—the crimes committed by the evil state, therefore absolving the latter from their consequences.

Mu Dan’s main theological reference in his poems is Biblical mythology, especially the concept of the Garden of Eden which he adeptly uses to portray the decadence of modern life. The theme of the Fall recurs in several Mu Dan poems in connection with his evaluation of modern times. In “The Seduction of the Snake 蛇的誘惑” (1941), for example, man is punished symbolically for his original sin by the crack of a whip at the moment of his birth; as man slips further into the “empty shells” of the

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decadent world, he is flogged once again by the same invisible, punitive whip (CP, 63–7). In another poem, “Tide 潮汐” (1941), humanism is seen as a withered fruit from the tree of life; wisdom is illusion derived from the tree of knowledge; and man’s neglect of divine guidance results in the deprivation of the soul, a kind of lump of “dry soil” (CP, 93). The road to redemption is strewn with human ignorance, crimes, and false preachings:

Everywhere, splendour is actually seem to be hell,  
From which there is no escape. Love will become hatred.  
Crawling on their own wasteland, they erect  
A heretic god on the debased soil.

看見到處的繁華原來是地域,  
不能夠掙脫, 愛情將變做仇恨,  
是在自己的廢墟上, 以卑賤的泥土,  
他們匍匐著豎起了異教的神。

(“Tide 潮汐” (1941), CP, 93)

Bygone eras have lapsed into the “rat’s cave,” while the overloaded planets, each carrying a full house of corrupted deities, harbour the vices which will be inherited by mankind (CP, 93). Revelations as such evoke no religious feeling, as these gods by no means embody a universal experience for the believer,¹³⁵ or at least the inclination towards goodness. The gods he “creates” merely offer a kind of background or manifestation of the real problems of mankind. Poems of this kind can perhaps be vaguely therapeutic, but are executed in a radical and heavy-handed manner.

But it is Mu Dan’s situating of social and political reality within the frame of
divine will or predestination that seems the most problematic. This is apparent as one
reads “Departure,” which for the most part consists of repudiations and attacks from the
poet against either God or the corrupted government. Mu Dan extends his own moral
entanglement to a wider context, to the general condition of “us,” the collective of
Chinese soldiers going to the war. But this wider circle of companions is a forced and
alleged one, an indication of the arrogation of the voices of others, and also of the poet’s
own sentiment over reason. We feel, therefore, that with this cognitive error and the lack
of real religious connotation, this God-centered discourse has indeed, in the words of
Bernard Williams, “added nothing at all” intelligently or morally, or has merely added
“the wrong sort of thing.” It simply transforms a potentially inspiring poem into a bad
argument. Even his plea for enriched experience will be rebutted in front of the world’s
“empty shell,” as this experience provides little to nourish or fortify the mind—the
compensation it seeks for its sufferings will be thwarted by man’s own failure and the
devil’s scheme (the manipulation of the state). In the poem “Protest,” Mu Dan wrote:

We see, this practical attitude
Exceeds any of your ideals—only this will survive
The war. Submission, applause, and suffering
Are the one obligation of the weeping conscience—

Silence. And against this background
A cold wind blows into today and tomorrow,
A cold wind scatters our eternal home,
And our temporary inn.

136 According to Bernard Williams, the trouble with religious morality lies not in the nature of morality, but
rather in the difficulties in the belief in God, in the religion’s “being incurably unintelligible”: if god existed,
it gives no special and acceptable reason for subscribing to morality; if the words of God constitute
unquestionable belief, such belief in principle can at most affirm God’s existence as “an unfailling
hypnotist.” See Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge, London, Melbourne:
Cambridge University Press, 1972), 79 and 86.
我們看見，這樣現實的態度
強過你任何的理想，只有它
不毀於戰爭。服從，喝彩，受苦，
是哭泣的良心唯一的責任——

無聲。在這樣的背景前，
冷風吹進了今天和明天，
冷風吹散了我們長住的
永久的家鄉和暫時的旅店。

(“Protest 控訴,” *CP*, 131)

Life here is depicted as a tramp trapped in an empty inn. The poet further indicates that while the children are contaminated and spoiled, the adults are “doing nothing,” “believing nothing” in their self-imposed exile (*CP*, 131–32). Notwithstanding this, the “gods of the future” remain indifferent to man’s misery, and to the “countless assassinations” plotted against mankind (*CP*, 133). These revelations show clearly Mu Dan wrestling with the failure of an idea (God’s benevolence) and the failure of men (their struggles and fate). According to Bultmann, the distinction between these two perceptions of failure is closely related to how transcendental thought or belief presides over practical ends in the domains of Humanism and Christianity.137 Faith always represents the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty, in spite of the defeats experienced on the part of man.138 Mu Dan’s fault, so far as I can tell, resides in the infirmity of his faith, entangled inexorably with “the historical contradictions” he discerns in civilization and


138 According to Bultmann, faith represents the idea of man which serves as a norm above his empirical life. Faith informs man’s duty and thereby gives him a sense of dignity and nobility. Humanism is “faith in the spirit of which man partakes, the spirit by whose power man creates the world of the true, the good, the beautiful.” Ibid, 80.
man. “What shall we do? O, Who should be held responsible for such crimes? 我們做什麼？呵，誰該負責這樣的罪行” (CP, 133)—These surprisingly weak, rhetorical
questions to round off the fierce attacks on wicked authority seem to affirm Auden’s
rejection of equating goodness with success: “History to the defeated/May say Alas but
cannot help or pardon” (“Spain”).

One such poem is better in eschewing this awkward situation in connection with
the appearance of God. In “Vying Gods and Devils 神魔之爭” (1941), God and Satan are
seen as the two conflicting forces that shape the order of the world, moulding man’s
general perception of good and evil. Each living being is part of of this eternal struggle
for power: from lava to dust, from living creatures to massacred children, from “force to
force, being to non-being” (CP, 118). This sweeping pantheistic view combines Mu
Dan’s metaphysical reflections with a broad worldview, giving the poem a sharp focus
and narrative vigour. However, as the dialogues between God, Satan and other
supernatural beings unfold, the message at times becomes obscure, and the tone cynical.
The forest sprites say mockingly:

Who knows what we are made of?
The woodpecker replies: ding dang!
We know our own folly,
Which is like the eternal red of the leaves.

誰知道我們什麼做成?
啄木鳥的回答：叮，當！
我們知道自己的愚蠢，
一如樹葉永遠的紅。

Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2007), 113.
The inherent folly of mankind, the impish sprites further conclude, makes human life an errant, ephemeral enterprise: “Our living is death, dying is life 我們活著是死，死著是生” (CP, 119). With this sharp turn from stern morality (“Where is benevolence? /Responsibility and reason/Have disappeared forever! And protestation is written/On your face 仁義在哪裡？責任，理性，/永遠逝去了！反抗書寫在/你的臉上,” CP, 111) to elusive wit, from chiming melody to rowdy parody, the harmony between poetic and religious thought is fatally damaged. And the prospect of peace and happiness for mankind seems out of reach.

Towards the Year’s End

From May to September the Burmese military campaign became a bloodbath, as the expeditionary army underwent a series of fierce battles and defeats. Eventually, an ill-fated, epic retreat took place. Mu Dan’s division was deployed to cover the whole expedition, and as it turned out, less than one-fourth of the men made it to the sanctuary base in India. The rest perished in the tropical mountains and forests. The three short poems in connection with this ordeal “The Pastoral Dream自然底夢,” “The Phantom Traveler幻想底乘客,” and “The Obstructed Road阻滯的路,” were composed in haste either during the intervals of fighting or during the poet’s brief recuperation in India. Understandably, they exhibit a deep sense of grief over the “lost paradise” from a man

140 MD, 86–91.
who had himself narrowly escaped death. In “The Obstructed Road,” lamentation is symbolized as a treacherous path leading towards the distant hometown—a “treasure abandoned in the swamp” by time, where the child is lost in isolated, perpetual cold (CP, 152–53). In “The Pastoral Dream,” the poet dreams of himself donning the white clouds in the crimson dawn, as in the good old days. But the dream only reminds him of the real loss of his carefree joys: memories of love’s labour, the chirping bird, the creek and flowers, together bring tears to the bereaved youth.

Despite certain elements that may indicate a typical pastoral idyll—motifs of retirement, child of the world, the sense of unfulfilment, the general mood of melancholy—141—the disrupted inner peace and pronounced anxiety of these two poems betrays another attitude towards the miseries of the present society. In “The Phantom Traveler,” the pastoral illusions fade quickly into exposure and rebuke:

The Phantom Traveler

The passenger alights from a phantom flight,
Forever arrives at a wrong station.
But he, sacrificial victim beneath an iron hand,
Surrenders to the wishes of others.

So quickly have his glorious thoughts
Been shredded into a life, sluggish and unfaithful.
He has become a cog, bound to a giant wheel,
 Ideals with the name of a slave.

Here compassion for each other is reciprocal terror,
That warms you, and sends you into automatic exile;
To free himself he must feign a humble smile
His secret turn, his secret slip into disillusion.

Dear readers, you may utter a sigh of praise:

Crawling on the web of the cowardly mob,
And feasting upon countless vicious minds,
He has already begun to study the solemnity of the master.

幻想底乘客
從幻想底航線卸下的乘客,
永遠走上了錯誤的一站,
而他，這個鐵掌下的犧牲者,
當他意外地投進別人的願望,

多麼迅速他底光輝的概念
已化成瑣碎的日子不忠而紆緩,
是巨輪的一環他漸漸旋進了
一個奴隸制度附帶一個理想,

這裡的恩惠是彼此的恐懼，
而溫暖他的是自動的流亡，
那使他自由的只有忍耐的微笑，
秘密地回轉，秘密的絕望。

親愛的讀者，你就會贊嘆：
爬行在懦弱的，人和人的關係間，
化無數的惡意為自己營養，
他已開始學習做主人底尊嚴。

(CP, 155)

The backhanded compliment paid the evil regime echoes Mu Dan’s earlier attacks on the corrupted authority in “Protest” and “Departure.” Now the poet pledges to be an accomplice with that very authority. Most tragically, the once ebullient voice of “us” turns bitter and cynical, as the poet—the estranged third-person “him”—becomes deeply sentimental and self-critical. With a magnanimity that recalls Baudelaire’s famous ending of “Au Lecteur” (“You know him, reader, this exquisite monster./—Hypocrite reader, my likeness, my brother!”), he invites the readers to look further into the cause of the conflict between man and society, into man’s hostility to man. The whole year has gone, and so
there will never come another spring of passionate and fanciful love. It appears to the reader that the poet has completed a cycle of enlightenment and disillusionment, of giving and loss, before being tossed onto a shaky road of self-recovery. He is offered another life, a deeply capricious future whose blessings hinge solely, and pitifully, on the self-sublimation of his own pain and misery.

**Contexts and Implications**

*A Recurring Theme in Chinese Literature*

We must look further into Mu Dan’s state of mind upon his going to the war, a mentality which appears to me altogether puzzling and out of place. Merely one year earlier Mu Dan had voiced his detestation of the lethargy of the petit bourgeoisie in wartime, as opposed to the resolve and tenacity shown by the common people; he saw with great empathy the hope of a nation that he hailed as the rising sun, forged in the blood of vengeance. Yet strangely, “Departure” emerged as an outright denial of the righteous war, as Mu Dan laid the blame on God and his secular agent for his participation in war as a soldier. For a volunteer soldier, this was a truly baffling statement to make.

Few writers have ventured into real warfare themselves, and rarely have they uttered such contradictory views at a time that would have called for whole-hearted commitment rather than extreme criticism of individual fate. Some may attribute Mu Dan’s struggle for meaning in “Departure” to the gap between the thought of war and the horror of the act of killing and surviving; some may be tempted to read the poem as a demonstration of Mu Dan’s wit in handling severe social and moral problems. I would propose, however, that Mu Dan’s psychological dilemma reflects his profound inner
struggles between the ideal and reality, sense and sensibility, and most of all, the overwhelming sense of anxiety over his self-identity, over the conflict between his lyrical obligation and social commitment as a young poet.

The linking of “pain of abundance” at the close of “Departure” may sound inspiring, but the statement, which is prompted by an abrupt, conjunctive “but,” can hardly justify itself with the argument thrown up by the poem alone. The idea of the absorption of experience, with its promise of truth and concomitant pain, was probably borrowed from Rilke. Certain images and ideas in Rilke’s “heartwork” and their inward orientation may well have inspired Mu Dan’s spiritual quest, and to some extent, informed the special mode of his expression. However, we need to be cautious in this area by delimiting the content and context of Rilke’s work, in relation to their reference to Mu Dan’s poetry. Some crucial questions remain unanswered in “Departure” alone, and need to be addressed carefully for an exegetic reading: if the experience of pain verifies and reinforces the purpose of life and one’s place in the world, will this experience be obtained through poetry alone, or through a greater cause beyond poetry? In other words, is this quest for spiritual richness and sufficiency an individual act, or part of a collective undertaking for the well-being of a wider community? And will this self-

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142 See, for example, Chen Gonglong, “Mu Dan Rilke tongming shi ‘Qi’de bijiao” (A Comparison between “The Flag” By Mu Dan and Rilke), *Fei Tian* 4 (2009): 33–35. In Kunming Mu Dan would have come across the translations of German poets including Rilke by Feng Zhi.


144 Compare, for example, Mu Dan’s “Spring” with Rilke’s following lines, quoted from Wood, *The Ring of Form*, 43: “Now the hour bows down, it touches me, throbs/ metallic and lucid and bold:/ my senses are trembling. I feel my own power—/ on the plastic day I lay hold.” A sense of mysticism emanates from both their poems characteristic of echoing acoustic effect and vivid visual images. For more discussion on Rilke’s influence on Chinese poets, especially the Nine Leaves group, see Zhang Yanquan, “Li er ke he zhongguo xiaodai xinshi” (Rilke and Modern Chinese Poetry), *Studies on Foreign Literature* 3 (2012): 120–28.
fulfillment eventually lead to a higher achievement, say, the revelation of God? Hindsight suggests that Mu Dan’s failure to address these questions has rendered his animated appeal premature, falling somewhere between true insight and exaggeration.

In the tumult of domestic conflicts and foreign aggression, there was a predominant feeling of impotence among Chinese writers, in regards to their sense of obligation and fulfillment in society. For many, being a writer was not an immediate choice; to be a plain soldier or worker may have had a greater appeal in view of its immediate engagement in various social movements.145 The Nine Leaves poets had an acute awareness of their own limitations: they were mostly confined to their study, and they regretted their own status as “sleepers 沉睡者” and “bitter grumblers 善訴苦者.”146 However, the wish to shake off this sense of impotence and isolation, by devoting oneself to re-education, to learning from the masses, did not immediately provide a clear-cut solution.147 In light of this, Tang Shi’s words, “I search for thunder and fire, /To burn this self, and to burn another self 苦難里我尋求一片雷火，/燒焦這一個我，又燒焦另一個我,”148 foreshadows Mu Dan’s view of pain and experience.

The person who resembled Mu Dan most in both spirit and temperament was, perhaps, He Qifang 何其芳. Slightly older and equally a disciple of Eliot and Auden in


147 Hang Yuehe, “Zhishi fenzi” (The Intellectual), Jiuye ji, 106.

his early years,\textsuperscript{149} He Qifang’s illustration of the time shows the mental struggles of a young writer—remarkably, in the elaborated funeral scene in his poem “Funeral Procession 送葬,” where his alter ego, pondering a suicide, puts a razor against “the blue veins on his own neck.”\textsuperscript{150} The “blue blood” is the same dense blood that flows in the veins of the ennobled, vivacious young body remembered in Mu Dan’s “The Pastoral Dream” (CP, 154). Compared with He, Mu Dan was more fascinated by the predicament of the self, of the self’s anguish over the conflicted body and soul, and over the clash between the inner and external world. According to the Hong Kong poet and critic Leung Ping-kwan, this awareness belongs to the introspective phase of representation of the modern consciousness.\textsuperscript{151} Mu Dan’s representation of the ideas is daring and impetuous, effusing a strong sense of grotesque and horror:

\texttt{Split from the womb, abandoned in coldness,} \\
\texttt{The fragmented body yearns for rescue.} \\
\texttt{Forever the self, locked in the wilderness.}

\texttt{(“Self 我,” CP, 86)}


\textsuperscript{150} He Qifang quanji, vol. 1 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin, 2000), 60.

\textsuperscript{151} Leung Ping-kwan, “Mu Dan yu xiandai de ‘wo’” (Mu Dan and the Modernistic “I,” in \textit{Yige minzu yijing qilai}, 43. There are numerous studies on the subject of the human body represented in modern Chinese literature. Among them, an assiduous study by Mi Jiayan, who traces the self-fashioning of bodily energy in the discursive formation of modern Chinese poetry between the 1920s and the 1940s. Following the dialectical development of poetic representation embodied in the works of three predecessors, Guo Moruo, Li Jinfa, and Dai Wangshu, Mi devotes a brief discussion to Mu Dan’s early poems, that seem to have suggested a new mode of expression. See Mi Jiayan, \textit{Self-Fashioning and Reflexive Modernity in Modern Chinese Poetry, 1919–1949} (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).
The birth signals immediately the disintegration of one’s prenatal being, a totality secured
in the safe haven of the mother’s womb. From the moment of birth, the self becomes
trapped in the estranged human world. Physical and psychological pain, an internal
burning felt by Rilke as the “boundless pain in the body’s weave”—sets the self
“afame” in great despair. Despite the tone of revolt against the passing moment, the
prospect of “self invention” is tenuous in this poem. There is neither an implication of
“heroizing the present” in one’s confrontation with the current crisis, nor of the
writer’s motivation to use his pen as weapon. In light of this, the underlying anxiety
and self-pity in “Self” make the poem regressively anti-modern.

Images of metamorphosis, are a deeper despair.
Always myself, locked in the wilderness,
Abhorring the Mother who cast me out of the dream.

幻化的形象，是更深的絕望，
永遠是自己，鎖在荒野裡，
仇恨著母親給分出了夢境。

(“Self 我,” CP, 86)

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152 Mu Dan’s depiction of the discarded body reminds me of a passage from Lawrence’s “The Wanderer”:
“I, in the sour black tomb, trodden to absolute death,/I put out my hand in the night…/and I felt that which
was not L/verily it was not L/it was the unknown…” Lawrence’s sense of redemption from contamination
with the morbid terrain of an old self and an old world is by way of separation and departure from the dead
self; these lines show the self’s intention to reach out toward a new experience. See Bruce Clarke, “The
Melancholy Serpent: Body and Landscape in William Carlos Williams and D. H. Lawrence,” in Richard
Fleming and Michael Payne eds., Criticism, History, and Intertextuality (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated


154 “Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it’s the will to ‘heroize’ the
present.” See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow ed., The Foucault Reader (New

155 Larson, Literary Authority, 154.
The pain, in the words of Rilke, is “a repetition of life with a difference,” which “tolerates no interpretation.” Mu Dan presents this pain by proposing one pivotal difference that anticipates a hideous prospect of the self:

With a moment’s reflection, I can hear a life lost,
Fallen into the torrents of time, crying out for help.

稍一沉思會聽見失去的生命，
落在時間的激流裡，向他呼救。

(“Advent of Wisdom 智慧底降臨,” CP, 90)

The self depicted in this poem is sterile, forsaken by time, and essentially rejected by society. This perception reflects Mu Dan’s own sense of identity crisis, as is also shown in a number of other poems. In “Spring,” the crisis takes the form of a bird trapped in his own desire; in “The Phantom Traveler,” it is incarnated in the master-slave relationship whereby the self vows to be evil’s reluctant accomplice. In other poems Mu Dan composed after 1942, the crisis is embodied in a series of stark images: fissures on a wall (“Fissure 裂紋,” CP, 169–70); an “unmanned region 無人地帶” and an unbridged crevice of death (“The Beseiged 被圍者,” CP, 179); a scout trapped in the vast land of the enemy (“Thoughts on a Thirtieth Birthday 三十誕辰有感,” CP, 227); the monochrome powder that alludes to the predicament of modern life (“Dance of the City 城市的舞,” CP, 263). These images and metaphors intimate the condition of the self, stumbling willy-nilly, but also inevitably, upon “suffering’s tangled pyre.” There is a constant danger that the rebellious self will be assimilated into the prevalent system. The

157 Rilke, Gedichte 1910 bis 1926.
future is not seen as an open future, and the light of emancipation is erased from the personal horizon.

These bleak views on life manifest the difficult transformation of the self from a lone questing spirit to an active participant of the time, faced by many of the May Fourth writers. Left-wing writers such as Mao Dun 茅盾 experienced it; the temperamentally more kindred He Qifang also evoked his distress in his depiction of the ancient capital Peking: a ghostly, empty city, a wasteland. Hearing a door slamming behind him reminds him of a stern reality threatening to shatter his literary dream. For a writer with a conscience and a strong sense of social responsibility, how to move away from this “brink of danger” in response to the “urgent call of life” was the foremost question to be attended to, one that would inform a writer’s particular style and subject matter. A relentless self-dissection may not lead to action. In the case of Mu Dan, the recognition of the pain in experience offers no release from the real troubles and the moral dilemma of the self in life. For Mu Dan poetry is the indomitable force of life, but this force was to prove ineffectual, and ultimately irrelevant, in the context of everyday

158 Larson, *Literary Authority*, especially chapter 3 and 5.

159 In his threadbare confession, Mao Dun’s talks about isolation, depression and pessimism, and further declares that these feelings are not to be relieved through the act of writing. In *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* 19.10 (October 28, 1929), trans.Y-shih Chen in “From Guling to Tokyo,” in John Berninghausen et al. eds., *Literature in China: An Anthology* (N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1976).

160 Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, trans. and ed. by Bonnie S. McDougall (University of Queensland Press), 41. In light of the prevalent state of abandonment and disillusion of the intellectuals of the era, Eileen Chang’s remarks are pithy and sharp, and deserve full citation: “In this era, the old things are being swept away and the new things are still being born. But until this historical era reaches its culmination, all certainty will remain an exception. People sense that everything about their everyday lives is a little out of order, out of order to a terrifying degree. All of us must live within a certain historical era, but this era sinks away from us like a shadow, and we feel we have been abandoned.” Eileen Chang, “Writing of One’s Own,” 17. Quoted from Zhu, “Reconfiguring Chinese Modernism,” 272.

161 Ibid. 13.
life—its upward propulsion, as Mu Dan put it metaphorically, is hampered by the opposing and delimitating forces of history.

We can therefore derive a better idea of Mu Dan’s thoughts of self-fulfillment: to endure and absorb the pain from experience, even to find encouragement within it, is to make truce with untractable reality. The compromise provides no long-term solution to the problems faced by the self. These problems are neither to be solved by the sovereign power of poetry alone, nor by any ideal held by the poet. “Often [he] dreams of flying over the world, but is constantly drawn tight by the earth.” (The Flag, CP, 188).

It is worth noting that when Mao Dun and He Qifang talked about their isolation and struggle, both were well-known, established writers. This was not the case for Mu Dan. Instead of focusing on serving the wider society, the young poet was immersed in his secret exploration of love, of life and fate—in isolation from the context of the cruel, ongoing war around him. Notwithstanding this, the reality of war was soon to catch up with him, bereaving him of his beloved subject: love was, as it turned out, only a dream, an illusory dream of weary angels in their private gardens. The greater the excitement and fascination it generated, the greater the grief that followed for the disillusioned poet. As to what triggered the disillusionment—whether it was war or other occurrences of life—that is secondary: the seed of bitterness had already been sown and was to proclaim itself in a violent and unforgiving fashion.

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The “Chinese Hamlet”

The lyrical “us,” the undefined plural subject who unleashed the protest against corrupted authority in “Departure,” represented no particular group of people with whom Mu Dan wished to associate. The time of protestation was extraordinary, in view of the urgent situation of China that certainly called for action from its every citizen rather than for dissident words. If we consider Auden’s *Sonnets from China* and poems such as “Spain 1937” (all passionately received at the time among the Chinese intellectuals), the implications of Mu Dan’s poem demand further investigation. “Spain 1937,” for instance, shows a clear sense of dedication to the common cause, despite its bleak note and doubts as to the future of mankind: “Death? Very well, I accept, for/I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain.” By contrast, the “to be or not to be” undertone of “Departure” is strangely at variance with the spirit of the time. Some qualities of this particular poem are illustrative of the dubious label—the “Chinese Hamlet”—which A Long 阿垅 pasted on Mu Dan and his Nine Leaves colleagues. An active member of the July School critics and writers 七月派 who advocated explicit and strong political purposes for revolution, nationalism, and social obligations, A Long issued his remarks in a review of Mu Dan’s small collection of poems, *The Flag* 旗 (1948):

“A [poetic] pinnacle is reached by the hard work of the likes of Mu Dan and Du Yunxie—a cohort of modernists who cultivate their self-consciousness as aficionados of Eliot, Auden, and Spender. Self-constrained, introspectively probing and profoundly lucid, their only concern is to express their own character and temperament, and at times, perhaps, to expand their own personalities. They are to

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some extent the Hamlets of our time, forever snared in the unattained equilibrium between the self and the world, of what they pursue and what is to be destroyed.”

Mu Dan should have every reason to be affronted by this critique, and to claim that the comment was a grave distortion of the facts. His main defence for his own style would have rested on the theories formulated by Yuan Kejia, a key member of the Nine Leaves Group, who proposed a much more tolerant and encompassing view of poetry. According to Yuan Kejia, true artistic purpose and social obligation should complement each other in literature, and good works of art can only be achieved by combining these two poles creatively and sensibly. This notion clashes with the doctrines of the July School writers, who proposed a greater role for writers in the time of struggle—they were ready to throw themselves into the “violent world and the maelstrom of life”; their sense of commitment and adventure, their fighting spirit for a cause that was lofty and good, and their sublimation of the tragic, recall the flawed hero Don Quixote whom they lionized. The Nine Leaves poets, on the other hand, were preoccupied with the revelation of the complex impulses behind human behavior, which were then further projected onto the domains of social and political life. While the July School writers were eager to exploit their extensive social and political connections, the Nine Leaves poets persisted with their detachment as a means of safeguarding the integrity of their art and

165 A Long, “Qi pianlun” (A Short Comment on Flag), in Shi yu Xianshi 3 (Beijing: Wushi niandai, 1951), 251.

166 Zhang Huan, Luling yanjiu ziliao (Materials for the Study of Luling) (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi, 1993), 87.

the “inner attainment” of the self. Understandably, the Nine Leaves poets received much less attention from the masses.\textsuperscript{168}

A Long remarked that Mu Dan was hanging precariously on the brink of an “indelible pessimism” and an “indifferent nihilism.”\textsuperscript{169} The remark may sound overly harsh, but it was nevertheless a shrewd observation of the poet’s current situation and moral dilemma. For Yuan Kejia, and Mu Dan as well, “fanciful” objects of art and “concrete” objects of social and moral commitment should never carry the same weight in the act of writing. To place “mankind” over “the people,” and metaphysics over the practical concerns of social politics is a common practice in the creation of any real and enduring literary work.\textsuperscript{170} The emphasis on the sense of truth propels their poetic endeavour, but when the truth proves too dim, or when it reveals a rather hideous future, the pursuers of truth may be filled with self-doubt, even self-negation. Like Hamlet, Mu Dan shows a certain “disinclination to act.”\textsuperscript{171} Yuan Kejia may claim that, “Poetry is action,” but this action takes place principally at the symbolic level of poetics. In practice, poetry remains the language of paradox, used to mediate the poet’s various impulses. To

\textsuperscript{168} Some modern scholars maintain that being intellectual is always a matter of degree, because an intellectual role involves intersection of several dimensions. This view is a far cry from Yuan Kejia’s “balance theory” and offers explanations for the structural tensions such as polarity between criticism and conformity, and as long as the Nine Leaves poets are concerned, the dilemma of detachment and engagement in modern society. See Stefan Collini, \textit{Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 52. For more discussions on this subject, see, for example, Barbara A. Misztal, \textit{Intellectuals and the Public Good} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), especially chapters 1–4.

\textsuperscript{169} A Long, “\textit{Qi pianlun},” 251.

\textsuperscript{170} Yuan Kejia, “‘Literature for Man’ and ‘literature for people,’ in \textit{Xinshi xiandaihua}, 112–24.

\textsuperscript{171} According to Margreta de Grazia, there are numerous analyses on Hamlet’s aversion to action, from Coleridge’s hermeneutic study to varied perspectives of consciousness, insight, reflection and deliberation, as explored by Hegel, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Derrida, respectively. See Margreta de Grazia, “Hamlet the Intellectual,” in Helen Small ed., \textit{The Public Intellectual} (Malden, MA: Black well Pub., 2002), 92–94,
believe that poetry can go beyond this point is superstition. The paradoxical problem for Mu Dan, as “Departure” and other poems on history and self suggest, is that while he recognizes and accepts the tragic role assigned to him by the play of fate or history, he also defies the very script or plots designated for that play.

It is necessary here to mention Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel Mu Dan was to read in the later years of his life. In this work, the image of Hamlet is used as one of the predominant symbols for the intervention of fate—“the will of chance” that forces the poet himself to be the judge of his time, and holds him as “the servant of one more remote.” This realization expresses the moral dilemma for Pasternak and his fellow poets of the time. However, Pasternak’s perception of art as sacrifice was based on Christ’s Passion, which also anchors Yuri’s spiritual quest. By contrast, this religious dimension is alien to the poetry of Mu Dan. The sacrifice and pain were seen by Mu Dan as inevitable expense, harsh lessons to be absorbed by the individual in his quest, though with great reluctance. At the same time, God, who “shapes our ends” and makes “my fate

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174 Ibid.

175 I refrain from using Martin Buber’s conception of dialogue, which is centered on the distinction between the I–Thou relationship and the I–It relationship, in the discussion of Mu Dan’s conception of God, for fear of overreading Mu Dan’s poems. However, Buber’s theory on this subject can expand our understanding of the poetry of Mu Dan, especially from the existentialist viewpoint of religion. For example, Buber maintains that he was not interested in ideas, but only personal experience, and that he could not discuss God unless through man’s relationships to God. In his framework, the concept of communication, particularly one that is language-oriented, is used both in describing dialogue/monologue through metaphors and expressing the interpersonal nature of human existence. Based partly on Kant’s theory of phenomenon, the objects of perception reside in the cognitive agent’s mind, existing only as thoughts. From this perspective, Mu Dan’s relationship with God can be categorized into the Ich-Es relationship, which is in fact a relationship with oneself. It is therefore not a dialogue, but a monologue. For more details, see Pamela Vermes, *Buber* (London: Peter Hablan, 1988); Kenneth Kramer and et. al., *Martin Buber's I and thou: practicing living dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2003).
cry out,”\textsuperscript{176} is perceived as an ambivalent figure, a potential perpetrator against reason. The meek “but converted,” at the end of the protest in “Departure,” suggest a “wise” decision made by the easily-duped and oppressed, a “let it be”\textsuperscript{177} resolution, a compromise that frees the speaker from his deep moral and intellectual burdens.

In the end, it is highly questionable whether the experience of an “abundance of pain” really helped Mu Dan in the individual cause of poetic self-discovery, let alone true enlightenment. After the creative burst that saw the sharp intelligence and exuberant emotions of “Spring” and “Eight Poems,” both “Departure” and “The Obstructed Road” appear “rough-hewn,” and “The Phantom Traveler” bitterly ironical and rigid. Only “The Pastoral Dream” retains the elegance of form and emotional ingenuity exhibited earlier by the poet. But nevertheless, it is the work of another Mu Dan, flagging in spirit and inspiration, and inevitably disappoints the reader.

\textbf{The New Lyricism}

In a rare exposition of his poetic ideals two years earlier, Mu Dan had idolized, for the only time in his career, the writings of a compatriot poet. Ai Qing 艾青 caught Mu Dan’s eye for his compelling style of passion, incisiveness, and eruptive power, and earned his praise as the “sturdy singer of the New China.” Mu Dan was so impressed by Ai’s approach, seeing in Ai’s poems fresh poetic perspectives and opportunities:

\textsuperscript{176} Hamlet, Act 5, Scene II, and Act 1, Scene IV.

\textsuperscript{177} Hamlet, Act 5, Scene II.
We can catch a glimpse into vast and profound emotions, into the way a heart of kindling passion ingests the experience of sacrifice and hardships that provides an upward propulsion for the poet.  

The comment comes from a short review of Ai’s 1939 collection of poems *He Dies A Second Time* 他死在第二次, in which Mu Dan also compared Ai’s spirit and style with that of Whitman. In a long poem which bears the title of the anthology, Ai tells the story of a wounded soldier who is determined to return to the front where he will be eventually killed. Self-sacrifice and intransigent heroism form the main theme of the poem, which was emphatically reiterated in Mu Dan’s review. Most fundamentally, as an avant-garde poet whose merit was chiefly founded on the downright “un-Chineseness” of his work, Mu Dan was completely overwhelmed by Ai’s clean-cut vernacularism, with its sheer power and vividness in tempering an exceptionally profound and smooth lyric. He maintained that the “groans, sufferings, struggles and hopes” in Ai’s poetry had grown out of the earth, and that the “fragrance and warmth” of the poems, their strength and beauty, could be only represented in free verse—a fluent and vigorous prosodic form analogous to the pristine and virile human body. Mu Dan concludes that Ai’s method was the only solution capable of freeing the new poetry from the clichés of versified slogans and their bloodless, rigid vocabulary.

One year later Mu Dan made a further attempt to articulate this notion, this time by positioning Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 as Ai’s antipode of poetic representations. In a laconic review of Bian’s wartime collection *Letters of Condolence* 慰勞信集, Mu Dan showed

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179 Ibid, 52.
180 Ibid, 48.
his disapproval of the excessive pastoral aura of Bian’s work, which he deemed unsuitable for depicting the real life of the soldiers and common people. To rectify this trend, Mu Dan called for a fresh, new voice—“the new lyricism 新的抒情.” This was seen as opposed to Bian’s narrow range of view and perception, his misuse of wit, and his unruly expression of emotions.\(^{181}\) Unsurprisingly, Mu Dan cited once again Ai Qing as the paragon of this new style, emphasizing the pressing needs of poetry to cope with the struggles of life and the spiritual search for enlightenment and truth:

> With the abundance of life, there should be more [such poems] in our repertory. For us city dwellers who are concerned with or engaged in the struggles [for the righteous cause], the old lyric mode—natural scenes mixed up with bucolic feelings—surely needs to banished. Meanwhile, in order to progress towards universal enlightenment for either society or the individual, and to render the great association between poetry and the age, we need a “new lyricism.” This “new lyricism” should exist to encourage people in their pursuit of brightness and enlightenment by the aid of common sense. I must emphasize the word “reason 理性,” on the grounds that in the present poets’ forum, there is a plethora of passionate lines which barely consult reason, but which are impelled merely by a bout of hysterics.\(^{182}\)

A poet’s voice, he further argued, should be “dynamic, vast, it should have a pulsating cadence and a cheerful tone,” in order to be in harmony with the chorus of the people on the street, in the towns and in the expansive wilderness.\(^{183}\)

> One question arises immediately in regard to the meaning, once again, of “abundance of life” in the cited passage. Ai’s soldier, who is country-born and an orphan,

\(^{181}\) The expression was probably borrowed from Xu Chi 徐遲, in the latter’s “Shiqing de fangzhu” (The Banishment of Lyrics), Dingdian 1 (July 1937): 50–51.


\(^{183}\) Ibid, 55.
and who has “never ever been loved by a woman,”\textsuperscript{184} bears little resemblance to the “us” who lodged a protest in “Departure,” having only recently received love’s lessons. The protest at participation in war, would never have entered the mind of Ai’s rustic soldier, to either thwart his will or affect his moral stance. The motivations behind these two types of soldiers are strikingly different: while one is driven by the simple desire to break “the dead water,”\textsuperscript{185} rallying with millions of countrymen in the war of resistance, the other is perplexed by the tragic truth revealed to the “sensitive heart.” For the former, an unsung heroism is made alive in the present tense of the young and strong; for the latter, a self-assigned ascetic role is derived from a bleak notion of an uncertain future. Ai’s soldier extolls life by devoting himself to the righteous cause of the people; Mu Dan’s soldier, fully aware of the evils in life, feels exploited, deprived, disillusioned, and is eventually assimilated into the scheme of evil.

Although Mu Dan considered Bian’s penchant for wit, his sentimentalism and rhetorical versifying detrimental to the new poetry, his own handling of wit and emotion was also problematic. The poems he wrote in the same period show great incongruence with the ideals he had proposed. There were imprints of both Ai Qing and Bian Zhilin, in terms of their subjects and themes, images and tones, and certain rhetorical features. He emulated Ai in his own voice that was majestic and moving in the depiction of the wretched life of people, their tenacity and their striving for a better future. However, the lyrical “I” of Mu Dan was principally a witness to the dynamic of history, a quintessential passerby who has never truly partaken in the life of those around him. Only occasionally

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid, 57.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, 54.
would he give up his obdurate self to fully embrace the mass consisting of “you” and “him,” to speak out as one proud member of “us” (“Praise 贍美,” CP, 134–36). By contrast, Ai Qing declared that he had abandoned the narrow self (his heart was “ripped open by the hand of fire” and “discarded by the river bank”), and that his spirit was like a bird wishing to cry out and sing in the violent storms. The two defining qualities—faith and sacrifice—which together forged Ai Qing’s self-image as the trumpet-blower of the age, were not present in Mu Dan’s poetry.

A brief preamble to his small collection of poems Expedition Team 探險隊, published in 1945, is perhaps the best illustration of Mu Dan’s frame of mind in this period. In this preamble, he says that his most urgent task as a writer is to reveal “the greatest sorrow” of the time, which was, in essence, “a lack of sorrow.” In light of this, he confesses that the poems he composed in this period reflect only a sentiment of complacency, and thus can at best be read as embers of fire amid an all-swallowing darkness. It was not the kind of darkness that would have given birth to Ai Qing’s tragic heroes, but one of isolation and oppression, derived from a morbid “plethora of blood.” It is for this reason that Mu Dan fell partly into Bian’s rut, only with his own intense drama and dialectical movement. His over-reliance on ideas, and his sometimes

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186 Ai Qing, Selected Poems (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 1979), 33.
187 Ibid, 73.
188 Originally appeared in Wen Ju 2.2 (1945); SWJ, vol. 2, 59.
189 Ibid.
190 See note 184.
“abstract and dull” expressions, make some of his poems obscure and flaccid.\footnote{Lan Lizhi, \textit{Xiandaishi de qinggan yu xingshi} (Feelings and Forms of Modern Poetry) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2002), 125, 127.} In the end, Bian’s style of idyllic allusion caught up with him, as evidenced by “The Obstructed Road” and “The Pastoral Dream,” as he plunged into post-traumatic reflections.

\textit{Abstract Lyricism}

Mu Dan’s failure or reluctance to fully engage with the time was a far cry from certain views of T. S. Eliot who claimed that abstraction is necessary, and in a sense, essential, in the reading of human history.\footnote{T. S. Eliot, \textit{The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism} (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 47–48.} Mu Dan’s particular attitude to literature also echoed the new \textit{l’art pour l’art} scholars such as Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜, who advocated a certain degree of detachment of artists from society in their privileged exploration of the human mind.\footnote{Zhu Guangqian applied a number of theories in his study aesthetics and literature, among them, Edward Bullough’s concept of psychical distance, in his defense of subjectivity in perceiving the objective world. See Zhu Guangqian, \textit{Wo yu wenxue ji qita} (Literature and I and Other essays) (Shanghai, 1947). For more discussions on the subject, see \textit{Modern Chinese Literature in the May Forth Era}, ed. Merle Goldman (Harvard University press, 1977), 37–51.} Mu Dan was only loosely associated with the literary circles of his time and an outsider to any political organization. Most of his poems were not conceived with any direct political or ideological motive. He was more or less an advanced version of the \textit{Ni Huanzhi} type of idealistic but disengaged intellectual, the school-teacher described in Ye Shengtao’s novel of the May Fourth period.\footnote{Ye Shengtao, \textit{Ni Huanzhi} (Beijing, Renmin wenxue, 1961).} Despite their strong sense of social responsibility, these intellectuals became dispirited and marginalized at a time of social
tumult and cataclysmic changes. Mu Dan’s own struggle to forge a true and meaningful relationship between his ambitious quest in literature and the cause of social progress shows the difficulty of balancing individual and collective objectives for the Chinese intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century. In the case of Mu Dan and most of the other Nine Leaves poets, there is an inclination in their writing to place aesthetics over social purpose, and poetry over politics. And their lives show a profound conflict between an individual devoted to a free, detached quest for truth and a courageous, socially engaged poet.

Maurice Bowra once asserted that a true poet speaks of his own feelings “because he must,” regardless of whether it may help others; altruism should never be the primary quality by which to judge a poet’s calibre. Mu Dan’s grappling with the personal and the impersonal, private and public, reality and the ideal, were reflected in his poems, in terms of his selected forms, his subject matter, and the general quality of his output. At his best, his poems can be superbly powerful, fusing insight, wit and passion. But often he was overly preoccupied with his metaphysical thoughts or overburdened himself with satire. Sometimes he merely imitated what other had already written. In “The Malaise of Mr. Hua 華先生的疲倦,” Mr. Hua, a petty-bourgeois figure whose fanciful romantic affair is set against an unnamed Chinese city, is observed through the satirical lens of T. S. Eliot. But despite the name of the protagonist and the Chinese context in which the narrative unfolds, the overall tone of the poem is alarmingly familiar: with sentences such


as “I drink tea,” “I talk in the park,” “What do they talk about? Do I love you?”, it is almost impossible not to read the poem as an echo of the soliloquizing J. Alfred Prufrock. This appropriation of language and theme from T. S. Eliot shows Mu Dan’s problematic approach, in which intention sometimes overpowers content in his illustration of complex social phenomena. Although “The Malaise of Mr. Hua” deals with the morbid behaviour of certain individuals in a time of war, the soul of Eliot’s quintessential Prufrock as the epitome of thwarted desires and modern disillusion is sadly missing from Mu Dan’s text. Poems like this can be seen as clever drill practice rather than as expressions of his own “pulsating” new life.

Some of Mu Dan’s early poems show an inclination to use grave social or moral issues as rhetorical objects, a tendency that can be traced to Auden’s Sonnets from China (1939). His stylization of the phenomena of life combines various perspectives and viewpoints, sundry allusions and tones of voice, and results in impressions of innovation and surprise. However there is often a strangely irrelevant and incongruous aftertaste, not unlike the ‘loose amalgam’ of Auden’s China sonnets. A poem entitled “A Soldier in Need of Tenderness 當一個戰士需要溫柔的時候” is a good example:

Girl, don’t let our muddle, so filled with meaning, Change your abundance into a wasteland, …


198 Stuart Christie, “Disorientations: Canon without Context in Auden’s ‘Sonnets from China,’” PMLA 120. 5 (2005), 1583.

199 As Christie observes, Auden’s knowledge of China and its people was acquired through his observation as a tourist who “passed through,” and his poems on the Chinese war were mainly a “loose amalgam of sensation and privileged misinformation fashioned into discourses of power.” See Stuart Christie, “Disorientations: Canon without Context in Auden’s ‘Sonnets from China,’” PMLA 120. 5 (2005), 1583–84.
I yearn for each one of your delusions,
So long as we don’t sink into the present; it envies
The happiness we have today or will have tomorrow.

別讓我們充滿意義的糊涂，姑娘，
也把你的豐富變得荒原，
...

你的每一個錯覺都令我向往，
只要不要墮入現在，它嫉妒
我們已得或未來的幸福；

(“A Soldier in Need of Tenderness 當一個戰士需要溫柔的時候”，CP, 198–99)

Mu Dan attempts to shed additional light on the inner world of the soldiers, but the slovenliness of his language and his awkward use of jargon make the poem oblique and artificial. He revives Ai Qing’s dead soldier, only to invest him with his own skepticism and bleak notion of humanity. In “The Symbol of Anguish 苦悶的象征,” he further states:

People laugh off their first love;
Their second quest for love is mere material despair.

初次的愛情人們已經笑過去，
再一次追求，只有是物质的无望，

(“The Symbol of Anguish 苦悶的象征,” CP, 209)

Should Ai’s soldier return from the war, he would be told by the speaker in Mu Dan’s poem that love is, in the end, an artificial flower, which is both morally wrong and empirically impractical. The mocking bitterness and the sense of disillusionment of these poems are in stark contrast with Mu Dan’s earlier vision of love (as in “Spring” and “Eight Poems”), and also with Ai Qing’s resilient soldiers of belief and faith. Ai’s critique of He Qifang’s “sugary” style and “sentimental twaddle” can also be applied to Mu
Dan,\(^\text{200}\) although in my opinion He Qifang shows more coherence in his style and greater control of emotion than Mu Dan. In order to realize his underlying purpose, Mu Dan tries to instill wit into every subject, into every situation. Consequently, his poems become overly abstracted and philosophized; some are obscure, even irrelevant. This contributed to the uneven quality of Mu Dan’s output in the 1940s.\(^\text{201}\)

Mu Dan, however, saved himself from further embarrassment by writing sparingly, so as better to maintain his “gymnastics of mood” —to borrow the words of Shen Congwen. In citing Shen I wish to emphasize the profound analogy between him and Mu Dan, in terms of their similar social milieu and method of writing. In his celebrated novel, *Border Town*, Shen gives a vivid depiction of his native country town whose extraordinary beauty and peace evokes the memory of a lost arcadia. According to David Der-wei Wang, Shen’s lyrical style combines with a realistic narrative mode, evoking the constant external threats that loom over the quiet, secluded community.\(^\text{202}\) The cruel external reality is eventually revealed as a fractured mirror of a human paradise blessed with unblemished beauty and peace.\(^\text{203}\) This extraordinary

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\(^\text{201}\) Mu Dan’s early poems remind me of another major poet, Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), who belongs to an earlier generation of modern Chinese poets, and taught Mu Dan in Kunming. Wen, whose achievement as a poet depends mainly on a small anthology of poetry *Dead Water*, is very conscious of striking a delicate balance between the intellectual, moral, and emotional concerns in a single poem. His stringent and elegant form is free from political jargon and pedantic statement, while also ensuring that sentiment and discursive thinking complement each other for greater effect. Wen Yiduo’s success in integrating these elements contrasts with Mu Dan’s fragmented and far-fetched efforts at self-expression in this period..


\(^\text{203}\) In Shen’s fiction, the remote border town is idealized through its geographical isolation which prevents temporarily the protagonist from learning of the miseries of the outside world. See Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 165.
circumlocutory approach to real life and society would later be repudiated by Shen himself as “abstract lyricism”—as a form of “bathos, a self-adjustment, and physiologically or psychologically speaking, the murmurs of a dream, of no use to the external world.”

Mu Dan’s conception of God is another manifestation of this special lyricism. For Mu Dan, God is introduced as an extra-human solution to the problems of real life, based mostly on a Christian sense of guilt and sin. This element is probably borrowed from Auden. However, Auden’s conception of God is derived from a specific Protestant theology and existential perspective (the “dread” of Kierkegaard and the “angst” of Kafka), which in turn give expression to a prevalent feeling of anxiety. As John Fuller has pointed out, Auden’s poem *The Age of Anxiety* is based on the vision of Agape uniting the faculties in a mystical communion, on the need to restore the hermetic garden (a lost Eden) which the fragmented psyche has left behind. For Auden, God is an “intellectual choice”; for Mu Dan, God is chosen through “habits of thought,” an incomplete rumination on the predicament of humanity and civilization.

The poem “Phantom of the Forest: An Elegy for the White Bones on the Hukawng River 森林之魅: 祭胡康河上的白骨” is another example of this style. Composed by Mu Dan in 1945 to commemorate the expeditionary soldiers who were killed in the primeval forests of Burma, the poem is an elegy of its own type: its theme of the unsung heroism of the Chinese soldiers parallels an inquest into man’s struggle in

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204 Shen Congwen, “Chouxiang de shuqing” (Abstract Lyricism), *Shen Congwen quanjí*, vol.16, 535.


206 Ibid.
history. This inquiry unfolds through a series of dialogues between man and the forest, and culminates in bold generalizations of the truth of death and reincarnation:

Forest:

This is just me, unable to walk close to you,  
I wish to lead you through doors of darkness;  
All that is beautiful is under my invisible control,  
It is all here, waiting for you to come after the desolation.  
There will be Beauty in your eyeless socket,  
One dream passes, another comes in its place,  
Wordless teeth will have a more melodious voice.  
From now, we will ramble together in this world of empty illusion;  
Emptiness and illusion are the tumult in every particle of your blood.  
A long, enduring life will possess you,  
Your flowers, your leaves, your larvae.

森 藨:

這不過是我，没法朝你走近，
我要把你領過黑暗的門徑；
美麗的一切，由我無形的掌握，
全在這一邊，等你枯萎後來臨。
美麗的將是你無目的眼，
一個夢去了，另一個夢來代替，
無言的牙齒，它有更好聽的聲音。
從此我們一起，在空幻的世界遊走，
空幻的是所有你血液裡的紛爭，
一個長久的生命就要擁有你，
你的花你的葉你的幼虫。

("Phantom of the Forest: An Elegy for the White Bones on the Hukawng River 森林之魅：祭胡康河上的白骨，" CP, 213)

The “eyeless socket” and “wordless teeth” are the miseries of the soldiers left behind;  
The “invisible control” and incessant “tumult” belong to another world of governance and scheming, one that Mu Dan condemned earlier in another poem: “Foolish men thus throw themselves into the muddy bog./And the murderer, in praise of the freedom of
May/Holds tightly the hub of all invisible electric powers. 愚蠢的人們就撲進泥沼里，/而謀害者，凱歌著五月的自由，/緊握一切無形電力的總樞紐” (“May 五月,” CP, 88).

While the tone of the elegy is solemn and moving, the awkward mingling of the metaphysical and political sub-themes weakens it, making the whole poem gloomy and obscure. The concluding images of the obliterating wind and rain on the burial ground indicate the uncertain place of the valiant soldiers in human history.

This air of gloom and doubt contrasts with other Nine Leaves poets, who approached the subject more candidly and with a brighter tone. Du Yunxie, for instance, maintains that “Those who create history will be buried more deeply/In history, they will burn to bring warmth for the latecomers建造歷史的要更深地被埋在/歷史裡，而後燃燒，給後來者以溫暖.”207 Yuan Kejia, in another poem, proclaims: “Life derives from misery,/In spite of the inflictions of silent death,/I am a great verdigris bell,/Absorbing wild wind from every quarter! 生命脱蒂於苦痛，/苦痛任死寂煎烘，/我是鏽綠的洪鐘，/收容八方的野風！”208 By contrast, in Mu Dan’s poems, especially those written after 1942, history is seem as a deadening force that destroys rather than creates:

In the picture of humanity’s clasped hands
Ruthless killings, again and again, immovable
Death born from its own ideal, a double life: time flowing from both ends,
Carries you with it today, rejected, wounded, distorted!

在人類兩手合抱的圖案裡
那永不移動的反覆殘殺，理想的
誕生的死亡，和雙重人性：時間從兩端流下來
帶著今天的你：同樣雙絕，受傷，扭曲！

208 Yuan Kejia, “Chen Zhong 沉鐘” (Heavy Bell), in Jiuye ji, 232.
The “immovable” ruthlessly repeated killing itself refers to the dominance of evil—another allusion to Auden, “The conscious acceptance of the necessary murder.” The “you” of today must bow to the same rule as the “you” of the past. In his poem “Violence 暴力,” Mu Dan writes:

From coercive, collective folly  
To civilisation’s precisest calculations;  
From the overthrowing of our values  
To acts of building and rebuilding:  
The most trustworthy is still your own iron hand.

From today’s nightmare  
To a heaven that struggles to be born;  
From the first cries of a child  
To his reluctant death:  
Everything transmits your image.

209 Auden’s particular view of history was derived from his own experience in the Spanish civil war, during which he defended the Republic against a fascist military insurrection. George Orwell, who later absorbed Auden’s view, put further emphasis on the distinction between murder as a word, and murder as a fact. See Fuller, Reader’s Guide to Auden, 258–59.
It is simply untrue to say that the *Nine Leaves* poets, at any rate so far as Mu Dan is concerned, were willing to carry the weight of history on their shoulders.\(^{210}\) In “Phantom of the Forest,” the bodies of dead soldiers are transformed into trees, but their spirits still endure the raging wild wind and rain in a foreign country. And the survivors are reeling between their credulity and bereavement, as is suggested in another poem, “The Obstructed Road.” The cold, vast wilderness that does not heed the soldier’s cry, is symbolic of both the adverse external world and the anguished mind of the questing poet.

In another poem, “Seventh of July 七七,”\(^{211}\) composed in 1945 to commemorate the resistance war in the wake of the Chinese victory over the Japanese, Mu Dan’s satirical utterance seems surprisingly at odds with the triumphant atmosphere then prevalent among the common people:

*Seventh of July*

You are the great God we invited  
To be our fairest judge.  
All the batons, water cannons, protests and appeals,  
Were meant for your arrival.

You are the uncle we yearned for so dearly,  
We shouted loudly in order to hear you speak;  
They opposed us, but since your arrival  
They have stolen our words to welcome you.

Gaunt and thinner we have become,  
Waiting day after day for you to stay.  
You distributed your gifts so randomly,  
But demanded of us the utmost sacrifice.

Who will inherit your wealth?  
The answer to this question is still unclear.  
They are clearly your beloved sons


\(^{211}\) The seventh of July 1937 was the date on which the war between China and Japan officially commenced.
And you will never notice the least trace of our suffering.

七七

你是我們請來的大神，
我們以為你最主持公平，
警棍，水龍，和示威請願，
不過是為了你的來臨。

你是我們最渴望的叔父，
我們吵著要聽你講話，
他們反對的，既然你已來到，
借用我們的話來向你歡迎。

誰知道等你長期住下來，
我們卻一天比一天消瘦，
你把禮品胡亂的分給，
而盡力使喚的卻是我們。

你的產業將由誰承繼，
雖然現在還不能確定，
他們顯然是你得意的子孫，
而我們的苦衷將無跡可存。

(CP, 200)

According to my own reading of this poem, Mu Dan is here putting the blame on “God”, an external agent, the Americans perhaps, who have caused such great strains between “us” and “them,” the unidentified parties (presumably the CCP and the KMT) facing an uncertain future after the war. In another poem “The Preceptors 先導,” he sees himself as among the privileged, selected heirs of the great preceptors of the age, among the disciples of the sages who were parachuted down into the world wearing their “burning attire” (CP, 201). His poems of this type tend to have forms that are rigid and crude; his heavy-handed treatment and throw-away use of allusions or expressions hampers the simpler expression of thoughts and emotions. Sometimes a violent mood swing
overpowers and undermines the poet’s purpose. In the poem “Flow, Yangtze River 流
吧，長江的水,” a moment of serious regret for poetry’s “universal and futile imitation
普遍而無望的模仿” (CP, 245) is followed by the poet’s own equally futile and
equivocal utterance of a pipe-dream:

Flow, Yangtze River, flow slowly,
Marguerite living in her lofty mansion by the bank
Watches you, as spring is yet about to fade;
Flow, Yangtze River, my song.

流吧，長江的水，緩緩的流，
玛格丽就住在岸沿的高楼，
她看着你，当春天尚未消逝，
流吧，长江的水，我的歌喉。

(“Flow, Yangtze River 流吧，長江的水,” CP, 190)

Unsurprisingly, Mu Dan has given his coveted maiden a foreign name, as he laments his
youth lost in immutable time. This enigmatic figure of love does not appertain to any
occurrence of real life, and her dolefully blank gaze is eventually lost in the nonchalant,
ever-flowing river. The poem recalls some random events of the past. Mu Dan wrote what
he felt and thought, yet he was not an effective storyteller. His particular style was too
private, too out of touch with his time.²¹²

Conclusion

²¹² According to Walter Benjamin, the effective act of storytelling rests first and foremost in the life of the
storyteller who intends to pass on his own experience as part of a greater experience to those listening. A
storyteller’s greater consciousness of an event can alleviate the effect of past trauma: “The more readily
consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely are they to have a traumatic effect.” See Benjamin,
The “New Lyricism” proposed by Mu Dan not only reflected the needs of new poetry in wartime China, but also brought into question broader issues of the self-identity of the Chinese writers in the tumultuous era. Different writers had their own responses to these problems. Mu Dan’s own development and transformation as a poet, and his traumatic experience in war, marked 1942 as the most vibrant and dramatic year of his life, with some truly remarkable poems, and also some severe poetic failures. His problems demonstrated his limited apprehension of modernity, his confused aesthetic orientation, and his ambivalent moral and political assertions. In his own way, he was exploring what poetry can do and is really about, exploring the possibilities presented to the new poetry. Like the novels of Shen Congwen, the poems he wrote in this year are a vivid illustration of the “subtle state” of his mind, in the light of his individual quest for a life conceived as rich and full, albeit still abounding in pain and suffering.

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Chapter Two

Self, Trauma, and A Special Mode of Revival: Mu Dan’s Last Poems

In what is perhaps Mu Dan’s very last poem, “Winter 冬,” written in Tianjin in December 1976, a small band of workmen stagger into a mud house beside a stable, sit and warm their wearied bodies by the fire, and amid the vapor rising from a boiling kettle, eat, smoke, hum a ditty, and talk intermittently about the people and things of the barren land—before once again dragging themselves out into the night. Against this picture of everyday life, a horse waits quietly chewing fodder, and a cart stands dutifully in the howling wind:

From the power lines the north wind calls to them,
On the desolate land the track fades into the horizon.
A few warm bodies step out of the house,
And hurl themselves into the freezing cold air.

(“Winter 冬,” CP, 362)

Despite the apparent mood of lament for old age which colours most of the poem, the last moments depicted in these lines are astoundingly vivid and exciting, almost visionary. We feel a sense of relief, and hidden self-redemption, expressed in the remarkably refrained tone, that makes up for the agony and malaise of what is otherwise a dreary poem. To transform personal grief into greater yearnings, and to construct a brave gesture of
perseverance and hope for the future, these are great manifestations of the intriguing and powerful workings of a poetic mind. The sudden shift of attention and perspective seen in “Winter” marks the culmination of the thematic movement of Mu Dan’s last creative period—thus giving his poetry a new dimension and significance. This fundamental aspect of Mu Dan’s last poems has surprisingly evaded his most dedicated scholars so far. It requires close scrutiny, which is the purpose of this chapter.

**Saving a “Sinking Boat”**

In his last years, Mu Dan mused to himself that his lifelong enterprise had amounted only to mediocrity, as he looked back upon it with an old man’s “cold eye.” He regarded himself as a “petty actor” in the universal order and a writer who had produced no more than a piece of scrap paper (“Meditation 冥想,” *CP*, 324). This was a telling admission, arising out of long reflection, demonstrating his sense of unfulfilled ambition. A greater fullness and unity in poetry and life—a goal that had motivated his earlier endeavours—was now replaced by the more urgent task of being a real human being. His late writings show the reader that he was still eager to embrace a larger existence—an elevated being in the company of the great masters Byron, Pushkin, Keats, and Tao Yuanming 陶渊明.

We detect echoes of these masters in his last creative burst: a spirit striving to reach another erring spirit; a soul seeking another tormented, and ocean-vast soul; a poetic voice singing with the nightingale over mortal sufferings; and a man of the world finally retiring to his beloved hills. But a melancholic undertone pervades these expressed
aspirations. The former “combatant and questing soul 搏求者,”214 as his fellow Nine Leaves poet Zheng Min has observed, met his fate with resignation: “A sensitive soul capable of love and hate, a man who gave his whole heart to repudiate and appeal, to praise and self-criticize, finally bowed to sadness, was eventually subdued by old age ... he didn’t live to see his own suffering healed by the sun.”215

Mu Dan seems to have carried with him the regret of a traveler in life who haphazardly boarded an ill-fated “phantom flight” (CP, 155). He had survived thirty years of tumult and horror, and from time to time in his late poems, he slipped into reverie or illusion: the world was no longer perceived as new, rich with intense opportunities and mysteries to unravel, but only as the gathering of scattered minuscule moments offering occasional surprise or bewilderment. Slowly from these poems we can piece together his variegated, often incidental moods, through a recounted chain of everyday incidents: a housefly trapped by a window screen evoking reflections on the brutality of fate (“The Fly 蒼蠅”); a small candle suddenly lighting up a blacked-out night, offering sympathy to the soul who foresees “a tiny tomb of red tears” erected at pale daybreak (“After the Power Failure 停電之后”); smog hovering over the city, heightening grief as the poet sees off a young friend (“A Farewell 有別”); and the murmur of a passer-by, which reminds the poet, who accidentally stumbles and falls by the sidewalk, of the sad truth that he is now a feeble, aged man (“On Hearing that I Am Getting Old 聽說我老了”).

214 Tang Shi, Xin yi du ji (New Hypothesis) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1990), 106.
Mu Dan’s life was unremarkable. He was a pure poet at heart and mostly distant from literary circles, and his physical life did not stand out from the millions of Chinese intellectuals who endured the incessant purges imposed by the savage regime. During his lifetime, his poetic genius went largely unrecognized. He was “a shrouded star,” and lived in obscurity despite the immense potential he possessed to absorb the spirit of his time. His posthumous fame, fuelled by the sudden burst of passionate interest on the part of both literary scholars and readers—the so-called “Mu Dan Phenomenon”—is a belated and somewhat ironic acknowledgment of his true stature. From his painfully engrossing poem “Poetry 詩,” we sense a deep-rooted frustration concerning the real state of his endangered “boat of fantasy 幻想之舟.” Revoking an earlier view of the relationship between poets and poetry as one of lovers seeking union (CP, 265–66), he turns now to feelings of anxiety—at the fearful task of emulating precursors, at the unfathomable stock of sorrow that defies expression, and at the impossibility of a readership in the future. This anxiety threatens to extinguish his passion in an “exalted silence” (CP, 319–20).

Despite their overwhelming sense of weariness and grief, Mu Dan’s last poems, written in the space of less than two years, between 1975 and his unexpected death in early 1977, display an unprecedented degree of freedom, owing partly to the fact that they were probably not written for any particular reader in his mind and that he did not expect them to be published in the near future. This small trove of poems—some thirty

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216 Yu Shicun, “Mu Dan xianxiang de yiyi” (Significance of the Mu Dan Phenomenon), in Fengfu he fengfu de tongku (Abundance and abundance of pain) (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1997), 94–103.

217 Xie Mian, “Yike xing liang zai tianbian” (A Star in the sky), in Fengfu he fengfu de tongku, 9.
only displays an immense range of feelings and thoughts expressed with great spontaneity and style. They suggest an immaculate control over his texts from a poet who was now less burdened by the influences he had received. Moreover, he seems to have distanced himself completely from the didactic and moral principles imposed by the Party and officialdom.

No Chinese writer under Communist rule could circumvent the tough, and potentially fatal question, “to write or not to write.” Lu Xun’s famous “iron house” metaphor and his “dancing with shackles” mockery of Chinese intellectuals are echoed in the poems of Mu Dan, who remained Lu Xun’s great admirer. The overall state of literature, which was constrained by a list of “dos” and “don’ts,” and the perilous nature of writing itself, were acutely felt by most Chinese writers. The Nine Leaves poets, because of their poetic ideals and practice, were among the first to feel the heat and they fell quickly into collective silence. As the only member of the group who still managed to write poetry at all in the 1950s, Mu Dan’s untimely publication of a number of poems in 1956–57 proved to be too politically provocative, while at the same time, when judged by purely literary standards, it fell short of aesthetic quality. This situation resulted in

According to Li Fang, Mu Dan actually composed fifty-nine poems during this last period, based on the information provided by the poet’s surviving family members. Apart from the poems which have already been published in a number of anthologies, the reminder are generally considered to have been lost or been destroyed by the poet himself. See MD, 379.


The specific approach adopted by the Nine Leaves group was on a collision course with the trend of new folk songs amid the “nationalization and popularization” of poetry advocated by the Communist Party in the 1950s. See Guo Moruo, “Guanyu shige de minzu hua quanzhong hua wenti” (On Nationalization and Popularization of Poetry) Shikan 7 (1963): 32–35; also, Hong Zicheng, History of Contemporary Chinese Literature (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1999), especially chapter 4.

Chinese writers who were forced to write officially acceptable poetry were likely to have their works deprived of any deep or original sense of the poetic or personal self, in their engaging, fearfully or
Mu Dan’s bleak view of poetry as analogous to a “sinking boat,” a view with which many of his contemporaries concurred. Soon after this he resorted to a mode of “latent (or underground) writing,” committing himself completely to the translation of foreign poetry. In hindsight, the strenuous act of translation did provide Mu Dan with a certain degree of exemption, a safe passage through the increasingly treacherous political battlefield. He was enabled to preserve his poetic identity and was given a means to escape from “the noise of time.” His translations were textual testimony to his survival, they were form of underground, rather than overt resistance.

Translation also had a profound impact on Mu Dan’s last poems as a rich source of thematic and technical development. *Don Juan*, for instance, which took Mu Dan eleven years to finish in extremely difficult circumstances, nourished his own sense of form and style. His own poetic revival and growth followed the process of self-making of Byron’s protagonist, his Fall and Recovery; *Don Juan*’s sardonic and biting wit, and the poem’s concrete, almost infallible feeling for the common-sense perspective in every


222 *JXJ*, 227.

223 In his study of Chinese poetry during the 1950–70s, Hong Zicheng identifies echoing expressions from poets such as Ai Qing (a fish fossil) and Zeng Zhuo 曾卓 (trees at the edge of a precipice) that reflected the perilous state of poetry. These images, according to the author, all pointed concordantly to the act of “secret writing” undertaken by these poets. See Hong Zicheng, *Wenti yu fangfa* (Problems and Methods) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010), 72.

224 The term was coined by Liu Zhirong in his book *Qianzai xiezuo: 1949–1976* (Latent Writing: 1949–1976), in which he devoted a whole chapter to the study of Mu Dan’s last poems.

situation, was a fitting model for the unfulfilled rationality long pursued by Mu Dan since his younger days. The use of poetic utterance as the sole analytic and critical weapon with which to engage the world came to fruition in Mu Dan’s last poems.

In the end, Mu Dan’s decision to resume writing his own poetry was his defense against the hellish feeling of not being seized by the spirit of poetry. It was a response to the “What Then” question imposed when Don Juan was finally completed. Encouraged by the considerably relaxed political atmosphere after the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of the Gang of Four in late 1976, and the increasing fear of his pen growing “rusty” from a prolonged hiatus, he focused on re-evaluating his own position among “the ordinary people and things in their everyday travail.” This re-assessment inevitably led to reflections on the damaged life of the self and of ordinary people in a wider historical context. And with it, came the reasserted attempt to raise the “sinking boat” of poetry and transform it into a floating boat offering remedies and solutions to life’s actual contradictions.

**Tragic Knowledge and the Anatomy of Power**

For the late Mu Dan, the truth of life was something acquired only in relative old age, with deep connotations of absurdity and tragedy. He seems to concur with Byron in implying, with a certain anguish, that with regard to humans and devils, “neither of their

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228 *JXJ*, 192.
intellects are vast*,229 in taking stock of the cherished things of the past—love, friendship, and ideals—he let out a cry against the world where “all hateful things” have conspired together:230

There is one tree that stands alone intact,
It thrives, I know, on suffering’s lifeblood.
Its green shade mocks me ruthlessly!
Oh wisdom tree! I curse your every growing bud!

(“Song of Wisdom 智慧之歌,” CP, 313)231

The truth that was previously revealed is now the subject of the poet’s fiercest denunciation; it has proved historically unviable, it does not exist in the realm of the possible, there is nothing better in the future. The poet’s cry points here to the hidden essence of reality—to the falsity of that very essence.

It is worth noting that this downright negation of wisdom, root of the illusions that foster all false values and beliefs, were as the development of Mu Dan’s earlier conception of enlightenment, something stumbled upon and lighted upon by chance. This enlightenment was originally conceived by the poet as an intuitive, poetic mode of

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knowledge growing from a deep self-consciousness. Knowledge of the predicament of the self had led the poet to the acknowledgment of power, the principle of all relations, and its sovereignty over the people and things in society. A series of images conjured up by Mu Dan—the relentless, all-swallowing torrent of time, withered fruit, lumps of dry soil, the dog-tooth-like zigzag passage leading to enlightenment—all imply the vanquished quest for human intelligence. The exposure of the corrupted nature of society, coupled with the recognition of the limits of man’s perception, and of the incapacity of human language, all contribute to the depiction of dilemmas of life and their representations in art: on the one hand, there is a craving for more experience concomitant with the accretion of pain, as suggested in the early “Departure”; on the other hand, experience of accumulated pain paradoxically defies expression, as poetic language becomes exhausted as soon as the pain prevails and dominates all other elements of experience. This complex experience led Mu Dan’s poetic endeavour to the metaphysical plane of inquiry, or, at moments of greatest illusion, to the engagement of a supernatural being, God or Satan, as the background cause of the incessant conflicts in human society. We see this last extraordinary movement in poems from the 1940s such as

232 As the Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-Kwan has observed, this self-consciousness in Mu Dan’s early poems is characteristic of inherent conflicts between body and soul, self and the external world. There are numerous studies on the subject of the body and self in modern Chinese poetry. Among them, there is an insightful study by Mi Jiayan (2004), who traces the self-fashioning of bodily energy in the discursive formation of modern Chinese poetry between the 1920s and the 1940s. Following the dialectical development of poetic representation embodied in the works of three predecessors, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Li Jinfa 李金發, and Dai Wangshu 戴望舒, Mi devotes a brief discussion to Mu Dan’s early poems, that seem to have suggested a new mode of expression. See Leung Ping-Kwan, “Mu Dan yu xiandai de ‘wo’” (Mu Dan and the Modern “I,” in Yige minzu yijing qilai, 43; Mi Jiayan, Self-refashioning and Reflective Modernity in Modern Chinese Poetry 1919–1949 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

These ruminations of his experience, wisdom, and the Divine are not grounded in any particular philosophy or religion; instead, they are mostly driven by Mu Dan’s moral concerns for self-preservation, in contrast with his own habits, social conventions, prevalent rules and ideologies. They are emotionally charged, and in many of Mu Dan’s poems, even appear forced and obliquely represented. What makes “Song of Wisdom” such an extraordinary cri-de-coeur is Mu Dan’s new perception of experience as seen against the completely impoverished silence of the estranged human world. The dispossessed soul, as the poet ruefully suggested in another late poem, is a permanently closed bank bereaved of its treasured stock (“Friendship 友誼,” CP, 331). The same metaphor of the bank reappears with extended implications, in the late poem “Love 愛情,” to delineate the hidden vice and decadence, which threaten to contaminate all noble human feelings and proper relations. Passionate love is personified as a female swindler and smart investor who, in spite of her cunning, is mortified by her inevitable fall:

Though she has a bank built of stone,
It cannot withstand the secret trembling of the soul;
And despite the smiles of trust, her life’s savings
Are withdrawn by the act of a stealthy hand.

雖然她有一座石筑的銀行，

233 In Mu Dan’s “I Sing of the Body,” the world is perceived as both a part and whole from the images of human body, and from this world arises God as subsistent existence who shows Himself as unrestricted form of various existent things. The amazement of this poem—and this is certainly open to debate—seems to dwell on this parallelism between the existential being of human body, the world as the place of experience, and God as the cause of the world and human activity.

234 As Tang Shi rightly pointed out, the main source of inspiration of Mu Dan’s early poetry is nature, rather than the moral and social imperatives. See Tang Shi, Xin yidu ji, 104.
Further to this exposure, the poet averred that humans are destined to be lost in the impenetrable maze of life, that their passion will be doused in the “ice cave” of this world, leaving the once plump heart to wilt (in the late poem “Idealism 理想,” *CP*, 321). Since the truth upheld by man is but a poor guide to reality, he affirms that the self-pronounced path-breaker, the staunch pursuer, is indeed “the traveler without a path” (“Love of the Sea 海戀,” 1945, *CP*, 186). The white bird, which bears the human spirit of imagination to survey the vast domain “beyond knowledge, in the mountain ranges beyond the mountains 在知識以外, 那山外的群山,” has deserted the poet, leaving him mired in a grim, irredeemable reality (*CP*, 186).

These impetuous utterances suggest the acquisition, in the words of Yeats, of tragic knowledge, acquired by Mu Dan with great irony. Typically Mu Dan would express himself in many, often opposing, voices. There was the immediate reassessment of his positions in time and society resulting in various modified strategies of survival: a keen eye for the world’s wonders, and a readiness to be inspired; to search constantly for new ways of self-efficiency in a cruel, mutable world; to be merely suspended in the merciless current of time; to be sober as a star, waiting to shine quietly, but also brilliantly, to be like a grain of plain sand (in the late poem “Sense and Sensibility 理智與情感,” 316). Despite past suffering, the future world continues to engage the poet, inviting him

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235 For Yeats, this tragic knowledge will however be used to impel poetic creation to compensate for the experience of real loss. Daniel T. O’Hara, *Tragic Knowledge: Yeats’s Autobiography Hermeneutics* (New York: Columbia University Press), 58.
to partake in further explorations (in the late poem “On Hearing that I Am Getting Old,” 232). These redefined attitudes and notions imply not only a reinforced defense of the self, but also wider prospect and new potentials of experience. The poet seems to be imaginatively in control of his spiritual pursuit. Citing Lu Xun on one occasion, Mu Dan was adamant that the best way to stave off the pressing darkness of life is to “let out all the heat and light,” like the fire emitted by a glow-worm.236 And only through his poetry, can past sufferings and pains paradoxically make life more worth living.

The paradox of life is a central motif of Mu Dan’s poems. This motif is made evident, as we have already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, in his response to the dire moral situations of life and in his Hamlet-like disposition (as seen by other critics). It can also be seen in his own problematic search for a new lyrical form. In his last poems, the recognition of the symbiotic relationship of art and politics is developed from inherent paradoxes and contradictions. A self-satirizing poem, “Performance 演出,” expresses his pathological suspicions as to the human motives that have deprived people of their conscience, of their authenticity, of their common sense and natural speech—an anatomy of the human condition also to be found in Václav Havel’s political writing. Social life is here depicted as a carefully staged theatrical performance where the actors’ quaint, almost comical demeanor can only be seen as “terribly entertaining”:237

Performance

Impassioned speech, indignation, eulogy and laughter—
Performances long expected by eyes in the dark.
See how the current cast of the play

236 MD, 160.
Compound anew their grand emotions.

Actors and audience alike have grown used to the sham,
And see the naive and the naked as oddities.
“Why do these discordant notes?
Cut them out, cover them over, correct, revise them!”

To achieve abnormal effects no effort is spared;
Every form must be polished, perfected.
“That is life,” and yet it violates Nature’s laws,
When actors are too sly to be sly.

But no one knows how many hearts of gold have been betrayed.
Everywhere fake notes are in circulation.
What they buy is not a resounding cry of sympathy,
But numb indifference beneath the sound of loud applause.

演出
慷慨陳詞，憤怒，贊美和歡笑
是暗處的眼睛早期待的表演，
只看按照這出戲的人物表，
演員如何配置精彩的情感。

終至台上下已習慣這種偽裝，
而對天真和赤裸反倒奇怪：
怎麼會有了不和諧的音響？
快把這削平，掩飾，造作，修改。

為反常的效果而費盡心機，
每一個形式都要求光潔，完美；
“這就是生活”，但違反自然的規律，
盡管演員已狡獪得毫不狡獪，

卻不知背棄了多少黃金的心
而到處只看見贗幣在流通，
它買到的不是珍貴的共鳴
而是熱烈鼓掌下的無動於衷。

(CP, 317)
What Mu Dan is satirizing here must be apprehended in the context of the anomalies of Chinese society since the 1950s. The dark, inhibitive set of the melodrama alludes to a nightmarish memory from the past; the poignant scenes of the grotesque derived from past experience are re-enacted in a characteristically crazy and bizarre dream context, and through it, a system of internalized values and norms of behaviour comes to the fore, in the form of the ritual-like engagement between actors and audience. The highly formalized and paradigmatic proceeding, as “Performance” suggests, pervades all aspects of everyday life, governing even the tiniest etiquette and rule, to ensure the “maximum effect” of the vicious scheme. In the process, cleverly-concealed lies and forms of jargon supersede reality and eventually become reality; each social member is merely playing with himself, a sort of “identity conceptual masturbation.”

One needs only recall Havel’s famous Zahradni slavnost (The Garden Party) to comprehend the full extent of absurdity delineated by this poem. It raises awareness of the political bestiality of the age, when language was “most separated from meaning.” This separation can be seen in the blankness of an inhuman silence. Havel’s confession—“I am afraid of my voice and of


239 Rana Mitter, A Bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209. In Trensky’s analysis of Havel’s drama, language is the symptom of the alienation of man that points not only to the impossibility of communication between people, but also to the “very corruption of intellect” embodied in language. In the theatre of the absurd, “language not only ceases to serve character development, but the opposite becomes the fact, characters being made the vehicle of language. Words form people by filling their inner void until human speech stops functioning as a means of communication and becomes a form of social behavior.” Here the language is presented as proliferating object of a “monstrous energy.” Ji Fengyuan also writes on the phenomenon of the “linguistic engineering” that took place in Mao’s era, resonating with Karl Popper’s explication of social engineering. See Paul I. Trensky, “Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd,” The Slavic and East European Journal 13.1 (1969): 44; Ji Fengyuan, Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao’s China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), especially Chapter 1.
my mirror ... This silence is my damnation"—echoes deeply in Mu Dan’s illustration of the frenetic madness of his age, in which aphasia is a common symptom suffered by all social members.

The theatre of China’s Cultural Revolution, like that of the era of the Soviet revolution, was a universal art-form, one that involved stringent proceedings and careful staging, symbolization and the embodiment of strong ideological connotations. It was an enforced game that engaged all social members and operated, as “Performance” implies, through transgression of “the order of nature.” A parodic “masked ball,” a fairground side-show, it was connected to the society-wide political arena, built upon the hidden matrix of power that pervaded all aspects of an ailing society. Though it was never Mu Dan’s intention to decipher the myth of power at a theoretical level—by systematically examining its causes, contexts and effects from a broader socio-historical perspective—he nonetheless shows the percipience of a poet who transforms his own traumatic experience into a universal parable of political purge and terror.

The Formation of “I”

Lies transmitted by newspapers and airwaves
Burst into my head triumphantly;
Just when I was about to make up my own mind
They bombarded me with threats and advice.


243 Viktor Shklovsky, “Drama I massovye predstavleniia (Drama and mass performance),” in Khod konia (The Knight’s Move) (Moscow and Berlin: Gelikon, 1923), 61.
A man I did not know
Waved his hand. He’d never thought of me before
But when I walked out on the main road,
He snatched me into a life-cell.

Official documents travel from one office to another—
Do you know what keeps them so busy?
So that the ocean of my life can be made to
Freeze for ever beneath the imprint of their seal.

On the land, on so many mansions made of earth,
Stands so many powerful idols.
I know that earth will one day revert to earth,
But by then I shall have been destroyed.

As if in the sleep of a madwoman,
A strange dream flashes and fades away.
She wakes to a brilliant world,
But the same grotesque dream has impaled me.

“我”的形成

報紙和電波傳來的謊言
都勝利地衝進我的頭腦，
等我需要做出決定時，
它們就發出恫嚇和忠告。

一個我從不認識的人
揮一揮手，他從未想到我，
正當我走在大路的時候，
卻把我抓進生活的一格。

從機關到機關旅行著公文，
你知道為什麼它那樣忙碌？
只為了我的生命的海洋
從此在它的印章下凝固。

在大地上，由泥土塑成的
許多高樓矗立著許多權威，
我知道泥土仍將歸為泥土，
但那時我已被它摧毀。

仿佛在瘋女的睡眠中，
一個怪夢閃一閃就沉沒；
Disturbingly allegorical and almost Kafkaesque, the poem reveals the vicious force behind a series of ambuscades and onslaughters encountered by the self. The appalling image-complex of unreality and horror reveals the real conditions of private and public life, echoing a Foucauldian notion of power that circulates “through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures, and all their daily actions.”244 The intervention and administrative control through terrorization, coercion, violence, and the establishment of the false emblem of authorization, together draw a chilling picture of a totalitarian state from which no one can escape. Following the fanatical show of “Performance,” this poem gives further illustration as to how an innocent man is bound and assimilated into a system in which tyrannical law governs both the “order of nature” and that of the state.245

The poignant image of the madwoman that concludes the poem shows the devastating impact on people after years of purge and prolonged oppression. The poem’s allegorization of past horrors is concerned mainly with the fragmentation of the ego, the persona’s self-imposed exile, and the self’s struggle for reason. Wrestling with premonition and doubt, the self slips back into the tumultuous state of the unconscious, despite the unequivocal call from “a brilliant world.” This inaction seems to suggest an unspeakable weariness with life, even a Hamlet-like fear of a dreamless realm of death or


oblivion. The self is reluctant to bring itself to complete consciousness, and this unresolved dilemma, which resonates with Derrida’s diagnosis of madness—a state of being that cannot be said—heightens the drama of the self and its psychological predicament.

Sobriety here is what the split self, thus also the poet, craves, approached with caution. It requires time and immense effort to be liberated from the present madness, to let reason and sense save the self from seemingly debilitating lassitude and self-doubt:

O! Each and every sense sinks into the material world—
What message can I project through this window?
What heaven can save me from “Now”? 

呵，耳目口鼻，都沉沒在物質中，
我能投出什麼信息到它窗外？
什麼天空能把我拯救出“現在”？

(the last stanza of “Drowning 沉沒,” CP, 341)

With this self-interrogation, the plight of the self remains unresolved. But despite the bleak view of the present earlier in the same poem—the “melting icebergs” and “palace of death” that embody man’s fallen ideals and tragic ending—there is still some slight hope, represented by the prisoner’s glimpse of a bright sky beyond the window (CP, 341).

Mu Dan’s inquiry into power was directed more from a human perspective than from any particular ideological viewpoint. Whether earthbound or looking heavenward, man alone bears the brunt of the game of power. The late poem “The Transformation of Gods 神的變形” gives evidence to this humanistic strain, presented in an exceptional tale

of conflict that involves both the human and supernatural. All godly figures, such as God and Satan, are usurpers of power, driven exclusively by their thirst for power over both the supernatural and human world. Power is the only cause, purpose and mediator of the world’s affairs; mankind, so absorbed in the cycle of chaos and order, is a mere offering for the strife, and is destined to “savour again and again its bitter fruits” (CP, 356). There is no longer any “contractual obligation” between God and mankind. The dictator of the mundane world has taken over the work once done by God.

Following this line of exposure, truth reveals itself only as a “regime” of truth. Truth is power and power is truth. The overwhelming sense of inevitability, which pervades the treacherous political and social life of the present, was acutely felt by Mu Dan. For him, the act of writing had been increasingly absorbed into a system of “production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.” As an individual, and as a writer, he lived with neither poetry nor a true feeling of the self.

“Song of the Siren,” a short poem composed earlier in 1956, registers his prescient feelings of doom. It tells the story of a group of pilgrims who, enchanted by the siren’s song, give all they have, before realizing that what they have pursued is but an illusion. “The more we lose, the more exquisite is her song;/Till the very “loss” becomes our happiness” (CP, 285). The poet demystifies the myth behind the siren—state’s propaganda and forced

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249 Ibid.
education, the Utopian dream peddled to the naive people (“Love and dreams shine among the thorns 愛情和夢想在荊棘中的閃爍” (CP, 285). In a much fiercer rebuttal made twenty years later, Mu Dan went further, claiming that good and evil, heaven and hell can hardly be distinguished in a society crippled by madness:

Once I cursed the darkness and sang praises to a ray of light;  
But now the darkness is worshipped with light:  
My soul, can you still seek Heaven?

我曾詛咒黑暗，歌頌它的一線光，  
但現在，黑暗卻受到光明的禮贊：  
心呵，你可要追求天堂？

(“Asking 問，” CP, 351)

The self’s internal values have been shattered by the totalitarian state, which imposes its own values as the conventions and codes to be obeyed in the everyday life of the people. The self, coerced into this pseudo-life, now turns to its sober sense for salvation. In his late poems depicting the self’s tragic experience in harsh, multiple realities, Mu Dan provided one of the most astounding testaments in modern Chinese literature. In the poem “Self 自己，” he retraces the metaphorical development of life, its dreams and beliefs, resistance and strife, ending in the self’s tragic demise. The concluding scenes of the poem are simply astonishing:

Meanwhile another world was posting bills for a missing person.  
His disappearance surprised the vacant room,  
Where another dream was waiting for him to dream,  
And numerous rumours were ready to give him a shape  
Hinting at an unwritten biography:  
was that my real self?

另一個世界招貼著尋人啟事，
In this relentless interrogation of the self, of one man’s micro-history and the macro-history of the people, each member of society is the protagonist of an unfinished false biography, written and forcibly “documented”, by rumours and lies. The individual’s whereabouts and uncertain future strike a note of poignancy and doubt, insofar as the room in which the person once dwelt is now empty. The metaphors of empty room, a stark foreign land, and a string of tumultuous dreams, evoke the proximity of life and death, and with that, the transition from the self’s idyllic origin to its ghostly existence, is completed: the original camp once set up by the young sojourner in the glistening starlight (CP, 334) has been transformed into a camp of terror governed by the life-administering power. The tragic venture of life continues to be the subject of the endless interventions and restrictions of the sovereign state.

These illuminating reflections on the impact of power, and on the condition of the self, are characteristic of Mu Dan whose ability always resided mostly in his perceptive power rather than analytical aptitude. At his most lucid and sharp, the depth and vividness of his revelation resembles a Denkbild, or thought-image.²⁵⁰ Mu Dan’s use of the method

²⁵⁰ The denkbild was a term used by the Frankfurt school. See Gerhard Richter, Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damages Life (California: Stanford University Press, 2007).
is however purely poetic: for him, it is a “secret avenue,” the only vehicle whereby critical insight can fully expand.

Mu Dan’s resemblance to Václav Havel on the subject of the shattered life is equally impressive. Not only do the two share similar experiences under the “sphere of power” that mirrored “a mutual totality, the auto-totality of society,” they also show consensus in their self-designated role as intellectual and writer. “It is I who must begin.” Mu Dan, a pure poet by temperament, sets himself the task of bringing to light the operation of power and the concurrent sufferings imposed on the ordinary people. His wish is that one day his voice can reach others. He agrees, although unknowingly, with Havel that the efforts made in the search for meaning are proportionate to the absurdity that is revealed through that very search. Moreover, both emphasize the importance of reviving the lost conscience. To cite Havel: “Without a profound inner longing for sense, there could not then be any wounding by nonsense.” Mu Dan echoes this view by claiming, in his late poem “Sense and Sensibility,” that although human life is not superior to a grain of sand, it still bears within itself a “predetermined cause and purpose,” which is to be preserved and revived under its vigilant guiding stars (CP, 316).

**Seasons as Theatre of the Soul and Social Allegory**

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251 Ibid, 2.


My references to Foucault and Havel in the above readings of Mu Dan are based on their shared awareness of the social ills which gives substance to all their works, and also their perception of the special burdens of history rendered in a more or less tragic mode. The relevance of their luminous ideas to Mu Dan’s poetry on certain important subjects—power, self, responsibility—is both apparent and profound. In “Performance,” for instance, the elaborate theatrical setting and sequence of events on the stage represents the subjecting of individuals to discipline, while the actors’ extreme professionalism in perfecting their every move and utterance can be seen as the tragic result of social assimilation. The false allegorical show portrayed by Mu Dan is the very opposite of Havel’s ideal of a true theatre that fosters a sense of “alliance” or “fellowship” between artists and audience.256 In Mu Dan’s poem the keen and probing eyes in the dark, and the failure of communication between actors and audience, resemble the surveillance that takes place in the cells of the Panopticon in Foucault’s political allegory: “small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized, and constantly visible.”257 Mu Dan’s re-enactment of the exercise of power in the everyday context alludes to a profound and horrific political experience, metaphorized through an intensely conceived poetic drama. Likewise, the madwoman’s dilemma depicted in “The Formation of ‘I’” epitomizes the failure of the living subject to overcome the brutal tyranny of history.

Mu Dan’s illustration of the natural seasons in his four late poems “Spring,” “Summer,” “Autumn,” and “Winter,” is an attempt to erase the disparity between reason

256 As Robert Pirro observes, theatre for Havel represents the greatest potential to be a “social phenomenon in the true sense,” and is a distinctive form of community that can come into being between audience and artists. During a theatrical performance there emerges from their “common participation in a particular adventure of the mind, the imagination and the sense of humor” and a “common experience of truth or flash of insight into the ‘life in truth.’” See Robert Pirro, “Vaclav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy,” Political Theory 30.2 (2002): 238.

257 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 200.
and reality, a conscious departure from, or rather extension of, the social tumult depicted in his other last poems. As a series of mini-dramas echoing the turbulent past, they anticipate a future still permeated with various omens of struggle and violence. We feel therefore a remarkable sense of unnaturalness in the anthropomorphized procession of time, as the poet works toward the universality and dramatic objectivity of his representations. Equipped with sharper and more concrete views, and with an uncanny sense of distance from his subjects, his rhetoric has shifted from broadside attack to calm reception, from angst and despair to gratification, and sometimes from bitter satire to light-hearted drollery.

The first act of the play, “Spring 春,” is a quaint metamorphosis. Instead of the “bright silhouetted world” that flashes in the madwoman’s dream, the world she wakes up to is here depicted as a wild congregation of all vociferous things:

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Spring riot: flowers, fresh green, and your youth,
Things that once crowded my early days;
Secret pamphlets distributed, promoting the tropics and superstition,
Actively incite the overthrow of my gentle little kingdom.
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(“Spring 春,” CP, 326)

The world suddenly abounds with a myriad lives and activities, but the awakened self still frets over the possibility of losing its sanity once again: the “cold wisdom” acquired by old age prefigures further chaos behind the feast of senses; the decrepit self safeguarded
by “enclosed stone walls” is under a new threat from “the next wave of attacks” (CP, 326).

“Summer 夏” is furious and hot, with its living creatures swarming and competing for the primary right of speech. As in the human world, summer’s established order is shaped by an omnipresent, totalitarian power: all living things, “the green veins and the red blood,” are absorbed into the sun’s grand plan of writing an epic. This epic, however, consists only of “words, words, and words” (CP, 328) that power uses (in Foucault’s words) to “fascinate, terrorize, and immobilize.”

The sun’s insatiable desire for extravagance and power has each individual at the mercy of its whims and ceaseless escapades:

He describes my vexed journey
But when it nearly reaches its climax, he changes protagonist
And in a cold sweat, I escape into idle thought.

他要寫出我的苦惱的旅程，
正寫到高潮，就換了主人公，
我汗流浹背地躲進冥想中。

(“Summer 夏,” CP, 328)

The poem concludes that the sun’s ostentatious writing will be guaranteed of publication in the coming spring, thanks to the collaboration of the lukewarm critics. Here the

exposure of the status of writers under stringent censorship is expressed in mixed fantastic and social terms that call into question the power of regularization.  

“Autumn 秋” offers relief for the sorrow-laden, afflicted soul in the climate of the harvest season. The poem can be read as a homage to Keats, to whom Mu Dan had dedicated a beautiful translation of the latter’s ode “To Autumn” some two decades earlier. In his own representation, the regained soberness and self-restraint are reflected in the firmament’s “intense blue,” and the ambiance is likened to an inveterate drunk finally coming to his senses. It is a time when the burden of life must be unloaded, the dust of past affrays must be settled, and one’s debts to the world be cleared. The soul reopens as the theatre for all good and ill. But still, there is the imminent threat, the “declaration of war” looming large beyond the “peaceful port of autumn” (CP, 337–38). This challenge requires from the poet an elevated level of apprehension, reinforced courage and commitment, and more importantly, a vision, built upon a privileged sense of the self and deepened historical consciousnesses. A sympathetic understanding and symbolic representation must illuminate experience through a new lyrical voice. This was exactly what Mu Dan sought to achieve in “Winter.”

The first impression of “Winter” is its humility and restrained nostalgia, as its theme appears to consist of nothing spectacular or threatening. Consisting of four short sections of regular verse, the poem registers the poet’s perceptions and thoughts, from a  

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259 Publication is a matter of “making live and letting die.” Another late poem of Mu Dan’s, “Tui gao xin 退稿信” (Rejected Letter), suggests that a literary work must defer to the official decorum, ideally, by slotting a new set of names to the prefabricated script of plots and characters. The main credentials of a writer, therefore, lie in his or her willingness and ability to comply with the political will and to maneuver amidst various clashing forces (CP, 358). On this understanding, a conscientious writer will be treated like a housefly: driven by the impulse for a simple meal, it will be destroyed by a smack; and the writer will be snubbed out by the intolerant system (“The Fly,” 309–10). See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 247.
late winter afternoon to the sleepless night of “wanting and sighs,” which completes what seems to be another uneventful day. It contains the calm regret and yearnings of old age; the recognition of the deplorable common lot, which takes the form of “the shackle of winter,” “the sealed tongue,” and “the executioner of all good things.” This deepening grief is, however, drastically overturned in the last section of the poem, by an intervening illusion or dream. This illusion or dream seems completely untriggered but nonetheless exerts itself in vivid cheerfulness, as we already illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. The brief appearance of the band of anonymous men, with their unhurried movement, their ease and determination, imparts a feeling of security and vigour, in the face of the many prospects and possibilities in the future: Have these men escaped from the poet’s suppressed consciousness? Will they slip into another “undreamed dream”? Who are they? What messages are they carrying? Where are they heading? The group bas-relief, their sitting around the glowing fire, their dashing into the north wind and toward the wilderness, seems to anticipate a new chapter of adventure, rather than putting an abrupt end to an old man’s distressed or “good dream.”

In a letter to a friend, Mu Dan says that the theme of “Winter” is one of joy and pleasure, a statement epitomized by the poet’s lone, calm figure by the window immersed in his work. His rekindled passion for the great poets of the past, Du Fu 杜甫 and Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, further evokes the likening of his little residence to the former’s “thatched hut” or the latter’s country retreat where Tao Yuanming, in perfect solitude, casts a gaze toward the hills lying beyond his south-facing window. But, unlike Master Tao, whose feelings and thoughts of cloistered life are projected onto the

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surrounding natural objects (returning birds, the distant hills, setting sun, eastern fence, yellow chrysanthemums, and so on), the time for Mu Dan is just four o’clock in the afternoon, and the poet is yet to put aside altogether his obligations to the mundane world.

To fully appreciate the significance and implications of “Winter” we need to retrace our steps more than thirty years to another night that briefly hindered a young traveler. In the poem “A Cold December Night 在寒冷的臘月的夜里,” a winter storm wreaks havoc on a poor northern village. There is the familiar setting of mud houses, resting cattle and carts lying “silently beneath the falling snow” (CP, 96). Written at the time of the Sino-Japanese war, Mu Dan’s depiction in this poem of the wretched life of the Chinese people echoes certain works of Ai Qing, notably “Snow Falls upon the Chinese Land 雪落在中國的土地上,” in terms of high spirits and emotional appeal. However, the difference between the two is fundamental. Unlike Ai Qing, who sees himself as a “trumpeter 吹號者” of the time, Mu Dan’s self-image is mainly that of a universal traveler of the time, a passionate beholder, who rigorously registers his incidental encounters. As a poet, his main trade was to “exchange emotions with the myriad things 和事物作情感的交易” (CP, 334) and to let poetry be the measure of all things. This strong Symbolist bent, along with the wit he learned from Eliot and Auden, forged his particular style and rendered most of his poems introspective, self-focused, and often ambivalent. We sense, in “A Cold December Night,” the hushed, gripping air of death that transfixes the reader: the halted cries of a child, the broken whispers from the ancestors lying in the field, are unattended; the traveler, while hearing the whispers and cries, fails to awaken the peasants and the “perennial things” of the rural land from their

261 JXJ, 92–93.
stupor. Suddenly, we feel that the traveler—intruder per se—is seized by the same languor as the slumbering peasants: the messages, passing from “one roof to another” are ignored, because “we,” the ignorant and pain-stricken, “cannot, just cannot hear” (CP, 95). The unanswered admonition or requests are scattered to the wild wind, in the intermittent silence exuding melancholy and torpor. The stark village bears the aura of the past, but for the traveler, there is no correspondence between what he sees and what he prays for in the future.

This lingering sense of isolation and lethargy taking hold of both the narrator-traveler and his subjects reflects some fundamental questions Mu Dan had to deal with in this early period. On the one hand, his historical consciousness leads to a mostly pessimistic view of life and society. History, which is perceived as a cycle of decadence and destruction, enters into experience as otherness, embodied in a string of stark images (waste land, ruins, rat holes, abandoned obelisk, a chasm or fissure, etc.); humanity caught up in this cycle is a defective species, destined to be consumed by its own erroneousness—amid “a swirl of poverty and ignorance (旋轉在貧困和無知的人生)” (“A Day in A Small Town 小鎮一日,” CP, 124). Amid “the endless waves, we are submerged in無盡的波濤的淹沒中” (“To Live on 活下去,” CP, 172). There is a glimpse of hope, an ecstatic call for “a second birth” (“May 五月,” CP, 87), but the hope itself is subjected to merciless subjugation, to be “suppressed and twisted (被壓制，被扭轉)” “those that could precipitate change have themselves been changed today 那改變明天的已為今天所改變” (“Fissure 裂紋,” CP, 170). This exceptional “pleasure after despair 絕望後的快
樂” (CP, 87) sets the tragic, yet ambivalent tone that is central to Mu Dan’s poems in the 1930s and 40s.²⁶²

On the other hand, with this complex, and seemingly self-contradictory view of man and history, the poetic narrative struggles to proclaim itself as a true, valid voice. Although poetry gives voice to an experience, it offers little help for the self’s transformation through the incessant and accumulated suffering imposed by history. We cannot help wondering in what way the half-question, half-exclamation “What on earth can we do, who are held responsible for this crime?” (“Protest 控訴,” CP, 133) can relate to either past brutality or present challenges. We are also unsure under what circumstances the “melodious truth” of poetry can deepen the consciousness, can inspire the suffering people in their cause of survival, something sound and firmer than a Keatsian consolation, “Why so sad a moan?/Life is the rose’s hope while yet unblown.”²⁶³ Notwithstanding the excitement generated by Mu Dan’s lyric lines, there is no indication as to what measure or direction is to be taken toward a revived and meaningful life.²⁶⁴

In spite of these limitations and flaws, these cited poems still gain significance in terms of the subtle alterations brought to the consciousness. In “A Cold December Night,” it is the silently falling snow that erases what Walter Benjamin describes as the “jagged line of demarcation” between physical nature and its allegorically moral and

²⁶² Tang Shi, Xin yi du ji, 89–90 and 106.
²⁶⁴ Mu Dan’s allusion to the romantic poetry of Keats and Wordsworth is a strong indication of his own uncompleted quest for truth through poetic inquiry. For more details on the romantic views on poetry and history, see, for instance, Alan Liu, Wordsworth: The Sense of History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 542.
Bringing with it an immense emotional aura and echoes of ongoing history, this spectacular, all-encompassing snowfall breaks the strong hue of death emanating from the poem and should not be construed as a mere rhetorical figure. We see a similar approach used by writers such as Lu Xun in his prose poetry, as Ban Wang has expertly illustrated. The crux of the matter is whether a passive experience can be transfigured into an act of choice—into potential actions based on a new insight for the future. From the poet’s point of view, the act of allegorization provides an additional motive for the narrative. With this new perspective and motive, the poet has set himself a new task—the creation of a new identity and voice that is more relevant to his time and society. From Mu Dan’s “Cold December Night” to “Winter,” is a long and difficult poetic journey in which the former traveler enters the hut and assigns himself the role of a chronicler, a hidden partaker in the activities happening there. He has broken his silence after three decades of aphasia, so that his poetry can continue speaking.

**Further Implications of Historical Narrative and the Unconscious Mind**

Whether the last moments of “Winter” are derived from a flash of memory, an illusion or a dream, is unimportant, insofar that all these sources are likely to be related closely to the same episodes or events in recent history. In historicizing a past event, facts and


266 In his study of the historical narrative of Lu Xu’s prose, Ban Wang says of the important function of allegory that it “posits a fundamental conjunction between voice and heart, man and nature, form and content, representation and reality, narrative and history.” Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 79.

267 Mu Dan’s close friend and colleague, Professor Pang Bingjun, maintains that the setting of the concluding episode of “Winter” is Dasu village 大蘇莊, a former re-education camp site where he and Mu
pure fiction tend to intertwine and be superimposed one on the other, as each participant in history creates an individual version of the past.\textsuperscript{268} It is necessary for a writer to exercise invention (often in defiance of known facts) so as to record a coherent and credible life history for both himself and his prospective readers.\textsuperscript{269} It is on this understanding that Mu Dan’s last poems should not be read only as a transcript of his time but also as an imaginative record of past events. The people and things that made up these past events are the driving force of potential cataclysmic change, and thus constitute an indispensable part of the “unwritten biography” of each individual and of the wider community. In “The Formation of ‘I,’” the past experience rendered by Mu Dan was retrieved and reconstructed simultaneously from the madwoman’s dream and the poet’s private memory. Together they provide a more vivid and authentic account of a collective history.

This intricate process of remembering anchors the closing act of “Winter.” The setting is one place, but when probed further, it can be associated with many places linked to many people’s memories. This helps overcome Mu Dan’s limited self-perception and helps to make poetry “the other voice”—the voice that arises from certain buried realities, and will be preserved and presented as the new imperative of poetic creation.

On the other hand, oblivion, an integral part of the same process, is sometimes a virtue, as Pasternak once pondered over his own fate, ascertaining that a grain could yield


a fresh shoot through its own dying.\textsuperscript{270} Forgetting is necessary for the reconstructive faculty of imagination to be able to come into play. Sometimes the process involves the difficult “choreography of self-effacement”:\textsuperscript{271}

After a long day’s labor you finally retire,  
And hear the growls of stones, of trees and grass.  
You lie down to sleep, but struggle to dream,  
For winter is the executioner of good dreams.

你疲勞了一天才得休息,  
聽著樹木和草石都在嘶吼,  
你雖然睡下, 卻不能成夢,  
因為冬天是好夢的劊子手。

(the third section of “Winter,” \textit{CP}, 364)

Facing this predicament of deprivation and loneliness, the creative mind contrives to redefine its relation with the world. Livingstone’s closing remarks on Pasternak’s last collection of poems, \textit{When the Weather Clears}, is a telling one:

Now the poet is seeing the world for the last time. He sees it at a distance—sees more of it than before, but much less of it in sharp detail; he loves it and finds truth and faith in it, but cannot really smell or taste it. He adds it up, recognizes its sum as right and good, and then leaves it: it is not any more his world.\textsuperscript{272}

In this observation, Pasternak, a firm believer throughout his prolific career in the perceptive power of poetry, is described as fading away from the “living picture” of the


world he once created. His “sponge” of poetic inspiration is no longer vouchsafed by the “all-powerful god of detail,” as the world under his scrutiny is increasingly imbued with an other-worldly prescience. Poetry becomes the “last resort within history,” but no longer in collaboration with real life. Mu Dan was a vigorous reader of Pasternak, but unlike Pasternak, his perception of the world, as shown in his sequence of four poems on the seasons, is alive with enticing sounds and movements, albeit still overshadowed by various intimidating forces. His hermeneutic inquiry of experience is initiated by the lamenting, alienated self, but that self moves steadily into a world where personal and collective experience are inseparably interwoven, where everything in his perception possesses an unseverable bond with the poet—he can still “smell and taste it,” as the “here it is” sense of historicity renders a specific moment of life an universal testament to the existence of mankind. And it is at this point that we sense in Mu Dan’s last poems a surreptitious and purposeful movement of historical narrative: by shifting the focus of his reflections from the tumultuous human world to that of nature, and from nature to the as-yet-unknown future of man, a sense of resolution is achieved through elevated poetic imagination based on sense and reason. This imagination aims not to redeem the reality of life, but to testify to a new experience, illuminated and revived in the light of hope and belief in humanity.


274 Mu Dan however was quite unimpressed by Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*, finding it flaccid and dull. See Sun Zhiming, “Wo suo liaojie de shiren Mu Dan” (Mu Dan the Poet that I know), *Twenty-first Century* 6 (1998): 142.

275 In his explication of the relationship between the work of art and history, Adorno says that the negative disguise taken up by art does not repress empirical existence; instead, it allows the empirical to emerge in its more vivid form in the imagery of art. Despite their drastically different treatment of materials in their last poems, this notion of the authenticity and autonomy of art seems to account for both Mu Dan’s perception of the unreal and the possible, and Pasternak’s impressionistic depictions of the world. See
The dialectic movement of revival and self-expansion becomes healing and energizing for the soul. In poetic narrative, the self can be enlarged to a monumental size in historical time. Past experience then begins to acquire historical meaning. The meaning is necessarily derived and embodied in the images of ordinary man—an aggrandizement of the common man in literature which Mu Dan proposed in the 1940s, but was never truly fulfilled in his own poetry. Apart from a few exaltations of the motherland, the keystones of his early poems are an exceptional set of antithetical and metaphysical ponderings, in great contrast to the ideals of “the new lyricism” he purported. We feel that what flows in the surprisingly “sensitive heart” of an ordinary soldier is the poet’s own splenetic “ultra dense blood,” which effectively hampers the “upward propulsion” of a righteous cause. “The greatest sorrow” of the time tapers off to “a lack of sorrow,” as suggested in the debilitating silence in “A Cold December Night.” As Mu Dan himself admitted, the poems composed in this early period lack intensity and real impetus to echo the spirit of the time. There is a rhetorical reticence operating beneath an array of Mu Dan’s attitudes and emotions that recalls Auden, often resulting in an odd, unsettled silence in the illustrations of human life and social injustice. Over-generalization of an experience or phenomenon tends to

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278 See note 182.

279 See note 188.

280 Mu Dan’s indebtedness to Auden is in full evidence regarding the special use of reticence. To cite Hardy: “The reticence takes many forms, not all of them quiet. Strident imperatives, casual sloppiness of word and phrase, exaggeratedly rigid doggerel, extravagant hyperbole, ‘clinical’ coldness, many kinds of anti-climax,
weaken “personal immediacy,” to give an impression of an event that happens rather than one that is experienced. Though Mu Dan does not go all the way to declare that “the truest poetry is the most feigning,”281 this “feigning” element is visceral in his dramatizing of an experience or event to evoke what Shen Congwen called “the gymnastics of mood.” The result of this treatment is a feeling of detachment, illusion, and on some occasions, abstraction.282 Consequently, ordinary people in his poems—peasants, washerwomen, street hawkers, coalminers, porters—never truly emerge as heroes in the everyday struggle, in the sense that Yuan Kejia proposed: “Life prospers in miseries.”283 These people are—as prescribed by Lu Xun—“ancient people 古民,” who cannot “breathe new life into the present 呼吸不通于今.”284 Their “voice of the heart” fizzles out as they habitually submit to authority and tradition, as demonstrated by many of Mu Dan’s early and late poems.

Entering the 1950s, Mu Dan was increasingly drawn to the concept of realism. L. I. Timofeev’s literary theory, which he read and translated, gained textbook status in China at the time. Among the poets Mu Dan translated, Pushkin had a great influence on him in his idealization of the lyric, especially in the depiction of the wretched life of all can be forms for his reticence.” See Barbara Hardy, The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1997), 87.


282 As Shan Qing observes, the change from the realistic mode in depicting rural life to abstract lyricism in Shen Congwen’s works is part of the process of “somnoloquy-like self-adjustment.” This change represents not only Shen’s conscious exploration of form and style, but also the assiduous and difficult quest for enlightenment and truth undertaken by a modern Chinese intellectual. See Shan Qing, “Cong ‘shuqing’ dao ‘chouxiang de shuqing’” (From “Lyricism” to “Abstract Lyricism”): 55–66.

283 Jiuye Ji, 232.

ordinary people. Pushkin’s realistic approach, fusing sublime thoughts and human emotions, and featuring immaculate “rendering of the particulars and stupendous generalization,” is expressed in terse and powerfully sensuous lines (such as “Misfortune’s stalwart sister, / Hope, lurks in dungeons’ gloom”) to evoke tragedy and hope, to transcend personal feelings of misery. This particular style represents a sound alternative of historical narrative whereby the ordinary people are elevated to the status of perseverant, everyday heroes.

Fyodor Tyutchev is another reference for the ideal of realistic art, especially in terms of how a particular image can be constructed to bear the immense symbolic value of a poem. In Tyutchev’s poems, a severe storm in nature is conceived as the externalisation of the poet’s inner tumult and in turn converses with the poet in “a language well known by the soul”, nature and history move conjointly forward under an “indeterminate textual surface,” as if under the influence of the rolling thunder. Tyutchev’s foreboding weather phenomena set a good example of how a rhetorical object can be used innovatively and powerfully in symbolic poetry. The same winter storm that swept past the small northern village in “A Cold December Night” remerges later in “Winter” with reinforced symbolic power.

\[285\] JXJ, 127.

\[286\] Mu Dan, Translator’s note on “Selected Poems by Tyutchev,” SWJ, 163.

\[287\] Ibid, 170. For detailed discussion on Mu Dan’s symbolism, and especially the influence of Tyutchev, see Li Zhangbin, “Mu Dan de yinyu yu shige ganxing” (Mu Dan’s Metaphor and Poetic Sensibility), Journal of Changsha University of Science and Technology (Social Socience) 27.6 (2012): 28–34.

\[288\] In his note on Tyutchev, Mu Dan contends that a true creative mind must possess the destructive power and heart of rebellion so that a poet committed to life and society will carry on writing. SWJ, 163–64.
For Mu Dan, these new dimensions of poetic imagination encourage the “discovery of wonder and awe” as one’s limited life is illuminated and broadened into a “unique historical experience.” In this new experience, contrary thoughts and emotions—hope and despair, love and hate, acceptance and rejection—can be blended into a single lyric. We trace in Mu Dan’s last poems the agony of old age, of the wretched individual and communal life, the madness and atrocities of society. These are further projected together onto the evolving natural seasons, till “Winter” sets in to draw an emphatic, but seemingly open-ended conclusion. “Winter” undergoes extraordinary transformation to save the consciousness from what appears a direct downfall to disillusion, before a new life is given to the self in a moment of revelation. The animated interior of the hut resonates with the raging wind outside, but the subjects seem to be immune from the external dangers. They show freedom and grace in one desired space reclaimed from the severe weather; they are neither isolated nor subjected to the omnipresent rule of power, as their utterance and movement are portrayed as possessing great ease and vitality; they speak in no lesser voice than the voice that once hushed them by force; and their going about is handled with ease, and potentially well-directed. They will live out the night and venture into the storm-ridden future. The pathway meanders towards the far horizon, that “all-in-here and out-there” metaphor (the horizon connecting the past, present and future) which signals the transformed silent energy of history, and sends the soul to its inmost depths, seemingly in harmony with the external forces. It is at this moment that the feeling of the sublime enters the realm of

consciousness: it is the “echo of a great soul”\textsuperscript{290} which, bearing the hopes of the suffering and oppressed, proclaims itself through the dramatic turn of the narrative:

\begin{quote}
The turn itself, the transfer of power can take place only if some element can shift its position from one side of the scheme to the other… \textsuperscript{291}
\end{quote}

The “sublime turn,” as Hertz’s dissection of the rhetoric of Longinus’s Sublime suggests, is achieved by intense drama involving an unexpected shift of perspectives, views and positions. In “Winter,” the band of men rising up in and through the verse implies, as \textit{Don Juan} does for Byron, a remarkable self-making to save consciousness from its tragic fixations.\textsuperscript{292} With this, the narrative of self-scattering and self-loss develops unequivocally into a statement of poetry as an irresistible force. Because winter is perceived as both annihilating and regenerating, this vision propels the poetic endeavour by endowing it with an indomitable power against the inevitable conclusions facing humankind.

We finally realize that, with this glimpse of redemption and hope, there is a “transfer of power” undertaken in Mu Dan’s last poems. This transference is essentially based on reaction rather than action from the poet, in that it happens subconsciously as if in a trance or dream, fusing seeing and imagining, the inner and outer experience of the poet. This subliminal change gives the poet additional sensitivity and perspective to


\textsuperscript{292} Garber, \textit{Self, Text, and Romantic Irony}, 306–7.
approach his subject more vividly and concretely; the subconscious mind, operating as a “chancy producer,” keeps digging up traces of the past, “buried sounds” to be interrogated—the sounds “explode,” in the words of Walter Benjamin, in the unconscious with shock, giving meaning, plot or implication to the trauma and calamity of the past.

An instantaneous, haphazard gesture or scene ensures that the whole poem attains its eschatological significance. In the case of Mu Dan, the subliminal force secretly mobilized aims to safeguard the besieged “fortitude of old age” (CP, 326): in his last apologia, the sounds of tumult and protest are tempered, their poetic repercussion becomes sacramental, and almost beyond death. The “sinking boat,” symbol for the shattered self and the endangered poetic identity, is set to be saved.

Conclusion

Mu Dan’s late poetry was conceived mostly as a series of self-reflections in the wake of three decades of tragedy in the individual and collective history of modern China (the purges of the 1950s and 1960s, the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76). The deep-seated, unyielding humanistic core of these poems, and their political undertones, call directly to the “gentle readers” of our time to look closely at ourselves and our society. With his intense drama and satire, Mu Dan has provided us with a powerful stylization of past

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293 In her study of the impact of modern calamities on the mind of the Chinese people, Meng Yue observes a similar process taking place in the subconscious: “[History] slips through the net of our consciousness” and the memory and record of the fact “dissolve into vagueness and non-meaning beneath the threshold of consciousness.” See Meng Yue, Lishi yu xushu (History and narrative) (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin, 1991), 166.

294 Hertz, End of the Line, 19.

295 History, as Ban Wang shrewdly remarks, is something “which hurts, that which trips us up.” See Ban Wang, Sublime Figure, 5.
events, a lived experience that allows the reader to communicate with the poet and his time at a profound, allegorical level.

Ultimately, these poems manifest the life of a poet who had in his own way, like Pasternak, devoted himself “in work, in searching for the way/in heartfelt turmoil.”

They show that the poet Mu Dan was not motivated by the desire to restore fallen man through some form of revamped knowledge, but by the pressing need to save what he considered a severely endangered human activity—poetry. By contemplating the past, people and things “really as they are” and perhaps also “ought to be” in the future, he strove to keep his voyage unhindered, almost to plan ahead. Though the world he conceived was largely one of absurdity and despair, he nonetheless transformed it into a world of human dignity undaunted by evil. Ordinary human beings can redeem themselves as the dominant force, the vital partaker and ultimate sufferer, as well as the initiator of changes in history. Poetry becomes the witness and co-author of history. This vision gave Mu Dan a glimpse of the Sublime that helped him not only overcome the omen of his own death, but also maintain a new tenable dream with reason. Though he remained shattered and grief-ridden, he could be proud of himself as one of the most emphatic voices to resonate with Pasternak’s concern. In Pasternak’s own words, “we are still far” from the way the era should be remembered.

The task of completing “the unwritten biography” of the self and his time must pass on to the conscientious writers

296 Barnes, Boris Pasternak: 308.
298 Cited from Loewen, Most Dangerous Art, 179.
and readers of the future.²⁹⁹ Pain can bear witness to the richness and volatility of experience, a flash of humanitarian insight outlives the oppressive cloud cast over an alienated, tragic poet. It is this “economy of the sublime,”³⁰⁰ characteristic of the subtle and dramatic shift of positions and views effectuated by a poetic work, that to me constitutes the incomparable instrument for understanding Mu Dan’s last poems.

²⁹⁹ Though not typically read as political poetry, some of Mu Dan’s last poems, in my opinion, exemplify the best characters of the genre. As Samuel Hynes claims: “[political poetry] does not prescribe political ideas or actions; but it helps us to live in political history. Moving between private loss and public crisis, it brings the tragic past and the apocalyptic future together, and draws strength from the interaction; it is at once history and elegy, a work of art and a defense of art.” See Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s (London: Bodley Head, 1976), 353.

Chapter Three

Overall Assessment of Mu Dan’s Poetry: Development, Main Characters and Elements

Mu Dan’s Mission

To assess the achievement and the position of Mu Dan’s poetry in Chinese literature, we must first look into the challenges he faced and his specific responses to them. These together defined his poetic agenda and determined the outcome of his poetic endeavour.

Compared with the May Fourth poets, Mu Dan and his Nine Leaves colleagues set themselves more advanced and comprehensive tasks. Unsatisfied with the simple objective of acquiring a live language expressed in a free form, they turned more resolutely to Western sources as inspiration and paradigm, following the trend set by their literary forebears from the 1920s and 30s. Understandably, the Nine Leaves poets had better comprehension of the nature and the characteristics of the major Western literary movements (Romanticism, Symbolism, Realism, Imagism, Surrealism) and were keener and more adventurous to incorporate various elements they learned into their own practice—from vocabulary to syntax, from poetic symbols to allusions. Enthusiastic imitation and creative adaptation became a dominant model. The result was a new poetic convention that differed substantially from that of their predecessors.

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302 As Yeh observes, Modern Chinese poets have been engaged in creative experiments and theoretical discourse in diverse directions, although their enterprises often appeared hasty and immature, even imitative of Western movements and styles. The further modernization of the new poetry became increasingly a necessity from the late 1930s. Ibid, 105.
of mission was so overwhelmingly strong and vehemently expressed that they tended to see themselves as the “spokesmen of the age,” as did the novelists of the time.\textsuperscript{303}

The Nine Leaves Poets were self-proclaimed modernists, a “new generation of poets,” according to one of the members of the group, Tang Shi.\textsuperscript{304} Their collective goal was, in the words of Yuan Kejia, the realization of “modernism with Chinese characteristics.”\textsuperscript{305} Throughout the 1940s, Yuan published a series of remarkably perceptive and lucid essays, on a number of important issues in modern poetry.\textsuperscript{306} The principles articulated by Yuan became the main reference for the critical interpretation and appraisal of Nine Leaves poetry.

The centerpiece of Yuan’s framework is, in general, the cultivation of a new synthetic style blending three fundamental aspects of poetic creation: reality, symbolism, and metaphysics. This act of synthesis, which draws in “the fullest breath of consciousness of modern men and the influence of Western modernist poetry,”\textsuperscript{307} embraces I. A. Richards on the one hand (the psychological process of consciousness), and T. S. Eliot on the other (tradition, contemporaneity, continuity). In practice, the best

\textsuperscript{303} Mau-sang Ng, \textit{The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction} (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 44.


way—the only way perhaps—to achieve this goal, is through the dramatized treatment of poetic materials and themes to ensure a representation of heightened poetic experience, one which is simultaneously subtle and complex. Intensified situations and scenes, supplemented by intriguing plots and characters, together create a superior effect of narrative vigour and a suggestive power, resonating with the perception of modern experience:

There is a need to eschew the linear expression of emotions in favor of non-linear, dramatic expressions in verse. The reason for this is multifold (the increasing complexity of modern experience, the nuance and essence of modern life, its marvels and oddity, etc.) But the most fundamental rule for the modern poet is to render experience rather than to utter his or her emotions. An organic, modulated representation of complex experience is vital, in that every moment in modern life is a paradox. Poetry must rely on indirect, circuitous, and suggestive ways of expression.  

Paradox can be poignant and painful. A sense of loss, fragmentation and powerlessness form the backdrop of possibilities for the new poetry. Unresolved tension can create multifarious effects for the poets engaged in their inexhaustible wrestling with the inherent ambiguities and contradictions of modern experience. Yuan’s ideas allude to Eliot who calls for “more comprehensive, allusive, indirect” expressions in modern poetry. Modern life is paradox-ridden and abounds in contradictions and tensions. Poetry must encompass these elements if it is to be real, diverse, and coherent. In short, poetry is an “outright performance of drama.”

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Yuan’s generalization is localized in view and progressive for its time. But from a strictly theoretical point of view, his argument is loose and mostly illustrative. As a theorist, he lacks coherent and systematic analytical tools and methods to cover the main subjects of the modernization of new poetry. He plays with some fashionable literary ideas of the time, while making limited attempts to formulate the subjects, themes and techniques of the new poetry and its goals. Often his inquiry tends to end abruptly as if to say that from here on imagination must take over the rule of discursive thought. His proposed “indirect, circuitous, and suggestive” expression of modern poetry which anchors the dramatized representation—the use of imagery and metaphor, the exploitation of the “objective correlatives,” the use of a dramatic ending to a poem, etc.—all of this is yet to be contextualized and fully explored in terms of its far wider application to the new poetry.

Despite the principles and styles shared by the Nine Leaves poets, Mu Dan has his own peculiar views and emphasis on the nature and the prospect of Chinese poetry. The “new lyricism” he proposed was grounded on his critiques of two of his contemporary poets: Ai Qing, whom he hailed as the paragon for all Chinese poets, and Bian Zhilin, the antipode of Ai, whose problematic approach, in Mu Dan’s view, posed great danger to the spirit of the new poetry.

Mu Dan’s view of the poetic ideal reflects the general perception of the function of wartime literature, which for the majority of Chinese writers in the 1940s, especially the Leftists, was seen as a weapon against foreign aggression. According to this general perception, poetry must reflect the ethos of the time, and be read and recited by the masses,
rather than merely being printed for its own sake.\footnote{See, for instance, Xu Chi, \textit{Zui qiang yin} (The Loudest Sound) (Baihong shudian: 1941).} Ai Qing’s statement on this matter is typical: “Since the war, new poetry has championed countless new words, new dictions, new norms, and new styles. The ever-changing subjects and materials of real life, the widening range of spectacles, the complexity of subjects, inform the new thoughts and sensibility.”\footnote{Ai Qing, “Lun kangzhan yilai de shixin” (On the New Poetry Since the Resistance War), in \textit{Wenyi zhendi} 4.2 (1942): 34.}

The poems of Ai Qing in the late 1930s and early 1940s are a pastiche of revolutionary romanticism and patriotic passion—what Mu Dan described as “the dynamic, vast, pulsating cadence and cheerful tones” imbued with “warmth and sunshine, and the call of life.”\footnote{SWJ, 48.} They exemplify, in the words of Yuan Kejia, a “literature for the people” rather than a “literature for mankind.”\footnote{Yuan Kejia, “‘Ren de wenxue’ yu ‘renmin de wenxue’” (“Literature for the People” and “Literature for Mankind”), \textit{Lun xinshi xiadaihua}, 112–24.} For the Nine Leaves poets, the question remains how to combine these two ends, so that the vigour, resilience and “the energetic beauty” of Ai Qing’s poetry\footnote{SWJ, 51.} can be absorbed into a modern consciousness which is essentially self-centered, complex, often dark and elusive.

Despite the great sense of urgency caused by the pressing needs of war, a perusal of Mu Dan’s poems written in the 1940s suggests that it was Eliot and Auden whom he constantly consulted for inspiration, and who served him as the symbol of spiritual renovation in literature. The ideal of Ai Qing was acknowledged only in the context of war and national strife, and was not seen as a long-term solution.
Mu Dan’s attitude to Bian Zhilin, on the other hand, was rather ambivalent. His attacks on Bian were centered primarily on Bian’s treatment of wit and emotion in poetry, which clashed with the principles held by the Nine Leaves group. For Mu Dan, Bian’s circumventive approach and his use of parody were against the principles of what poetry can do and should do spiritually, morally, and aesthetically, for wartime literature. As we have discussed in chapter one of this thesis, this negation of Bian’s poetry is not fully justified by Mu Dan’s own approach, which ironically echoes Bian’s style with its own sentimentalism and abstraction. In fact, Bian’s particular style provoked divergent receptions from Mu Dan and Yuan Kejia, the latter remaining Bian’s lifelong admirer. The disagreement between the two seminal figures of the Nine Leaves group reflects a more intricate subject, the overall realization of modernism, in their case, the creation of poetic drama and the reconstruction of poetic experience in terms of language, emotions, the appropriation of symbols, and the various poetic modes, techniques and styles. This, we will discuss in detail in the following sections.

Mu Dan’s Early Execution of His Mission

Mu Dan’s first collection of poems, Expedition Team, did not appear until 1945. Before then, his poems were only published separately in a number of literary magazines and newspapers. Though some of them were rated highly by certain critics and poets for their refreshing power and distinct personal voice, it was 1942 that marked his transformation from ardent apprenticeship to the establishment of a mature, resourceful poet, thanks to a string of remarkable poems written in that year, notably “Spring” and “Eight Poems.”

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316 Yuan Keja, “Shi yu zhuti” (Poetry and Themes), Lun xinshi xiaodaihua, 72–81.
Though this period was far from being prolific, these poems alone disclosed a sensibility avid for every impression that a new life can yield, for every experience relished by youth—a superior imagination, ready for the worldly encounters coming its way.

In these poems, Mu Dan shows his great love of paradox and his willingness to push metaphor to its limits of expression. His unique style incorporates some dramatic elements of modern poetry with considerable success. In his rendition of experience, the physical world is depicted as a book of revelation: a garden opening itself to the wakening youth, bucolic views unfolding before the world-traveler, freight trains on their course to find love and fate. Unhindered, exuberant passions and desires animate the poems which often, however, end on a resounding note of suspense or horror.

Some reviewers acknowledge Mu Dan’s dialectical and radical style of “thinking with the body,” resulting in remarkably sharp “knife-edge” impressions; some show their approval of his “nearly abstract and metaphorical” approaches and the exceptional vigour which pulsates like “larva underneath the crust” in Mu Dan’s early poems. The dynamics of Mu Dan’s poems of this period are aptly described by Zheng Min:

[His poems] embody the ferocious agony and pain of a passionate poet standing at the rim of the tumultuous human world; they [his poems] show multiple gnarls and twists, their inner sap striving incessantly to break the constricting shell of words. His words are dense and heavily laden, his poems are created in the true manner of the works of art.

Impelled by this surge of ferocious energy, the poems are however not always satisfactory in their execution. While they evoke pathos and drama, they may also expose

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317 Refer to note 10 in the Introduction.
318 Tang Shi, “Yi shiren Mu Dan” (Remembering Mu Dan), in A Nation Has Risen, 153.
319 Zheng Min, “Shiren yu maodun” (Poet and Contradiction), in A Nation Has Risen, 33.
their own inadequacies at many levels of good, sensible writing. Experience which
constantly waylays him may not be fully addressed; while he challenges the habitual
mode of perception, readers may yet have to make a special effort to understand him. His
adherence to a certain set of aesthetic formulae, rather than responding directly to the
phenomena of life, tends to result in vague and oblique expressions. And despite the
rhetorical freshness of his poems, his superior perception or insight can sometimes be
emasculated by awkward, overwrought forms or undeveloped diction.

In his poems written in the 1940s, the theme of war tends to be entangled with a
dubious metaphysics about the fallible nature of man—a reminder of the influence of
Auden, who rationalized man’s predicament in social or scientific aphorisms.320 This type
of poetry contrasts sharply with the poetic ideal embodied in Ai Qing’s work, and even
more starkly with the voices of the “drumbeat poets” (many were from the July School)
who flourished during the wartime. Mu Dan’s diction and style are what the “drumbeat
poets” precisely lack, in terms of the variety of themes, the expression of multiple moods,
exuberance of language, and the predominant use of metaphors.321 Take the poem entitled
“Field Practice 野外演習” (1945) as example:

Field Practice

We see a scroll of vignettes unfolding:
Many postured trees, tombs of fresh epiphanies.
Grass fragrance, air-borne, unable to filter into their haste.
They slip from eternity to the makeshift shelters.

Having acknowledged the great land as the Mother,
They still treat the land only a few yards away as enemy,
Shrouding in smoke, they shoot with cannons and guns,

320 John Fuller, Reader’s Guide to Auden, 191.

321 Julia C. Lin, Modern Chinese Poetry, 191.
Cause only damage and harm: the eternal enemy has never been here.

Yet the distance between man and man is thus lengthened,
The distance between man and man is suddenly shortened,
The dangers are so close, tears and smiles
Melt into a life: here is the pure epitome.

Life is the oldest profession,
By which we search constantly for gain.
We have studied it since we were young: cruelty is insufficient,
And the justice of the entire world requires it to be so.

野外演習

我們看見的是一片風景:
多姿的樹，富有哲理的墳墓，
那風吹的草香也不能深入他們的匆忙，
他們由永恆躲入剎那的掩護。

事實上已承認了大地是母親，
由把幾碼外的大地當作敵人，
用煙幕來掩蔽，用槍炮射擊，
不過招來損傷：真正的敵人從未在這裡。

人和人的距離卻因而拉長，
人和人的距離才忽而縮短，
危險這樣靠近，眼淚和微笑
合而為人生：這裡是單純的縮形。

也是最古老的職業，越來
我們越看到其中的利潤，
從小就學起，殘酷總嫌不夠，
全世界的正義都這麼要求。

(CP, 197)

The strength of this poem is the vigour and delicacy of the metaphors, rich in complications of the ongoing war and humanitarian suffering. Moral judgment on war and justice, the poem’s predominant theme, is presented in a typical satire revealing the sense of futility in man’s quest for justice through history, Echoing with passages from
Auden’s “Poems from China,” the poem, with its nutshell theory of war and morality, eventually shifts from allegorical perspectives of real life in all its evil and horror to bold assumptions concerning the moral predicament of humanity in general (“the eternal enemies are not here”; “tears and smiles merge into life”; “the distance between man and man is thus lengthened”; “[life is] the oldest profession/By which we search constantly for gain”). The result is a self-ironic, light parody of war, shrouded in the “indirect, circuitous, and suggestive” aura of a proposed modern poem. The concluding two lines of the final quatrain, an ironic statement of the inherent vice and atrocity of human society, recall his earlier views of a callous God and state government—which do not bolster his claims of righteousness in his protest as a soldier or a pursuer of truth. In terms of the intellectual adequacy of image created to fit experience, and his appropriation of Auden, the whole poem risks failing Pound’s “test of sincerity.” We can’t help feeling that a poem which has expended so much rhetorical energy in stylizing an observed event or condition (Zheng Min’s constricting shell of words), should not just end here: there is still much room for his poetic vision to grow and reveal itself, and for his forms to mature and become more related to reality, for the sake of historic truth and the depth and complexity of humanity, two chief motives of Mu Dan’s poetic inspiration.

Language

One unstated mission of the Nine Leaves group was to bring together words and things, to continue to digest and express, in Eliot’s words, “new objects, new groups of objects,

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new feelings, new aspects" of modern experience, following the earlier efforts of their predecessors. Collectively, they sought alternative models to the established norm, including linguistic methods, to deepen the new poetics. The “un-Chinese” nature of Mu Dan’s poetry—a fundamental “otherness” in terms of his resistance to the literary tradition—shows his readiness to subvert past norms and poetic diction and have his “revenge” on the standards established by the previous poets.

As a significantly modified language, *baihua* was deeply influenced by the features of Western languages. And it was the Western languages that the modern Chinese poets consulted frequently in order to produce certain special effects which the traditional language, *wenyan*, was unable to do. As a result, the dynamic process of learning, imitating and adapting prompted significant changes in the outlook of the Chinese poet. F. W. Bateson’s following observation on one special use of the English language by non-English writers can also be applied to the evolution of *baihua* as a poetic medium:

The important difference between the native English writer and the métèque (the writer with a non-English linguistic, racial or political background) is the latter’s lack of respect for the finer points of English idiom and grammar. This allows [him] to attempt effects of style, sometimes successfully, that the English writer would feel to be a perverse defiance of the genius of the language.\(^{325}\)

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\(^{324}\) According to Vincent J. Chen, the concept of “otherness” is closely related to one attitude towards the “traditional lineage” of English held by great writers such as Shakespeare, Milton and Joyce—as the force of resisting and defying the centrality of canons, empires, and totalizing structure. See *Joyce, Race and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

Like Rilke who attempted to rejuvenate “humble words” by “giving them hues out of festivals,” Chinese poets faced the task of giving the Chinese language a new character, by renewing it, saving it from banality. For the Nine Leaves poets, a specialized mode of thinking required avid experiment with a poetic idiom that was rich and simple, developed, in the words of Wordsworth, from “the very language of men.” The purpose was to renew the lost freshness of the Chinese language, so as to prompt the transformation of an experience into a vital poetic event. The clichés and obscure dictions of Romanticism are for Mu Dan too abstract, dull, and ineffective in expressing the complexity and subtlety of the psychic reality of modern man. His early poems show the special efforts he made in the wide area of poetic art—from the bold use of imagery and symbolic units to unexpected meters and rhymes that are either of his own invention, or imitation and adaptation from the works of others.

Mu Dan is conscious of the poetical qualities of the colloquial language. His effort to weave both popular terms and those extracted from diverse social and political fields into his poetic discourse is apparent. These practices show his intention of mastering the specific historical and linguistic context to attain a higher level of linguistic richness. In the process, recurring motifs of Self, social conflict, and fate are explored.

326 Rilke, quoted from Frank Wood, *Rainer Maria Rilke: The Ring of Form*, 21.


328 Sinyavsky observes the broadening of subject matter in Pasternak’s poetry: “He used traditional themes well-worn by poets past and present; however, he spoke of the beauty of nature not with the usual poetic banalities but with the words we currently use in our ordinary everyday prose.” See Angela Livingstone, eds., *Pasternak: Modern Judgment* (London: MacMillan, 1969), 178.

with great linguistic clarity, vigour, and ease. Take for example the following lines from the second of four poems entitled “Current Reflections 時感” (1947):

Cruelty steps out from our hearts,
It demands light, it has created this world.
It is your wealth, it is my safety,
It is feminine beauty, the culture of refinement.

From youth it hides in our love,
It takes shape in our unceasing tears,
It travels like gold from hand to hand,
It has written history, and is the great man of the present day.

…

It is the benefactor, the glory, a moving speech, and the face of courtesy.

残酷从我们的心里走来,
它要有光，它创造了这个世界。
它是你的钱财，它是我的安全，
它是女人的美貌，文雅的教养。

从小它就藏在我们的爱情中，
我们屡次的哭泣才把它确定。
从此它像金币一样流通，
它写过历史，它是今日的伟人。

…

它是慈善，荣耀，动人的演说，和蔼的面孔

(“Current Reflections 時感,” CP, 220)

An abstract idea is personified here to reveal the evil inflicted on the mind and throughout human history. The severity of the topic is made trivial and ironically ludicrous by the running of a jolly meter throughout the poem to achieve the maximum auditory effect. However, the somewhat hilarious tone belies the poet’s apparently bleak view of the overwhelming oppression and the prospect of self-destruction, expressed in self-mockery:
“Everyday we breathe in its slight dirt, /O! This trembling soul is both dead and alive! 當
我們每天呼吸在它的微塵之中, / 呵, 那靈魂的顫抖——是死也是生” (CP, 221).

Mu Dan has shown great craftsmanship in extending the range of prosaic
language in poetry to benefit the music and the recaptured pulse of everyday life. Many
poems strike the reader with their verbal vitality from their very first lines:

When the God of night taps the ghosts of an ancient country,
Silently, the wilderness gazes at the dark sky.
O race away, spinning planet …

當夜神扑打古國的魂靈,
靜靜地, 原野沉視著黑空,
O 飛奔呵, 旋轉的星球,

(“Two Choruses 合唱二章,” CP, 45)

Endless mountains, undulations, rivers and grasslands,
Innumerable dense villages, roosters crowing and dogs barking
Are united with this same desolate Asian land,

走不盡的山巒和起伏, 河流和草原,
數不盡的密密的村庄, 雞鳴和狗吠,
接連在原是荒涼的亞洲的土地上,

(“Praise 讚美,” CP, 134)

Now day after day, night after night,
We have come from a path completely astray,

現在, 一天又一天, 一夜又一夜,
我們來自一段完全迷失的路途上,

(“Faintly Visible 隱現,” CP, 234)

But the best manifestation is perhaps “I Sing of the Body” (1947):
I sing of the body: because it is the rock,
A certain island amid the sea of our uncertainties.

I sing of the oppressed, of the downtrodden,
The wastrels and the misers,
The body lofty as God, and base as worms.

We have never touched it;
We hold it in awe, revering it as an ordinance.
    It used to be free as the flowers in the distant hills, rich
    As buried coals revealing the earth’s contours;
    It has always been a seed; not our slave.

我歌颂肉体，因为它是岩石
在我们的不肯定中肯定的岛屿。

我歌颂那被压迫的，和被蹂躏的，
有些人的吝啬和有些人的浪费：
那和神一样高，和蛆一样低的肉体。

我们从来没有触到它，
我们畏惧它而且给它封以一种律条，
但它原是自由的和那远山的花一样，丰富如同
蕴藏的煤一样，把平凡的轮廓露在外面，
它原是一颗种子而不是我们的掩蔽。

(“I Sing of the Body 我歌颂肉体,” CP, 255)

The dynamic rhythm and the lively, mercurial rhymes expressed in plain and popular words together create a remarkable effect of directness, motion and of sensual joy. The images are very concrete, and abstract ideas are made physical as they seize the reader’s imagination. The whole narrative flows with exuberance and unhindered rhythm to unravel the brimming wonders of the world; its frequent and interwoven subordinate phrases and enjambment oblige the reader to take large breaths in order to complete the unbroken periods of the poem. As with the poems of Whitman, one feels that the poet thinks and speaks not in separate lines but in “whole stanzas, whole periods or
Though we are not sure of the exact meaning or references of this poem (whether it is an existential depiction of the human body, or an exploration of the possibilities of transcendence in the presence of the divine Providence), once the discourse is set in motion, it gains momentum and reaches out towards each living thing within his grasp. The rhythmic vigor carries the poem irrevocably towards an overwhelming revelation of the superhuman beauty of man and the advent of the divine:

I sing of the body: because it is the root of a great tree,

... 

It is upon this rock that we measure our distance from the world,
Upon this rock Nature bestows us a little gift,
Sun, wind and rain, time and space,
There are its bold traps, thrust upon us.
But we are afraid; we distort it, we forbid it.
We are yet to accept its life as our life,
To absorb its growth into our own history,
Because its secrets are beyond all human language.

I sing of the body: because light will emerge from dark,
Your existence instant and full, essence of beauty, my Lord!

我歌颂肉体：因为它是大树的根，

...

是在这个岩石上，成立我们和世界的距离，
是在这个岩石上，自然存放一点东西，
风雨和太阳，时间和空间，都由于它的大胆的网罗而投进我们怀里。
但是我们害怕它，歪曲它，幽禁它，
因为我们还没有把它的生命认为是我们的生命，
还没有把它的发展纳入我们的历史，因为它的秘密还远在我们所有的语言之外。

我歌颂肉体，因为光明要从黑暗里出来：
你沉默而丰富的刹那，美的真实，我的上帝。

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A critical examination of Mu Dan’s poems shows, however, that such linguistic richness and splendour is interspersed with frequently overstrained and awkward uses of words and sentences. A true mastery of sound qualities, which is an integral part of poetic creation, sometimes eludes the poet. We sometimes feel that an expression that is condensed and full of subject matter is simply not enough. In the case of Mu Dan, the expression must be further orchestrated through the subtle use of rhythm, rhyme, and other rhetorical means, in order to achieve his desired poetic effect.

Mu Dan’s modern predecessors generally relied heavily on external techniques and tended to have more problems with their language, as compared with the subtle and highly metaphorical wenyan used by the classical poets. The language used in most of their poems is “awkward, crude, and immature.”\(^{331}\) Baihua is a modified language, and the word becomes free, but it also becomes too free, to connect with and engage the reader. A palpable danger is that as thought seeks expression, language is likely to displace actions and function as the “worn coin of communication.”\(^ {332}\) The superiority of poems such as “I Sing of the Body” rests on the delicate balance between emotions and thoughts expressed by the ingenious use of plain words and colloquial expressions. It is a rare feat mastered only by great poets such as Whitman and Pasternak. And regrettably such superiority is an exception in the poetry of Mu Dan.

The “un-Chinese” character of Mu Dan’s poetry brings into question the relationship between the poetic experience itself and the verbal idioms used to represent it.

\(^{331}\) Lin, *Modern Chinese Literature*, 3.

From the various influences a poet may receive, he must make choices concerning his convictions, allegiances, and attachments. In presenting intractable materials of experience he needs to find his own language and idiolect. In Mu Dan’s poems, there are admittedly individual words which, from the viewpoint of strict grammar, are not correctly used; there is also an apparent rhythmic oddness in some poems because the rhythms are determined more by externally imposed structure of form than by the internal rules of the actual language used. Poems such as “Departure 出發” (absence of subject-pronouns, irregular meter and tense), “Sacrifice 犧牲” (1947) (absence of subject-pronouns, sloppiness of syntactic structure), and “Violence 暴力” (1947) (syntactic and semiotic ambiguities) are fitting examples of his oblique and awkward use of the Chinese language. The inherent flaws of these poems can explain why they are clearer and much easier to read when translated into English.

The ingenious use of language is manifest in Mu Dan’s satirical poems that aim to expose the moral and political predicaments of modern society. In this type of poetry, there is a subtle yet appreciable duplicity (a double layering) in the mode of language that is built upon a hidden duplicity of structure and intent. The interplay and multiple mirroring of different perspectives and notions, judgments and emotions, suggest that his satire in these poems is predominantly ironic. This, however, will be discussed in more detail in the latter part of this chapter.

In all, the “newness” of the new Chinese poetry has to be achieved through exploiting the potentials of baihua, a path blazed by Mu Dan and other Nine Leaves poets with mixed results. At his best, words are a fitting medium bridging thought and emotion, logic and intuition. They render the poems admirable vehicles of fresh feelings full of
elegance and tension; but when he slackens the control, the poems tend to be enervated by the awkwardness, even slovenliness, of the language he uses. Between these two poles, the discourse will oscillate between the “easy and relaxed”\textsuperscript{333} and rigid, laborious utterances.

\textit{Expression of Emotions}

Lyrical poetry, in the words of Barbara Hardy, “isolates feeling in small compass and so renders it at its most intense.”\textsuperscript{334} For Yuan Kejia, this intricate process of isolation and intensification for the sake of emotion is realized through the dramatization of the poetic situations and scenes.\textsuperscript{335} And with it, paradoxical emotions can be reconstructed and channeled to gain multiple depths and directions—a path to the “congruous and organic whole” of modern experience.\textsuperscript{336} Yuan’s itemizing of the three types of writers—the “introverted,” like Rilke, the “extroverted,” like Auden, and those who write in the form of pure poetic drama—springs from this proposition.\textsuperscript{337}

Mu Dan’s treatment of emotions is radical and dramatic. He not merely borrows, but often seeks to improve what he borrows. He makes the best use of his superior imagination and his sensitivity to words and metaphors to enhance the subtle effect of

\textsuperscript{333} I refer to Matthiessen’s discussion on Whitman’s language in regard to his attraction to technical terms, colloquial and dialectical phrases and slang. See F. O. Matthiessen, \textit{American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman}, (New York: New York University Press, 1941), 527.


\textsuperscript{336} Jiang Dengke, \textit{Jiuye shipai de hebi yishu} (Chongqing: Xinan daxue chubanshe, 2002), 233.

emotions in the context of the poetic drama. There is unrequited yearning, suppression of
戀”), there is the nostalgic beckoning of lost home and youth (“The Dream of Nature 自
然底夢” (1942), “Cloud” (1945)); there is also agony and pain, arising from the eternal
struggle between body and soul, from the emerging self-consciousness (“Self 我” (1940),
“The Advent of Wisdom 智慧底降臨” (1940)); there is resounding laughter and
lamentation in the portrayal of the tragic and the absurd (“Song of Rose 玫瑰之歌”
(1940), “May 五月” (1940), “Inflation 通貨膨脹” (1945)); there is muttering and praise,
murmuring and anger in the reflections on depravity and the trauma of old age (“Praise
讚美,” “Performance 演出,” “On Hearing I Am Getting Old 聽說我老了”). It is difficult
to give full illustration of the range and particularization of these feelings in Mu Dan’s
poetry. But generally, these feelings shape themselves within his affective experiences of
fairly short duration, and these particular feelings as a whole grow and change over
longer periods of time. His love poems, for instance, reveal the power, the limitation, and
the social vulnerability of the lovers’ commitment and feelings; he reflects on these
feelings and gives them fresh dimensions by projecting them onto the vast background of
the social and psychological reality of modern man:

Tempest, long journey, lonely night
Loss, memory, never-ending time,
Fears which all of science cannot erase
Let me rest peacefully in your arms.

O, from your untamed heart,
Your enchanting beauty flickering;
I see there your lonely love
Stand upright, growing by me side by side!
风暴，远路，寂寞的夜晚，
丢失，记忆，永续的时间，
所有科学不能祛除的恐惧
让我在你底怀里得到安憩——

呵，在你底不能自主的心上，
你底随有随无的美丽的形象，
那里，我看见你孤独的爱情
笔立着，和我底平行着生长！

（“Eight Poems 詩八首，” CP, 148–49）

The poet’s personal feelings—his remorse and agony, his ecstasy and fear—flood this poem. They trigger the shift of focus from musings on human love to the probing into the existential conditions of humanity. This is characteristic of the early sequence “Eight Poems,” in which the feelings expressed are simultaneously personal and impersonal, emotional and anti-emotional.

Some of Mu Dan’s poems remind us of Ai Qing in their shared subjects and ethos. These poems include “Praise 讚美” (“For him I will embrace everyone,/For him I have lost the consolation of the embrace,/Because we cannot give him real happiness 為了他我要擁抱每一個人，/為了他我失去了擁抱的安慰，/因為他，我們是不能給以幸福的”), “Where is China 中國在哪裡” (1940) (“We can’t gain eternity, our sufferings are forever flying,/And our happiness/Lives on in the mother’s belly 我們得不到永恆，/我們的痛苦永遠地飛揚，/而我們的快樂/在她的母腹裡，是繼續著”), “In the Cold December Night 在寒冷的臘月的夜裡” (“At the doorway, those used sickles./Hoes, yokes, stone mills, and cart/Lie silently, beneath the falling snow 那些用舊了的鐮刀，/鋤頭，牛軛，石磨，大車，/靜靜地，正承接著雪花的飄落”), and “The Barren
Village 荒村” (1947) (“Blow, dry wind, when suffering cuts into your heart,/Blow across the river, over the field ridge, and bring out tears/Towards your master afar to whom you have dedicated everything!
乾燥的風，吹吧，當傷痕切進了你的心，/吹著小河，吹過田垅，吹出眼淚，/去到奉獻了一切的遙遠的主人！”) However, as we have already discussed in the preceding chapters, the more enduring influences on Mu Dan came from western poets, especially Eliot and Auden, whose singular styles inspired him while also posing immense challenges in the creation of his own voice.

Poems such as “The Malaise of Mr. Hua 華先生的疲倦” (1941), “Lyrics from the Air-Raid Bunker 防空洞里的抒情詩” (1939), “From Void to Full 從空虛到充實” (1939), and “Ladies and Gentlemen 紳士與淑女” (1948) show unmistakable references to the works of Eliot (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Portrait of a Lady,” and even “Four Quartets”), in respect to their subject matter, theme and idiom. “The Malaise of Mr. Hua,” for example, is remarkable in recapturing the self-referential and self-dissolving utterance characteristic of a Chinese Prufrock. The emotions evoked are superficial and ineffectual, and the borrowed situations and scenes fit uneasily into a Chinese context. The poem shows merely the makeshift use of another text, and the forcing of the poet’s intention onto his materials.

The influence of Auden, on the other hand, is more substantial and persistent. The intricacies of Auden’s work and his world seem better suited to Mu Dan’s natural gift and temperament. Mu Dan’s illustration of love and truth is quintessential Auden, it is “in any serious sense,/Like orthodoxy ... a reticence” (“The Truest Poetry”). According to Barbara Hardy, this reticence represents the multiple attitudes and emotions underlying Auden’s poetry:
The reticence takes many forms, not all of them quiet. Strident imperatives, casual sloppiness of word and phrase, exaggeratedly rigid doggerel, extravagant hyperbole, “clinical” coldness, many kinds of anti-climax, all can be forms for his reticence.338

Mu Dan’s poems also show this multifaceted mode of reticence, though on a lesser scale compared with Auden, in his illustration of human love, the general conditions of civilization, and the vice of society. The disasters and ills which befall individuals are presented with a simultaneous ferocity and silence. Take for example the following lines from “Hand 手” (1947):

How can we enter this country,
This hot, parched land ruled by a single hand?
A hand that scribbles names on treaties,
A hand that builds and destroys,
A hand that knows no tears,
Is master of our fate:
One second of negligence condemns our planet to death.
A hand that never loosens its grip
On each and every soul.
A hand that holds records and files, that presses the button
Of a door-bell.
Ten kings are dethroned by a five-fingered hand.

How can we enter this country?
Omnipresent hand! The silence of one hand
Strangles our voice.
Ten thousand stubby hands raised
To snuff out one solitary eye.

我們從哪裡走進這個國度?
這由手控制而灼熱的領土?
手在條約上畫著一個名字,
手在建筑城市而又把它毀滅,
手掌握人的命運，它沒有眼淚,
它以一秒的疏忽把地球的死亡加倍,
不放鬆手，牽著一個個的靈魂

338 Hardy, The Advantage of Lyric, 87.
The hand is a diabolical hand. It is also a cunningly concealed hand, of relentless control, it forbids people from entering their mother country. This predominant image of an invisible and omnipotent control is supplemented by an array of secondary images (the ruin, the door bell, the strangled voices, the tortured eye), pointing to the hidden evil which governs every aspect of people’s life. The irony is enhanced by the odd touches of lyricism, in the enchanting echoes of the opening question, “How can we enter this country?”

One may criticize this type of poem for its lack of “personal immediacy,” and, in the manner of Auden, for its presenting a phenomenon or event as an instance of a general case, something that happens but is not directly experienced. While Mu Dan does not go all the way with Auden to declare that “the truest Poetry is the most feigning,” for him this “feigning” is vital in the dramatizing of an experience or event to provoke a thought and feeling in the reader. We sense, in many of his poems, a certain complexity of feelings, a constant clash between the feeling behind the poem and the feeling in the poem.

339 Quoted from Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric*, 84.

Wait for a better world to be born,
Girl, you will retain your pure joy.

等一個較好的世界能夠出生，
姑娘，它會保留你純潔的歡欣。

(“When A Soldier is in Need of Love 一個戰士需要溫柔的時候,” CP, 199)

Or,

We are groping: but there is nothing with which to compare,
When the vast significance is suddenly abolished.
A desire to revive nature, in the hollowness left by action,
Remove the uniform, the hot-blooded dreamer

我們在摸索：沒有什麼可以並比，
當你們巨大的意義忽然結束；
要恢復自然，在行動後的空虛裡，
要換下制服，熱血的夢想者

(“Retiring from the Army 退伍,” CP, 181)

Or,

The past still wishes to pause here,
But “now” assails like an epidemic.
Every thirst must be quenched,
Merchants and insects are all as happy as the American soldiers.

過去的還想在這裡停留，
“現在”卻襲擊如一場傳染病，
各種飢渴全都要滿足，
商人和毛蟲歡快如美軍……

(“Counter Attack 反攻基地,” CP, 206)

These poems are all about the situation of war and people in war, and the poet must select his subject and decide on the appropriate methods to present it. For some writers, this is a rather difficult process, as duly observed by Eileen Chang: “The works of war and
revolution often fail precisely because they represent more urgent demands of rationality than sensibility … their technical prowess outstrips their artistry.”

What Eileen Chang is saying here is that a writer must prioritize emotions derived from the trifles of everyday human life. The reason for this is that it is only through the anatomical study of human nature that a balance between the aesthetic and social ends of literature can be reached. Reasoning is instrumental in the expression of feelings, in that it enhances the aesthetic function of literature. McCallum rightly comments on the aspect of intellectual enquiry in the reading of a single poem:

The state of intellectual enquiry, the construing, interpretive, frame of mind, so much condemned by some critics … passes away once its task is completed, and the reader is likely to be left with a far securer grasp of the whole poem, including its passional structure, than if no resistance had been encountered.

Mu Dan’s fusing of “reason and sense” with wartime sentiment in his illustrations of the people in war is in accord with the general principles of the dramatics and metaphysics of modern poetry envisioned by Yuan Kejia—principles that encourage the interwining of fact and fiction, wit and fantasy. This means that the multiple layers of emotion can be expressed in the conspicuously oblique or the dull, with extraordinary effect. Because of this, a poem may be more complex than it originally appears. For example, “Phantom of the Forest” is an elegy dedicated to the expeditionary soldiers, but

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342 To cite Eileen Chang’s own statement: “In contrast with the unguarded freedom of love (lian’ai de fangshi), war is inexorably imposed on us from the outside, whereas revolution often forces the individual to drive forward by dint of will alone. A real revolution or a revolutionary war, I believe, should be as emotionally unguarded and as able to penetrate into every aspect of one's life as romantic love. And it should bring one back into a state of harmony.” Written on Water, 444.

it is also a serious inquiry into the nature of war and the value of individuals in human history. On top of that, it vaguely speculates on the prospect of civilization, a prospect epitomized in the incessant turmoil within each living man, and in the spirits abandoned in the primeval foreign forest. As an elegy, the poem takes on some of the character of the dead soldiers to whose memory it is dedicated, acting as a mirror of what has been lost; but it is also based on existential emptiness, in the light of which the heroic deeds of the soldiers are seen to be in vain and worthless.

Mu Dan’s treatment of feelings is a delicate act involving both the heart and the head. He was fascinated by but was also wary of the techniques that potentially foster emotionless aesthetics; he was conscious not to overburden himself with the pure principles of art. Still, the harmonious balance between thought and emotion, which demands great spontaneity and great masterly control, is sometimes missing from his early poems. To let feelings “give importance to the action and the situation,” or else to let the action and situation attest to the feelings, is the diverging point between Romantic and modern lyrical representations. Mu Dan’s wrestling between these two ends tends to result in a mishmash of feelings, often in a concomitant jumble of thoughts, and self-contradictory views. The effort of self-renewal in “Phantom of the Forest 森林之魅” and “The Phantom Traveler 幻想底乘客” ends up portraying man as of insignificant value. On some occasions, the narratives are more literal and lack extended meaning, and therefore prevent readers—to cite Hartman’s description of the Romantic poetic process—from “response, repercussion, overflow.” These problems reflect Mu Dan’s

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limited comprehension of the range and the possibilities of Chinese poetry, in its
evolution under the influence of Western literature. Mu Dan will come to address and
tackle these problems more thoroughly and wisely in his later poems.

**Mu Dan’s Later Modified Mission**

By 1942, Mu Dan was already a mature poet. His readiness and control to render new experience in fresh poetic language is evident in an array of important poems composed in the early 1940s. But increasingly, his poems seem to be written for a familiar reader who appreciates his aesthetic principles and has mastered the code for the symbolic values of his images; others who are unfamiliar with his particular style may easily dismiss many of his poems as severe misrepresentations of experience, oblique and repetitive.

Although Mu Dan is not a poet who sees poetry from the point of view of a pure craftsman focusing on the continuous perfection of his art, his adherence to a specific set of rules of versification and diction means that his poems appeal only to a certain type of reader. After the tumultuous year of 1942, his focus shifted more from an objective to a subjective world. Experiences which he had once shared with society were now treated increasingly, and exclusively, as material for solitary reflections. An array of poems from the mid-1940s—from “Departure” to “The Phantom Passenger,” from “Seventh of July 七七” to “They Are Dead 他們死去了” (1947) and “Sacrifice”—show that direct

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experience has begun to desert him more and was outside the range of his poetry. His poems are instead packed with historical antithesis and oxymoron, and tend to lose the vital impulse and direction towards real insight or vision. The original events that once inspired a poem can now only be remotely felt and related, while the overly self-conscious poet fails to make direct claims upon the reader’s sensibilities. As a result, the poems give readers pleasure, but this pleasure also creates a blank aftertaste, because the poems have been designed to predigest experience into formal design rather than to communicate it afresh. For general readers, these poems, with their highly particularized references which they may not understand, are rather distant, symbol-laden and, perhaps, willfully difficult. They are lonely and self-centered, aiming merely to fulfill themselves.  

Western modern poetry and its critical theories provided Mu Dan with a perfect apprenticeship in technique from the start of his career, but their limitations also harnessed his development as a singular poet. One reason for this is that aesthetic principles and the methods one borrows do not automatically bring forth success in other specific literary and linguistic contexts. To be an echo-chamber for all available modern discourses is not enough for the new poet, because a new poetic discourse cannot be found in imitation. In the case of Mu Dan, his early poems are full of unassimilated thematic and stylistic echoes of others, and he is yet to shake off altogether his mannerism cultivated in the apprentice stage of his career. As Scigaj writes of Ted

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348 These characteristics of Mu Dan’s poetry recall some fundamental propositions of the French Symbolist school of poetry, in respect to the individual’s life and creative art. As André Gide observed: “One of the great objections to the symbolist school, is its lack of curiosity about life ... Poetry had become for them a refuge, the only escape from the hideous realities; they threw themselves into it with a desperate fervour ... it was not astonishing that they should have supplied no new ethic—contenting themselves with that of Vigny, which at most they dressed up in irony—but only an aesthetic.” See Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle* (London and Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1959), 205.
Hughes, experience invites the true poet to recapture and reconstruct the things of the world which are so full of nuance, so volatile and vanishing. The western mode of self-development through headlong encounters with experience—through confrontation with either salutary or menacing forces in the environment—demands sustained perceptive power and energy embodied in the poetic art.  

Mu Dan’s frequent failure to live up to the standards of new poetry proposed by Yuan Kejia is an indication of the difficult task confronting Chinese poets, as opposed to the conventions of modernity and its clichés. Zheng Min rightly remarks: “He [Mu Dan] was still too young to truly grasp the [big] issues such as mankind and history, either from the viewpoint of tradition, or against the background of world literature … It was not until the last few years that he achieved a deeper understanding of life.”

We feel, for example, that Mu Dan’s metaphysical poems represent a mode of dialectic he used to view an experience both emotionally and intellectually. By engaging in this particular practice, the poetic mind digests and transmutes its own passions: “Dig out all the evil and vice/And crucify us now./A collective gloom is growing, consuming/Our future as its main staple 一切丑惡的掘出來/把我們釘住在現在,/一個全體的失望在生長/吸取明日做他的營養” (“Sacrifice 犧牲,” CP, 249). Despite being full of observations of life and Audenian wit and premonition, the discourse fails to exploit the potentialities of the Chinese language as an instrument of communication. In one sense, the wit belongs to the seventeenth century—an “intellectual quality” often

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350 Yi Bin, “Ta feichang kewang anding de shenghuo” (He craves a peaceful life), Xinshi pinglun, No.2 (Nov. 2006), 238.
confused with erudition and cynicism.\textsuperscript{351} As noted by Eliot, this type of poet “thought and felt by fits, unbalanced...”\textsuperscript{352} In other words, this characteristic of self-consuming subjectivity and passionate introspection hampers the unified sensibility pursued by a modern metaphysical poet. The problem of Mu Dan is illustrative of the difference between the “permanent and the ephemeral in imaginative writing”—once again, citing Eliot: “In the latter [the ephemeral] the author can know exactly what he meant, and if the audience does not get the thing that he was aware of or meaning to say, his attempt has failed.”\textsuperscript{353} This is sometimes the case with Mu Dan. His references are sometimes too ephemeral to be of lasting significance.

Another important subject which Mu Dan constantly grappled with is the practice of realism in literature. Mu Dan’s idealization of Ai Qing as a realistic writer was based on his scrutiny of Ai’s best poems, written in the 1930s and early 40s, that feature superior originality and power with perceptiveness, classical rigor, and intensity of feeling.\textsuperscript{354} Not soon after his acclaimed poems \textit{He Died the Second Time} 他死在第二次 (1940) and \textit{Towards the Sun} 向太陽 (1940), Ai’s focus turned drastically to the spiritual and educational functions of poetry as a branch of propaganda, “as a spur for the goals of revolution.”\textsuperscript{355} Ai’s rich literary style then gave way to a homely realism, following the growing vogue for folk literature. In \textit{Wu Mangyou} 吳滿有 (1943), a book-length narrative

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{351} T. S. Eliot, \textit{Selected Essays}, 247.

\textsuperscript{352} Ibid, 248.

\textsuperscript{353} T. S. Eliot, “The Chief Aims of Poetic Drama,” \textit{Adam International Review} 17.200 (1949), 16.

\textsuperscript{354} Lin, \textit{Modern Chinese Poetry}, 184.

\textsuperscript{355} Ai Qing, \textit{Shi lun} (Shanghai: Xin Wen’i, 1953), 66.
\end{small}
poem, Ai makes abundant use of folk motifs, and the balladic rhythms and vocabulary he thought most suited to his needs.\textsuperscript{356} The overall impression of this poem is, despite its naïve simplicity and rustic charm, a mixture of political slogans and didactic messages serving effectively as propaganda.\textsuperscript{357} Mu Dan was astonished and disappointed by the change.\textsuperscript{358}

Socialist Realism, which had become the official doctrine in Mao’s China, was a controversial topic both between writers and within the ruling Communist party. Established as a kind of “typicality,” the realist mode of representation aimed either at an evasion of reality, when that reality was not in accordance with the official party line, or an idealization of reality when it was.\textsuperscript{359} Mu Dan’s caricature of certain people (intellectuals and officials) in a number of poems, published in 1956 during the “Hundred Flowers Campaign,” is remarkable in its own right as a realistic depiction of the effects of the movement, but the poems also represent a grave misconception of realism in the treacherous political environment of China.

His understanding of realism, and good poetry in general, deepened through reading and translating a string of poets and theorists including Tyutchev, Pushkin, and Byron, among many others. The reflection on and re-evaluation of life and art, history and society, prefigured his second coming as a poet, when he went on to write with

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{356} Ibid, 6.
\item\textsuperscript{357} Lin, 187.
\item\textsuperscript{358} Sun Zhiming, “Wo suo liaojie,” 142. Ironically, Ai Qing became the target of fierce criticism in the 1950s for his lack of “political enthusiasm,” the “unhealthy emotions” and “bourgeois individualism” displayed by his poems. See Lin, 188.
\item\textsuperscript{359} The typical as a device in socialist realism can only be used to fit into certain ideological prescriptions and propositions. The plots and characterizations are conceived and construed as “supposed to be” based on selective or distorted perceptions. See Paul Hollander, “Models of Behavior in Stalinist Literature: A Case Study of Totalitarian Values and Controls,” \textit{American Sociological Review} 31.3 (1966): 354.
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remarkable freedom, virtuosity, and power. This late poetry manifests a truly profound and unique mode of expression, illustrating the conditions of the soul, and of the individual, and at the same time the collective sufferings of the people at large, and the possibility of revival after decades of purge and turmoil.

Towards the New Synthesis

The fulfillment of poetic aspiration is not a straightforward path, and for the young Mu Dan, the future held infinite possibilities—as pertinently depicted in the shock and exhilaration of his poem “Spring” (1942), that echoes the lines by Rilke: “Until I perceived it, nothing was complete/But waited, hushed, unfulfilled.”\(^{360}\) This particular poem by Mu Dan is also a declaration of independence from previous practices and norms, in the spirit of literary innovation; a true poet must be furnished with the prophetic power to “make what remains unsaid speak.”\(^{361}\) After the creative burst of 1942, Mu Dan was confronted with new challenges in poetic form and diction, and struggled to express his experience in the language of “abundance” and “pain”—the pain needs to be articulated and ordered, to become part of a coherent, united and total experience (“But we are converted—an abundant world/You promised, but with an abundance of pain.”)\(^{362}\)

This experience necessarily points to an unknown region into which poetry is about to enter, as implied by the agitated bird under the opening blue sky, and the uneven path which constantly poses challenges to the future explorer of truth (“Oh, light! Colors,

\(^{360}\) Quoted from Wood, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 44.


\(^{362}\) *CP*, 151.
sounds and shadows,/All writhing in naked pain/To enter into new combinations呵，
光，影，聲，色，都已經赤裸，/痛苦著，等待伸入新的組合”; “Prisoners of now, O
my Lord!/We are trapped in this dog-tooth passage 就把我們囚進現在，呵上帝！/在犬
牙的甬道中”).

The state of the unknown calls for a higher poetic aspiration, based on
the unity of life’s passion, purpose and desire. This means that the image of pain must
elevate itself from a rhetorical figure to a living challenge.

This modified task requires the cultivation of a new and unified sensibility, a
process in which the poet, at once the master of diction and “the most curious explorer of
the soul,” must find the verbal equivalent for his state of mind and feelings by
transmuting ideas into sensations. Mu Dan’s poetry after 1942 was rather uneven in
quality, at times even desultory in its content and form. The tension between meaning and
the words—the metrical, the linguistic, and the referential—was yet to be fully resolved,
and this demanded further scrutiny of his own method. The effects of the blended wit and
sense, of the poetic drama, had to be achieved through re-channelling his “uncontrollable
power” for the creation of a new and appropriate diction, mode and style.

In his middle years, Mu Dan spent a tremendous amount of time in the translation
of foreign poetry. He also rekindled his passion for classical Chinese poetry, which was in
keeping with his approaching old age. This reading and translating practice was crucial in
the late development of Mu Dan, serving as a remarkable source of inspiration, allusion

363 CP, 145, 151.


365 The expression is Fei Ming’s (1901–1967). In his view, the “natural shape” must be explored, completed
and perfected through constant experiment but not necessarily through radical reforms. The “uncontrollable
power” must be controlled. See Tan xinshi (On new poetry) (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 1984). Quoted in
Yeh, “A New Orientation,” 90.
and technique. Despite his denunciation of the limitations of conventional forms and clichés in depicting modern life, his exploitation of classical elements in his last poems was substantial and profound, compared with his experiments of the early 1940s. Reading the poem “May 五月,” composed in 1941, we feel that the allusions, metaphors, and direct quotations from classical texts are not truly alive, and have yet to be awakened. In his later poems, the blending of classical elements is more subtle and reasoned, and it lends the poems extra texture, vividness and suggestive power.

Mu Dan’s perception of the poetic language as a universal means of expression, which must be constantly refined, also deepens in this period. In his modified notion, the act of writing is analogous to that of swimming in water, in that technique and skill are a mere necessity while the soul remains the originator and the guide of creative energy. This is a significant departure from his earlier symbolic views characteristic of empty musicality, the pursuit of the occult, and sometimes, of subjective autobiography. The first section of the late poem “Winter 冬” is a remarkable example of fusing classical pathos with modern expression on the theme of the brevity of human life and abandoned daydreams. While the poem bears the inexorable imprint of past literati, there is little doubt that the expression of grief and gratitude for the remaining pleasures of old age is utterly modern. In view of the unified form of the poem and its revitalization of allusion, the expression is timeless. It manifests a basic rule observed by William Wimsatt: “…the

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366 Mu Dan, undated letter to Du Yunxie in 1976, SWJ, 145.

367 Sun Zhiming recalls this comparison between poetry and swimming. See Sun Zhiming, 143.
usual rule of thumb is that a poet should avoid clichés. But a higher rule is that he should be a master of cliches—at all levels….”

The effect of Mu Dan’s translating practice on his own poetry is a subtle and complicated subject and deserves a full, exclusive study. As a creative source, foreign poetry served him perhaps as an even more original alternative to his own verse. It helped elevate his poetic art to a higher level of fullness and virtuosity, and his poetry underwent significant transformations while remaining amazingly recognizable. One need only compare his poem “Performance 演出” with a passage from Byron’s Don Juan (which Mu Dan translated into Chinese):

To achieve abnormal effects no effort is spared;  
Every form must be polished, perfected.  
“That is life,” and yet it violates Nature’s laws,  
When actors are too sly to be sly.

But no one knows how many hearts of gold have been betrayed.  
Everywhere fake notes are in circulation.  
What they buy is not a resounding cry of sympathy,  
But numb indifference beneath the sound of loud applause.

为反常的效果而费尽心机,  
每一个形式都要求光洁，完美;  
“这就是生活”，但违反自然的规律，  
尽管演员已狡狯得毫不狡狯，

却不知背弃了多少黄金的心  
而到处只见赝币在流通，  
它买到的不是珍贵的共鸣  
而是热烈鼓掌下的无动于衷。

(“Performance 演出,” CP, 317)

And Byron:

Mu Dan’s poem and its echoes of *Don Juan* suggest that not only was Mu Dan able to find poetic material in the works he translated, he was also careful to use such material inventively in the new context. The connection between the text of Mu Dan and that of Byron should be considered secondary, because Mu Dan is ultimately speaking with his own aesthetic voice. The reformulated reality reflected in “Performance,” and in virtually all Mu Dan’s late poems, is so entrenched in the historical context of his time, that the poems engage the reader more powerfully and vividly than through discursive statement. These poems add a new dimension to both his envisioned pain of experience and to the Nine Leaves group’s credo of the modernization of new poetry; they represent an admirable blending of truth and vigor, nuance and purity of poetic representation.

**Satire and irony**

Throughout his career, Mu Dan was an avid practitioner of irony and satire. Together they inform Mu Dan’s poetry in the different periods of his writing.

To quote Simon Guant, irony depends on a disparity between literal and intended meaning, which abounds in Mu Dan’s poetry. This disparity applies in almost all his
social and political poems, as metaphor, allegory, metonymy and synecdoche. With various types of textual signals, such as contradictory statement, inappropriate style or register, or a particular formula incorporated in his poems, Mu Dan gives a clear-cut impression to the readers that he is being ironic.

Irony is Mu Dan’s most effective tool, and in a sense, the only vehicle for his criticism of society—it lends his poems subtlety and flexibility of expression while offering him the right means in the difficult quest for truth. This is evident in poems such as “Departure,” “Seventh of July 七七,” and “Inflation 通貨膨脹,” in which the prevalent ills are exposed, berated, falsely sublimated and ironically canonized:

You are the great God we invited
To be our fairest judge.
All the batons, water cannons, protests and appeals,
Were meant for your arrival.

You are the uncle we yearned for so dearly,
We shouted loudly in order to hear you speak;
They opposed us, but since your arrival
They have stolen our words to welcome you.

(“Seventh of July 七七,” CP, 200)

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370 Ibid, 29.
Under your enchanting light, righteousness appears pathetic,
You are a spider’s web, on which only maggots dwell.
If we want to live, they must die,
In fine weather, your rule must be abolished!

在你的光彩下，正义只显得可怜，
你是一面蛛网，居中的只有蛆虫，
如果我们要活，他们必须死去，
天气晴朗，你的统治先得肃清！

(“Inflation通貨膨脹,” CP, 207)

The intricate relationship between irony and truth was explicated by Beaty in his study of Byron, who so greatly influenced Mu Dan’s late poems:

…[the reader] must ultimately concede that each of the antithetical viewpoints, far from negating the other, contains partial elements of “truth” and that neither presents the whole picture. Unresolved ironies are the narrator’s prime rhetorical means of compelling the reader to see reality from different perspectives and to acknowledge that conflicting ideas are tenable within a larger framework.³⁷¹

Mu Dan’s use of irony echoes this observation with his singular themes and means of expression. In “Departure,” truth is perceived as an illusion, as a “semantic trap,” and while remaining—to use Newell Ford’s analysis of irony in Shelley—“imageless but incognizable,”³⁷² takes the form for Mu Dan of a zigzag path towards the fulfillment of life. In this type of poetry, paradox is the core and the richest vein for the ironic discourse of experience and for the reassessment of the truth. Paradox reflects the ambivalent nature of reality, the limits of cognition, and the incapacity of human language, as suggested in poems such as “Self,” “Advent of Wisdom,” and “Song of Wisdom.”

³⁷¹ Beaty, Byron the Satirist, 128.

“Phantom of the Forest” is a full treatment of this paradoxical nature of truth, a poem of multiple themes and motifs—law and order, life and death, sacrifice and value, heroism and nihilism. The constant strife and vicissitude of life is depicted with clear and enhanced irony against the exuberant and destructive force of the primitive forest. Although the poem is stylized and perhaps too ambitious for a single lyric, it is brilliant in its rhetorical vigour and the range of themes it covers. There are perhaps echoes of Shelley’s famous vision of the underlying spirit of the dead Adonais, “he wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead,” and the cosmic perspective brought into the dramatic dialogue also shows elements of the Romantic tradition, although the main influences on Mu Dan at the time were certainly Eliot and Auden.

Satire operates on two poles—on the one hand, “a rigid moral system” and on the other, “a graceful style.” In the words of Frye, this dualism takes the form of a “token fantasy” and an “implicit moral standard.” These two poles create mockery, malice, and derision, resulting in an “unstable force field” between the moral content and the playful, often destructive, form. By nature, this unstable field is not designated to be purely festive or comic; in the case of Mu Dan’s poetry, it unfolds with elaborated situations and scenes, with a view to accentuate a sense of conflict and tension. The mode of dramatic monologue appeals to Mu Dan, and he finds a stimulating precedent for it in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Poems such as “Lyrics in the Air Raid Bunker” (1940), “The Malaise of Mr. Hua” (1941), and “Ladies

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Adonais, 38:3. Mu Dan was later to translate the entire poem in the 1950s.


and Gentlemen” (1948) are overt imitations of Eliot, in which the dramatic persona gives Mu Dan an ironic object of introspection; the poet projects psychological materials into the dramatic persona which he separates from himself by exquisite irony: he fills the body of another to allow himself simultaneous expression and disguise. In these poems the poet wears a mask through which he expresses and simultaneously disguises his most immediate psychological concerns in the time of war; he emphasizes the persona’s isolation both in society and within his own consciousness, and in this isolation the speaker attains a more supple self-knowledge and a bitter sense of mockery of himself and the class to which he belongs.

As Mu Dan’s poetry develops, the poetic drama becomes increasingly metaphorized and digs deeper into his self-consciousness. A dramatic persona is still needed, but this persona is less obscure because it tends to be modeled on a real person and to epitomize its everyday context. This special mode of ideation and characterization is strikingly powerful in the portrayal of dominant power and social manipulation, expressed in a typically ironic voice. In his concentrated exposure of the ills of society, his irony tends to complement, strengthen, and revive the beleaguered sense of reason and human conscience—we feel, in “The Good Dream 好夢,” the consciousness of the brevity and slightness of individual life which impels the poet’s exploration of truth and value (CP, 343–44); in “Sense and Emotion 理智與情感,” the breaking of that very same good dream leads to yearnings of new experience transcending past suffering (CP, 315–16).

376 This specific method of irony is reminiscent of that exemplified by T. S. Eliot. For more discussions on dramatic monologues in modern poetry, see Carol T. Christ, “Self-Concealment and Self-Expression in Eliot’s and Pound’s Dramatic Monologues,” Victorian Poetry 22.2, The Dramatic “I” Poem (Summer, 1984), 217–26, 222.
Another poem, “The Song of the Siren 妖女的歌” (1956), tackles the theme of false belief, dream, and delusion, with an ironic tone of self-mockery and doubt. Mesmerized by the enchanting songs of a siren, a group of people set out on a journey to find her; they realize that the siren’s song is an illusion, and they have lost everything (“freedom, peace and possessions 自由、安寧、財富”). This discovery brings horror and panic to the group who, as the song ceases, come to an awareness of the propaganda game and the fact that they have been manipulated by the state. A nightmarish prospect is further anticipated by the poet: when the people are stranded at the top of the hill, those at the foot of it are still looking yearningly upward, unaware of the same ideological trap that has been laid for them. Although Mu Dan in this poem does not feign a moral agent, he assigns himself through this melodrama a high moral stance by revealing the vices and errors of political life for people in general. This extraordinary exposure contrasts with the new kind of sensibility promoted by the officials to encompass “collective brotherhood, and a commonality of feelings” in the process of socialist construction, it also contradicts Mu Dan’s own participation in 1957 when he rhapsodizes the great prospects of China among his contemporary writers and artists (his poetry throbbed at that time with bliss and ardor: “I sing for you, ‘science’ and ‘benevolence!’ 我歡呼你，‘科學’加上‘仁愛’!”)


378 “Sanmenxia shuili gongcheng yougan 三門峽水利工程有感” (On Completion of the Sanmen Gorge Dam Construction), *CP*, 299.
This moral stance separates satire from pure comedy. In the following poems, the satirical illustrations of the manipulation of social life evoke feelings of frustration and absurdity:

So why bother to bring it out and publish it?
I’m sure the editors know all about it:
Besides the ninety-nine contending schools,
There’s one little voice that won’t join the choir.

那麼，又何必拿出來發表?
我想編者看得很清楚：
在九十九家爭鳴之外，
也該登一家不鳴的小卒。

(“Let the Ninety-nine Schools Contend 九十九家爭鳴記,” CP, 305)

Here comes love’s smiling face,
Like the faintest of shadows, it vanishes into a smoke-filled room.

對面迎過來愛情的笑臉，
影影綽綽，又沒入一屋子的煙霧。

(“Going to the Study Session 去學習會,” CP, 296)

The events giving rise to these feelings should not be considered as trivial, but as harmful or destructive in their very core. From the reader’s point of view, the whole event might be read as laughable; from the satirist’s point of view, this laughter as a symbolic gesture of refutation and defiance betrays a social phenomenon which is essentially inhumane and cruel. In his laughter we hear echoes of “The Obstructed Road,” “The Heart of the City,” “Memory” (1945), and “Phantom of the Forest.” In the concluding verse of “The Heart of the City,” this laughter reverberates with the thunder rolling ominously over the bustling and spiritually barren urban streets.
Many of Mu Dan’s poems illustrate the conditions of the soul. They reveal the soul’s aspiration for the ideal while lamenting the very futility of the soul’s quest. This ambivalence of thought or gesture is the rule rather than the exception in most of Mu Dan’s satirical works. Sometimes, the predominant mood is one of spleen with a touch of cynicism and foreboding, recalling certain passages from Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal—for example, the last stanza of “Parisian Dream” (“The clock with its funereal ring/Was brutally sounding noon,/And the sky was pouring/ Shadows over the sad, numb world.”)

In this poem from the 1940s, Mu Dan extends the metaphorical delineation of the soul in its day-to-day miseries, and draws a dire picture of spiritual death: the deserted streets are doom-laden; man with his “cracked soul” perpetually suffers, his “wounds are stamped

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The juxtaposition of light and dark, life and death, prefigures the double movement of life: with “each inch of sunlight making us more mature,” youth has to “learn to be smart,” and aged men “cling dear to their dumbness” \( (CP, 170) \).

Satire and irony together mould Mu Dan’s poetic representation of everyday experience. State affairs tend to be mirrored in the chores of little people. Poems such as “The Symbol of Anguish” 

苦悶的象征

, “Counter Attack,” “Inflation,” and “Seventh of July” appear to make fun of public life in a light vein, satirizing the corruption of authority, and the inherent weakness of humanity. They seem trivial and yet they are the fundamental details of everyday life in a time of war, and they contrast with and complement the common beliefs, attitudes and values held by ordinary people. These “irrelevant trivialities” evoke an ambivalent sense of the real and unreal, which in turn challenges current beliefs and opinions.

The subtle act of repudiating his own thoughts or assertions is a “painful business” which flourished in Mu Dan’s satire.\(^3\) The impotence of thought reflects a tragic truth of life and society (“Oh wisdom tree! I curse your every growing bud 我詛咒它每一片葉的滋長!”). At the same time, despite the elusive nature of knowledge, the quest for it fosters a certain aesthetic pleasure and “fresh perspectives” for the satirist—as is evident in some of Eileen Chang novels written in the same period. In these novels, the seemingly irrelevant and trivial experiences of the war and of the average people are

\(^{380}\) Pang Bingjun, 258. The suffering people in this poem fit the general character of the possessor of the “cracked soul” as described by Baudelaire, in his poem “The Cracked Bell”: “a wounded man forgotten on the brink of a pool of blood beneath a great heap of the dead, dying there, fixed, in useless efforts.” Quoted from Nalbantian, Memory in Literature, 54.

\(^{381}\) Eileen Chang, “Jin yu lu” (From the Ashes), in Written on Water, 40.

\(^{382}\) Ibid, 221.
recorded and presented as examples of the historicity of the time and its happenings. Unlike Chang, Mu Dan’s satirical utterance combines the particular (historicising) and the general (philosophizing), whereby metaphors and drama work together to enhance the overall poetic effect.

Greenberg notes that satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering, because it flourishes in a homogeneous society where satirist and audience share the same views as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and as to their sense of stability and contentment. One problem for Mu Dan is that while his early satire aims to tackle serious evil and suffering, it often fails to engage the reader. His subject of irony is frequently shifting and cannot be taken wholly at face value; there is constant conflict between the aesthetic principles and the social needs in his ironic discourse. He raises questions but these questions can seem too rhetorical and easily weakened by excessive intelligence or wit. Some of his poems give an impression of being too private or vague, rendering the irony ineffective. In his poem entitled “Dedication” (1945), the heroic death of a soldier is strangely portrayed and evaluated with a theistic viewpoint of birth and self-redemption: “His delicate head lowers in submission,/But the life he offers/Has more glory in it than God’s gift/他精致的頭已垂下來順從，/然而他把自己的生命交還，/已較主所賜給的更為光榮” (CP, 205).

Sometimes it appears to the reader that the poet merely casts doubt on any subject he encounters in order to assert his own point of view, ironically. He urges the reader to investigate, to look further for solutions, but the reader may not take his urging seriously,

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383 These works were used by Eileen Chang with reference to the status of war literature in China. Ibid.

384 Greenberg, Modernism, Satire and the Novel, 7.
because there is not sufficient shared information or understanding of the context or situation linked to the irony. These poems then tend to fall into self-satire, and sometimes, self-parody, however artistically written they may be. There was still significant work to be done, in terms of exploring the new method and alternative modes, before Mu Dan could truly transmute a serious expression of social or individual life into a form of poetic entertainment in lyric verse, be it laughable, sickening, or grotesque.

One problem of Mu Dan’s satire is his lack of knowledge and limited understanding of the phenomenon he observed. This is obvious in “How the Americans Educate Their Next Generation 美國怎樣教育下一代” (1951), a poem he composed during his stay in the US between 1948 and 1951. The poem addresses a recurring theme, the education of children in a callous world, which he explored repeatedly in his early verse: children are portrayed as being at the mercy of adults through the education they receive; they are sucked into the state machinery; their innocence succumbs to adult cowardice and dissimulation. In this poem, the criticism is based upon his observation of the U.S.A, the epitome of imperialistic ambition, oppression and moral decadence. In a typically solemn and mocking manner, Mu Dan did not hesitate to enumerate the dangers lying in wait for American children:

Oh, little Peter, run away. But you can’t run; All manner of danger is lying darkly in wait in the corner. Each week the priest in his black cloak waves To make you weary of the world, and of your true quest. All sorts of pessimistic philosophies are waiting in the bookstores To depress you with all their logical ideas.

呵,小彼得，逃吧；你逃不开； 屋角暗藏着各样的灾害。 黑衣牧师每星期向你招手， 让你厌弃世界和正当的追求；
各種悲观哲學等在書店里，
用各样的逻辑要给你忧愁；

(“How the Americans Educate Their Next Generation 美國怎樣教育下一代,” CP, 276)

We are not sure if there is a Chinese reader at the back of his mind when he composed this poem, and to what extent the poem reflects the poet’s patriotic passions fuelled by the outbreak of the Korean War. But it will be fair to say that despite its ironic bite and an outsider’s critical eye, a complete and more objective knowledge of the ideology and social reality of a foreign country was yet to be attained by the poet.

In his later poems, Mu Dan is more aware of this limitation in his handling of complex social and political problems. His satire appears less complicated but more effective in illustrating the conditions of the individual and his social predicament; his mode of speech becomes straightforward while enhanced drama continues to play the pivotal role in the discourse. In “Summer,” for instance, the stricture of censorship under the regime is revealed in a series of mini dramas to engage the omnipotent sun, the changing seasons, the green grass, and in the end, the editors and authors. The sun is a narcissistic, authoritarian figure, administering the proceedings of his own deification; the editors are the sun’s proxy and secular accomplices; the authors, completely at the mercy of the will of the sun and the editors, are the reluctant collaborators in the sun’s scheme (“He describes my vexed journey/But changes protagonist when it nearly reaches its climax,/And in a cold sweat, I escape into idle thought” (CP, 328)). Life as portrayed in this poem is absurd, comical, and indeed, farcical, while the original aggressiveness of satire is checked and sublimated to the extent that it can be easily overlooked. It is
predominantly ironic because neither the instigator (the sun) nor the administrators of the regime (the editors) are overtly assailed.

Poetic drama like this makes full use of fantasies and daydreams, whereby the poet tests the limits of the forbidden fortress of old age, or takes flight to the faraway mountains, or ventures into the uncharted ocean where severe storms are brewing. His depiction of the changing seasons signals the transition from his earlier oblique expressions to the sensibly more positive and richly textured contemplations on man, history, and fate of his later period.

But it is perhaps “Performance” that marks the high point of his satirical art. It is in this poem that satire both overwhelms and undercuts an overtly grim melodrama to render a “lived experience,” in which the audience and the actor, the narrator and the reader, communicate at the allegorical level. With its immaculately elaborated sets and script, plots and subplots, Mu Dan provides us with a marvelous “stylization of event,” which is essentially a satirical and ironic mode of expression. As satire, the poem identifies a series of contradictions, and shows the discrepancy between good intention and actual, i.e., bad, behaviour. Readers are astounded by the poem’s revelation of the ubiquitous absurdity and horror, while at the same time experiencing a strange mixture of feelings of sympathy, relief and amusement.

This type of debunking poem is neither immediately political, nor presented as a head-on challenge to the established social etiquette or norms. Instead, it gives ideas about the truth of ourselves and the world which could eventually be transformed into a

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See Chapter 2 for this poem.

source of political action. Its unmistakable political undertone is an ardent cry to the
“gentle readers”[^387] of our society for a more humane world blessed with vision and hope.
While this vision and hope may not necessarily bring redemption, the historical
consciousness and moral conviction embedded in it make it emotionally powerful and
true. Its satirical expression is both personal and impersonal, manifesting the strength of a
true satirist.

**Symbolism**

Symbolism has played a fundamental role in the development of modern Chinese
poetry.[^388] Conceived originally as a reaction against the precision and exactitude of
realism, symbolism was passionately followed by the Nine Leaves poets. Among them,
Mu Dan was the most prolific and successful. In one sense, his poetic oeuvre can be
apprehended as the work of a quintessential symbolist—like the generation of Valery,
known for their solitary labor and earnest introspection.[^389]

Mu Dan’s use of images and symbols suggests the dominant influence of Auden,
as he himself admitted in the last years of his life.[^390] Not only was his verse marked by a
considerable number of conscious borrowings from and echoes of Auden, he also tended
to speak with Auden’s voice as though Auden had taught him his intonation, even given
him a vocabulary. However, a more thorough reading of Mu Dan’s oeuvre shows that the

[^387]: Don Juan, Canto, 13.

[^388]: Lan Lizhi, Xiandaishi de ganqing yu xingshi (Feelings and Forms of Modern Poetry) (Beijing: Renmin
wenxue, 2002), 241–73.

[^389]: Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle, 79.

[^390]: Mu Dan, Letter to Du Yunxie, June 28, 1975, JXJ, 190.
influences he received were manifold. They include Eliot, Yeats, Rilke, Byron, Shelley, Whitman, and Ai Qing, to name but the most apparent. For example, his image of the abandoned body, the newborn from the mother’s split womb, in “Self” (1940), alludes to Rilke’s womb image, in “Pietà”: “How came, how came from out thy womb, Mary, so much light/And so much gloom?/Who was thy bridegroom?”391 The self who strives against both his own consciousness and the current of time, in “Self” and “Advent of Wisdom” (1940), recalls Rilke’s New Man, who strives to be regenerated within himself, from “death the master.”392

There are also borrowings by Mu Dan—or rather, in the words of Eliot, “stealings”—that can be detected only by erudite poetry readers. We find a remarkable echo between the lines “And this old fan, this broken watch, these receipts…/There is no answer now to their riddles. /Ever since she left this world, /Their messages cannot be explained. /But these still objects have retained a lingering warmth/In which dwells her soul 还有旧扇, 破表, 收據……/如今都失去了謎底, /自從她離開這個世界, /它們的信息已不可解。/但這些靜物仍有余溫, /似乎居住著她的靈魂” (“Dream Murmurs of An Old Man老年的夢囈,” CP, 349), and these lines from Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, “And pricking himself on a needle/Still stuck in a piece of sewing./Suddenly he sees her/And cries quietly.”393 Mu Dan rated Pasternak’s poems included in this novel highly.394 His own depiction of a scene of the departed lover, the

391 Wood, Rainer Maria Rilke, 55.
392 Ibid.
393 Doctor Zhivago, 490.
fan, the watch, and the paper receipt is just as heartrending as that of the unfinished needlework, in Pasternak’s poem, which brings the poet Yuri to tears.

Romanticism is also an important source of inspiration for Mu Dan’s symbolic mode of expression. For example, in the early poem “Clouds 雲,” gloom and amazement are the key sentiments of a romantic poet confronting a natural landscape:

Clouds

Massed at the sky’s edge, on the mountaintops, on the prairie,
Boats carrying illusion, loved by the west wind, come from afar.
Clusters of cloud like our moods. You set sail
On the shoreless sea, submerged in the tender sun.

Seeds of storms, homeland of freedom:
You look down at all things, shed rain on the soil.
But fly higher,
And often chase the wind, leaving not a single trace of a tear.

雲

凝結在天邊，在山頂，在草原，
幻想的船，西風愛你來自遠方，
一團一團像我們的心緒，你移去
在無岸的海上，觸沒於柔和的太陽。

是暴風雨的種子，自由的家鄉，
低視一切你就洒遍在泥土裡，
然而常常向著更高處飛揚，
隨著風，不留一點淚濕的痕跡。

(CP, 215)

The spirit of imagination is embodied in a series of pristine images, emanating a strong sense of bliss and sorrow. This poem, together with another one composed by Mu Dan in the same year, “Love of the Sea 海戀,” shows Mu Dan’s romantic affiliation. He fuses his concerns for nature with reflective emotions and compassion for mankind. Both the
drifting clouds and the quasi-divine seabird represent man’s longing for freedom and rebellion against society. These were the norm of the romantic individual or hero.

Generally speaking, symbolism operates at three levels in Mu Dan’s poems, as it does in the poetry of Auden. To cite Spears:

> [In Auden’s poetry symbols perform] the technical function of providing a concrete dramatic situation and a unifying principle of organization for the imagery; second, the satirical function of extending satire into the cosmic dimension, and sometimes of implying a satiric norm; third, the didactic function of embodying concretely and dramatically concepts of varying degrees of abstraction.  

In Mu Dan’s poems, dramatic elements are exploited to create a background or situation in which the major symbols operate; a host of images and metaphors interweaving to create tension, echoing both the tumultuous world and the poet’s own psychic conditions, expressed in typical oppositions: God and evil, angel and beast, civilization and decadence, enlightenment and ignorance, life and death, children and adults. On the other hand, Mu Dan’s sense of anxiety in the modern world, his bleak view of history and human society, and his emphasis on the fleeting, ungraspable present, tend to be expressed in both concrete symbols and abstract concepts (Auden, again: “the incessant Now of/The traveler through the time.”)

These three functions of the symbol tend to intermingle in a single poem by Mu Dan, as was the case with Auden. A satirical poem that aims to reveal the conditions of

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modernity or a particular time typically unfolds by creating a dramatic situation, while moving towards a certain degree of generalization or philosophizing.

“Counter Attack 反攻基地” (1945), like “Field Practice 野外演習” (1945) which we discussed earlier in the chapter, is remarkable in its use of images and metaphors. I give here the complete poem.

Counter Attack

By day by night, the planes take off and land,  
Increasing hope at a speed of 300-li,  
This step in history must be taken:  
Trucks flow like a river in a summer valley.

This city: its defence the centre of operations.  
The sun goes down singing to every man:  
“I make no distinction between good and evil,  
Between one race and another.  
I only want you to dig deeper in the soil.”

The past still wishes to pause here,  
But “now” assails like an epidemic.  
Every thirst must be quenched,  
Merchants and insects all as happy as the American soldiers.

The array of generals looks into the distance,  
This place is just a springboard aimed at the future.  
Any one with the strength can jump on it,  
You or anyone else.

反攻基地

日裡夜裡，飛機起來和降落  
以三百裡的速度增加著希望，  
歷史的這一步必須要踏出：  
汽車穿流著如夏日的河谷，

這一個城市，拱衛在行動的中心，  
太陽走下來向每個人歌唱：  
我不辨是非，也不分種族，
我只要你向泥土擴張，和我一樣。
過去的還想在這裡停留，
“現在”卻襲捲如一場傳染病，
各種飢渴全都要滿足，
商人和毛蟲歡快如美軍，
將軍們正聚起眺望著遠方，
這裡不過是朝“未來”的跳板,
凡有力量的都可以上來，
是你還是他暫時全不管。

(CP, 206)

As their titles suggest, both of these poems deal with the theme of war, based on a particularized event or phenomenon. In both poems, images of war are boldly metaphorized against a natural setting, as the inner and outer worlds are dissolved to establish a broader moral perspective: “the distance between man and man thus lengthened” (CP, 197), and, “I make no distinction between good and evil, between one race and another/I only want you to dig deeper in the soil” (CP, 206). The initial allusions are still to do with the war, but both poems become increasingly generalized to expose the inherent vice of humanity. With this the double meanings of the same phenomena are brought to the surface with a light touch. The light-hearted treatment of the material contrasts with the weight of the moral dilemma and with the uncertain future facing humanity: the U.S. soldiers are the victors, but they are still as tiny as “happy worms”; the generals may be powerful, but they are the same prisoners trapped in “now” looking elsewhere for a better trajectory: “The array of generals looks into the distance./This place is just a springboard aimed at the future./Any one with the strength can jump on
it, / You or anyone else” (CP, 206). The irony is that the more responsibility the authorities assume, the more likely it is that the responsibility will be mismanaged.

In his last poems, this sense of urgency embodied in the “here” and “now” is extended to the wider context of life, which is perceived now as impoverished rather than enriched through experience. The zigzag passage leading to salvation or enlightenment for life’s solitary pilgrim is replaced by the image of a “spider’s web,” and a “sinking boat” in poems which ultimately defy the therapeutic role once expected of poetry.

Drowning

Day by day, the body sinks into the material abyss,
At the outset the seduction of life, blood’s desire
Paints colourful ideals for a youth which is empty.

Then there is a striving to explore the visible world,
A delight that the harvest is more and more bountiful.
And yet what you have embraced is a melting iceberg.

Love and hate, friendship, position in life, toiling on a spider’s web,
All things that cause me to live so strongly in their midst,
Amount to no more than a palace of death.

Twisting, proliferating! Even the soul
Is sucked into an armored car, racing on its metal tracks,
Speeding past one landscape after another!

O! Each and every sense sinks into the material world—
What message can I project through this window?
What heaven can save me from “Now”?

沉沒

身體一天天墜入物質的深淵，
首先生活的引誘，血液的欲望，
給空洞的青春描繪五色的理想。

接著努力開拓眼前的世界，
喜於自己的收穫愈來愈豐滿，
但你擁抱的不過是消融的冰山：
愛憎、情誼、蛛網的勞作，
都曾使我堅強地生活於其中，
而這一切只搭造了死亡之宮：

曲折、繁複、連心靈都被吸引進
日程的鐵軌上急馳的鐵甲車，
飛速地迎來和送去一片片景色！

呵，耳目口鼻，都沉沒在物質中，
我能投出什麼信息到它窗外？
什麼天空能把我拯救出“現在”？

(CP, 341)

This extended statement of life is here presented with a remarkable procession of symbols (abyss, iceberg, cobweb, armoured car, window, sky) which fit into a larger rhetorical structure. Within this larger structure is a series of contrasts between ideal and reality, past and present, the spiritual and the material. At the centre of the image cluster is the trapped self, which is also the keystone metaphor in certain other poems written in the same period by Mu Dan (an old man who shuts himself off in an isolated fortress (“Spring”), a madwomen caught in her own horror dream (“The Formation of ‘I’”), a frozen creek with its tightly sealed tongue (“Winter”), etc.) But rather than giving himself completely to cruel fate or the dominant power, the self here undergoes a secret passage of self-revival. Its inexorable sinking to annihilation gains a new force, as the soul is “sucked into” the itinerary of an armoured car; then the force propels the self from a predetermined course to one of unknown opportunities: a window opens onto the infinite sky filled with both promises and doom. And the self hinges precariously on the present moment, still searching for an answer.
The symbols in Mu Dan’s last poems vibrate with vigour and inventive power. These poems are rich in word-images that function, in the words of Octavio Paz, as the “metaphors of reality”\footnote{Paz, \textit{The Bow and the Lyre}, Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 24.}—reality crystallized in figurative language and myth. In “Performance,” for example, the “blankness of inhumane silence”\footnote{Violet B. Ketels, “Havel to the Castle!” in \textit{Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science} 548 (1996): 46.} entertained in Havel’s political drama takes the form of the heartless applause from spectators at the end of the show, revealing a similar hostility between the members of the community in a totalitarian society. In “Winter,” the concluding images of the winding path in the wilderness and the array of power poles extending towards the horizon depict a picture of another facet of life—a reality revived in the re-constructed memory of a past event. A new awareness enables personal misfortune to give rise to new beliefs.

When discussing the symbolism of Mu Dan’s poetry, it is impossible not to mention his “I Sing of the Body,” a masterpiece that inevitably brings to mind Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric.” The similarities between the two are not only implied by their titles, but also by their extolling of the human body with great frankness and subtlety. In the case of Mu Dan, this particular poem represents the pinnacle of one of the periods in his creative life, with its particular styles—direct, simple, and passionate, in line with other poems such as “Chorus: Two Chapters,” “Praise,” “Where is China” (1941), “Faintly Visible,” and “Discovery 發現” (1947). It is a style which contrasts starkly with the voices he inherited from Eliot and Auden.

Like Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric,” “I Sing of the Body” shows to the fullest measure Mu Dan’s dependence on metaphor, the poetic mode which Whitman
“could not do without.” It abounds in fresh images and metaphors which follow and echo each other, giving each line a throbbing vitality presented in a powerfully flowing cadence. The chief image, the human body, growing from Mu Dan’s earlier perception of it as the externalization of the embattled self-consciousness, becomes now the very locus of all beauty and reason bestowed on humanity. Each thing enumerated by the poet—the coal buried underneath the earth’s crust, the flowers swaying in the distant mountains, the continents drifting to and from one another—justifies itself among the other things; each thing in the perception of the poet forms an unbreakable bond and reference to this elevated being of the human body. The unimpeded rhythm and delicately hinted rhymes ensure that the harmony between the poetic tropes, the music, and the extended statement are reached in Mu Dan’s orphic celebration of the here and now, of life’s fulfillment through sympathy with everything else. The image of God at the end of the poem suggests that the poem works towards something greater than the body and the world, towards the inspiration of a Creator, who is the way and purpose, the source and impetus for the poet’s unceasing poetic endeavour.


400 Rilke is perhaps another inspiration to this poem, in terms of the poetic representation of the ubiquitous beauty embodied in each thing of the perceptible world: “What appears inexorable must be present [in poetry] for the sake of our greatest desires. Beauty will become paltry and insignificant when one looks for it only in what is pleasing; it might be found occasionally but it dwells and is awake in each thing where it encloses itself, and it emerges only for the individual who assumes its presence everywhere and who will not budge until he has stubbornly coaxed it forth.” Quoted from Ulrich Baer, “The Status of the Correspondence in Rilke’s Work,” in Karen Leeder and Rober Vilain, eds., The Cambridge Companion to Rilke (New York: The Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36.

401 Mu Dan’s creative use of Whitman is in stark contrast to that of Guo Moruo, who admired Whitman’s emotional intensity and “explosive” style of representation. But Guo’s crude, rigid imitation caused immense problems that hampered genuine poetic expression. See Lin, Modern Chinese Poetry, 210.
In Mu Dan’s poems, images and metaphors tend to develop surrounding a single motif. One such motif is passionate human love. As an indispensable part of Mu Dan’s life experience, the image of love evolves and undergoes significant transformation. Often, a lover will combine with a traveler to give the image of love a sharp focus and aura of spiritual endeavour. In “Advent of Spring,” the young wayfarers roaming in the blooming garden are also looking for love; in “Spring” (1942), the lover awakens to his own desire, and, facing an unknown, beckoning world, sets out to explore it like a naked, agitated bird; in “Eight Poems,” the lover’s journey is identified with the journey of life, during which the lover is constantly “creating” himself, despite the “storms, long paths and lonely nights” lying ahead. This series of images illustrates vividly the earnest world of these young world explorers. The metaphysical strain of “Eight Poems” further illuminates the passage of time trodden by the traveler-lovers: they retreat to the primary state of life, wherein one lover watches his loved one falling into a deep slumber. This Alastor-like figure who searches for “strange truths in undiscovered lands,” implies the human desire to return to nature, to a world that is free of decay and change.

This extended metaphor of the traveler-lover takes many forms. It can be in the image of a pilgrim who searches for the real meaning of love (“Your courage is your farthest borderland [of your adventure];/My skin offers the sincere devotion of my heart

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402 Mu Dan wrote two poems under the title “Spring,” in 1942 and 1976, respectively. These two poems exhibit the contrasting mentalities of the poet approaching different phases of his natural life, the vibrating and glamorous period of youth, and then, old age.

403 Mu Dan’s designation of the traveler-lover recalls both Auden and Rilke: Auden writes of the uprooted, the exiled, of the searching in the New World (“The world’s great rage, the travel of young men”); Rilke is concerned with the wonders of the world which invite the youth to explore (“You girls are like gardens/on April evenings:/the many journeys of spring/but no destination”). See Auden, “A New Year Letter,” Completed Works 1907–1973, 316; Louth, “Early Poems,” 48.

由於你的大膽，就是你最遙遠的邊界：/我的皮膚也獻出了心跳的虔誠”

(“Discovery 發現,” CP, 254). The metaphor can be embodied in an earthly creature impelled by the thirst for divine revelation (“Day and night after night, the white bird soars/ Beyond knowledge, in the mountain ranges beyond the mountains 日以繼夜，那白色的鳥的翱翔，/在知識以外，那山外的群山,” “Love of the Sea,” CP, 186–87);
The journey can be a fantastic one born out of the poet’s sober consciousness, as in his last poem about love, “Love 愛情.” There Mu Dan extends the lover’s journey to outer space, in the light of love’s futility, secularism, and vulgarity:

Love

Love is an almost bankrupt enterprise,
If only to protect her good name,
It hires those beautiful lies
And sells its might to the mind.

Love always conceives the cruelest plans
To let cunning desires serve her ends,
Some bend on their knees, some just see through her
Blowing a cold wind into her edifice of passion.

Love’s capital dwindles day by day,
She gathers together all her passion;
Let reason say yes, and never no,
Before funding her on a trip to the moon.

Though she has a bank built of stone,
It cannot withstand the secret trembling of the soul;
And despite the smiles of trust, her life’s savings
Are withdrawn by the act of a stealthy hand.

愛情

愛情是個快破產的企業，
假如為了維護自己的信譽；
它雇用的是些美麗的謊，
向頭脳去推銷它的威力。
愛情總使用太冷酷的陰謀，
讓狡獪的欲望都向她供奉。
有的膜拜她，有的就識破，
給她熱情的大廈吹進冷風。

愛情的資本變得越來越少，
假如她聚起了一切熱情；
只准理智說是，不准說不，
然后資助它到月球去旅行。

雖然她有一座石筑的銀行，
但經不起心靈秘密的抖顫，
別看忠誠包圍著笑容，
行動的手卻悄悄地提取存款。

(CP, 352)

In other words, the game of love is dangerous. It is a cruel tale of a striving Ego with an insatiable greed for money and power. The image of the trip to the moon heightens the lover’s sense of fantasy, only to be cut short by the cleverly concealed schemes of a callously calculating heart: the beauty of the moon, once a reflection of the young traveler’s yearnings for mysterious experience in “Advent of Spring,” reveals here a horrifying sterility and otherness. It has been deprived of any connotation of sensual pleasure or spiritual union for the lovers. A string of stark images—a bankrupt enterprise, a cold edifice, a bank enclosed by stone walls—enhances the sense of love against an appalling moral landscape. Against this moral landscape, the blessing and curse of love, its gift and deprivation are depicted as qualities which haunt this most intimate relationship. A complete narrative of love is presented: from the first revelation of love to lamentation and loss, from the lover’s thrill of discovery to doubt and rejection. The myth of love is negated and displaced by the greater myth of man in the corrupted human
world. It is a world in which man is deprived of his good will and good name, is deprived of trust, and ultimately, deprived of the impulse and ability to love. “Love” thus rounds off Mu Dan’s lifelong exploration of the subject, with a sad, dismal tone—in the words of Auden, “in one passionate negation”: the “voluptuous sensation,” once enjoyed by youth, is tragically destroyed by the “metaphysical despair,” which also pervades most of Mu Dan’s reflections on old age. Mu Dan’s unique style is forged mainly through the remarkable interplay of similes, images and metaphors. These love poems are melancholic, at once lyrical and tragically realistic, and are among his finest in quality for their richness of allusion and superb symbolism.

Conclusion

The 1940s when the Nine Leaves poets developed and matured, the decade before “liberation” in 1949, was a period of great earnestness, ingenuity, and sophistication. Yet a perusal of their works—and also of other important poets of the decade—suggests that this decade was not as important as the 1920s and 30s when prominent poets such as Xu Zhimo, Dai Wangshu, and Ai Qing flourished. Despite their inspiration and greatly developed skills, the Nine Leaves poets found it difficult to lay claim to their own place in history and to express their own voice, especially in the years after 1949. Compared with other officially sanctified writers, they only managed to reach a narrow audience, mostly their colleagues and a handful of critics. Mu Dan was the only one among them who is still widely read by today’s readers.

Some poets constantly change their subject and style, based on their changed aesthetic taste and their general views of life and society. Mu Dan’s extended career as a poet underwent significant changes and modifications, but his poetry as a whole remains coherent and remarkably recognizable. As a poet, he was never smug, and remained honest and courageous in his writing.

However, it is not this courage in the general sense that will give Mu Dan a permanent place in Chinese literature. It is the deeper, more spirited, courage by which, in the words of Pasternak, a poet presents himself and all his talent “in front of a blank sheet of paper,” rather than “on the platform, or in the editor’s office.” Mu Dan’s last poetry is the testament of a poet who had prepared all his life for the time when true language could take over, and what must be said could finally declare itself. In his untiring pursuit of truth, in his revelation of the falsity of life and society, his heart and conscience were the only guide which he consulted. As Yeats said: “A poet when he is growing old will ask himself whether he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment.” Mu Dan’s last poetry is one of the most complete answers to this. These poems, along with the immense body of his translations, represent the consummation of a long and fruitful career.

406 Henry Gifford, Pasternak, 239.

Chapter Four

Reassessment of Modernism in Mu Dan’s Poetry:

Context and Practice

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to provide a further assessment of Mu Dan’s poetry in relation to his status as a pre-eminent modern poet. For many readers, scholars included, modernism is generally seen as the starting point for an appropriate response to Mu Dan’s work, and a central point of reference for the working of his imagination. I wish to demonstrate here, however, that this notion, while shedding some important light on the main characteristics of Mu Dan’s poetry, may well mislead the reader and cause him to misjudge Mu Dan, in respect of his own unstated aspiration and the nature of his creativity. The modernist label given to him is a potential misnomer and requires closer examination against the broad context of the development of Chinese new poetry. Poetry as a form of self-revelation aims to recover the fullness of life; correspondingly, literary evaluation, including the evaluation of poetry, should focus, first and foremost, on making texts timeless and transcending their temporality. These views suggest a broader and more comprehensive approach in the assessment of our most radically innovative poets, including Mu Dan.


Innovation and Continuity: Mu Dan’s Search for Poetic Form

As a self-claimed modernist, one who arguably had “gone the farthest” among the Chinese poets of his era, Mu Dan seemed to have from the very start of his career freed himself from the “dark relationships” with tradition, from what Eliot described as the “pastness of the past.” Tradition offered Mu Dan little as a source of poetic inspiration or reference, as he strove to grasp the present moment, to be in control of the intractable materials of modern experience—“the vast magnetic field” of the time, in the words of his fellow Nine Leaves poet Zheng Min. Mu Dan’s notion of the past and the present, expressed in urgent terms, was more concerned with establishing a sequence of time rather than with merging different views and perspectives into a unified poetic experience. He was too keen, and perhaps also a little too impudent, to realize that his own poetic practice was constantly under the influence of two parallel trends in Chinese literature—westernization and vernacularization—and his own position was at their very confluence. Even in the last years of his life, he confessed that he had little to absorb from Chinese classical poetry.

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410 The words are those of Wang Zuoliang, whose review originally appeared in the London–based magazine Life and Letters (Jun., 1946), and was later subsumed in Mu Dan’s self-funded publication of The Poetry of Mu Dan 1939–45. The article reappeared in the Literary Magazine (Aug., 1947).


Mu Dan’s wrestling with form, with apt expressions of emotion and wit, was evident in his early verses, especially when he attempted to reproduce the effect of Auden and Eliot. In his late years, his views on poetry and his general stance on tradition were significantly modified. This can be seen from the following verbal remarks he made in conversation with his friend Sun Zhiming on Pasternak and Pushkin, in respect to the challenges of Chinese poetry and the absorbing of multiple influences:

The style of Pasternak differs from that of Pushkin. He can be seen as a T. S. Eliot in the Soviet context. Of the various schools and practices of modern poetry there is a common ground trodden by all poets—collectively they strive to grasp the essence of the inner world from a deeper level. If judged in terms of the profundity of their work, writers of traditional verse are dwarfed [by their modern counterparts]. As for the free-verse written in modern baihua, which generally has a lesser appeal for informed readers, the crux of the problem lies in its innate shallowness [of substance]. That is to say, the form it assumes is of lesser importance … Still, there is a crucial drawback in this pursuit of profundity on the part of poets from Europe and America—That is, the problem of obscurity. Though poetry in essence allows more obscurity when compared with prose, the excessive and pedantic use of obscurity is like shutting poetry up in an ivory tower. This deprives the general reader just as a shallow poem does. Thus we have to deal with this pivotal differentiation [between traditional and modern verse]—the dilemma where one feels it difficult to accept the one while being reluctant to accept the other. If only we can ingest Pushkin and Pasternak and smelt their strength and styles into an organic whole … this could be a viable alternative of new way of expression to benefit Chinese poetry.\textsuperscript{415}

This remark anticipates a new direction in Mu Dan’s last poems, and suggests a remolded way of writing expressed in plain and blunt forms. His fusing of various dictions, poetic tones and allusions from both the foreign and the Chinese literary tradition enriches his

\textsuperscript{415} Sun Zhiming, “Wo suo liaojie de shiren Mu Dan” (What I Know of Mu Dan), in \textit{Twentieth-first Century}, (July 1998): 141–42.
particular style and is characteristic of a “complex and multi-leveled structure” of the modern text.  

Fullness and complexity of experience compel—and propel—the continuous exploration of poetic forms. The poet has to deal with a loss of verbal intricacy and a growing appearance of contradiction in his works; a new approach has to be experimented with and perfected to represent the “whole reformulation of experience.”  

This is how Sperry identifies the series of odes written by Keats, in which a “cumulative recognition” is developed to accommodate a different perspective and emphasis feeding into the imagination.  

Chinese poets in the past have been engaged in this self-motivated, tireless searching for form to mold their splendid literary tradition.  

In the case of Mu Dan, to be a strong poet, and to attain what Owen has described as the “sheer variety and manysideness” of a great poet, tradition has the potential to play a greater part in his creativity, by combining with his modernist impulse and preoccupation. Sometimes, it is necessary for him to break with the norm of modernism, so as to be in close touch with both his mind and soul, and with the greater spirit of his time.  

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418 Ibid, 248–49.  
Poetic Text and Underlying Structures

In his seminal study of language and poetics, Ernst Cassirer observes: “As poetry aims to recover the fullness of life by using the sensuous forms of words and images as organs of its own, it recognizes the words and images for what they really are: forms of self-revelation.”421 These forms, as Cassirer suggests, can be only preserved within a prior structure or system. A poem is conceived as part of a system of structures established by the existence of other poems, and the author is not the poem’s creator in any *ex nihilo* sense. Rather, the poem might have created itself within the context of certain codes of poetry.422 McGrath makes explicit the rules in relation to these codes of poetry:

- a. Conventions, or set of qualities are operating within poetry, and it is impossible to exhaust all conventions; and
- b. A poem always has an option to exploit the value of the signs it uses in ways that can refer to recognizable human, historical, social, psychological, political, or religious experience.423

Poetic creation is not just a complex linguistic phenomenon, but one whose creation and appreciation depend on a specialized and privileged knowledge. Though there exists an implicit agreement that binds together all activities associated with poetry—reading, writing, and criticism—the complex, privileged conventions imposed by the agreement are thought of as neither intrinsic to the nature of a poem nor essential


423 Ibid, 817.
to it. This notion echoes Michael Riffaterre’s structurist conception of poetry.

According to Riffaterre, the poetic text is generated by the “expansion” and “conversion” of an invariant matrix into a set of variant images whose underlying propositional structure remains constant. He proposes the following rule: “Expansion transforms the constituents of the matrix sentence into more complex forms.” Expansion in this view develops the lexical form of the image, though the degree of the expansion, as well as its lexical content, varies among individual images. A model for stylistic reading of literary history is established based on the workings of the underlying structure, which Riffaterre termed as “descriptive systems.” Riffaterre defines these systems as consisting of nouns, adjectives, ready-made sentences, clichés, stereotyped figures, all arranged around “a kernel word that fits a mental model of the reality represented by that word.” Under this model, if the same descriptive system appears in two texts, it does not necessarily prove any influence between the two; if such an influence does exist, it merely suggests the repetitive use of a system in the “prefabricated language,” thus rendering the influence insignificant. In reading, a reader can detect these structures through his virtuosity and learning; in writing, a poet can revive them consciously or unconsciously, either creatively or ineptly, resulting in uncanny effect or mere triteness. One great example is Pasternak’s highly experimental early poems: of the seemingly fortuitous images Pasternak presented in combinations, readers seem to remember them as if they

424 Ibid, 819.


have already been there “somewhere,” and as the reading continues, the images become obligatory images.  

Owen has made similar observations in the context of classical Chinese verse. Images are discerned as existing in groups to be retrieved successively, simultaneously, and collectively, by the poet:

> Literary traditions … load such a freight of meaning onto things which … disappear irrevocably into the consuming world of words. The origins of this process by which a thing gathers meaning is lost in the beginnings of language, but once the process has begun with an object, it has virtually a life of its own.  

A single object brings more values and associations to other things of the world, by which its own references and meaning will be enriched in the history of the literary text. It comes into the history of human interest and functions as a nexus between elements of certain descriptive system—nouns, epithets, motif, narrative plots and situation, images, metaphor, oppositions, etc. As new usages of an object or thing appear and old ones fade from fashion, the very concentration and dimension of this accumulated meaning not only regulates what is seen, it also informs how a thing is seen.

This specific notion of “seeing” and “being seen”—the de Manian sense of insight and blindness that determines the course of literary evolution through inheritance and invention—is concerned with realizing the potentials of an existing system by suitable, “self-revealing” form, and is likened to the transformation of a dragon: a single touch by

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429 Ibid.
the colored brush will be sufficient to enliven the dragon’s blank eyes, to free the divine creature from the wall of inhibition. In the Riffaterre model, these blank literary eyes are equivalent to the “empty slots” in the descriptive system that a text is yet to actualize:

The structure of one system, unaffected by the fact that some of these slots remain empty, makes clear the relationship between the slots that are actually filled—thus yield up their meaning. When one of the slots is filled with a word that does not belong to the system—as it often happens—that word receives a new meaning from the function that corresponds to the position the word occupies in the system.

Riffaterre holds this process accountable for much of literary symbolism in terms of derived new meaning. From the viewpoint of reading, the reader of poetry, affirming the superposition of the descriptive system, will lay out a sort of filtre or grill of actual words on the potential lexicon of a particular theme (by eliminating certain elements and combining homologous components of the system). In doing so the overall valorization of the lexicon (its historical dimension) will be limited, and the focus will be directed upon what was pertinent in context (the stylistic dimension). This process is literally a dual reading, performed simultaneously at the level of the text and on the level of the theme.


432 Ibid.

433 Ibid, 55. These two levels combined bring forth the presence and functioning of intertext. Avant–garde hermeneutics considers that the content of text resides wholly or in part in the intertext. Rastier in his seminal study, *Meaning and Textuality*, cites Arrivé to define this intertextuality as “the place of manifestation of the connotated isotopy”: “this place is not the text, but the intertext, the intertext being in turn defined as the set of texts between which the relations of intertextuality function … In turn, according to J. Kristeva, intertextuality is defined as ‘the textual interaction within a single text.’” The “matrix” of a text resides in the intertext, which in turn overlaps with the Riffaterran descriptive systems, both giving life
In classical Chinese poetry, the key elements that comprise a descriptive system are images and metaphors. These images and metaphors play the anchoring role in the “mix and match” practice in its early period; they inform certain types of theme or genre in spite of constant changes to the linguistic feature of the poems; overall, they enable a stimulus-response model in the production and reception of the Chinese poetry in general: the immediate and profound correspondence between man and the external world ensures that poets and readers share a unified sensibility in literary activities. And it is at this point that some of Ezra Pound’s ideas on literal text and meaning can be related to Riffaterre’s system.

The Method of Ezra Pound

Before venturing into the experimental demonstration part of this chapter, I wish to examine some important ideas and methods underlying Pound’s literary works, notably, his translations in Cathay. One particular consideration for this is that, compared with many modern theories on literary innovation and continuity (such as Bloom’s regression and agonistic model), Pound’s method has a wider applicability in actual creative undertakings, a strength I will try to exploit in my treatment of the proof texts.

For Pound, the influence of tradition is a complex subject, concerned not only with shared language and poetic attitudes, but also with a wide range of technical and formal elements in the course of writing and translating as a form of literary re-creation. Shared experience of life or ideas plays a larger role in the creative process of both poet

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to poetic works and their appreciation. See François Rastier, Meaning and Textuality (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 13–14.
and translator, larger than purely linguistic or textual elements; keeping alive a tradition of good writing, and ultimately a culture, always requires a body of literature to provide sustenance and strength. Translation must address the works of past writers as “something living,” something speaking “of the world as I know it,” if it is to be a creative exercise reviving the qualities desirable in all great poetry. *Cathay* shows admirably that Pound was striving to revive the pathos of the original texts. Despite the misconceptions and irrelevant ideas introduced by Pound into these texts, the end result is superior to a colourless, “poetic” version of translation. In the words of David Hawkes, Pound’s “bringing a dead man to life” is more a literary resurrection than a translation.

In the lyrical mode of Chinese poetry, action takes place in the poem’s *tenseless* representation. As Yip observes:

> The fact is that if the Chinese poet has avoided restricting actions to one specific agent, he has also refrained from committing them to finite time—or perhaps the mental horizon of the Chinese poets does not lead them to posit an event within a segment of finite time. The past, present, and future tenses in Indo-European language set time and space limits even on the linguistic level, but the Chinese verbs (or verb elements) tend to return to Phenomenon itself, that undifferentiated mode of being which is timeless …

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435 Ibid, 468.


437 Ibid.

A translator of Chinese classical poetry who explores the same “mental horizon” must therefore himself partake of the Phenomenon by engaging directly in that pure experience, as the receiver of the immediate presentation of things.\textsuperscript{439} This notion echoes Pound’s assertion that “all ages are contemporaneous,\textsuperscript{440} in that both writer and translator must make a “brew” of life itself.\textsuperscript{441} Pound the translator uses “the luminous details” to light up “small areas of experience” that potentially reveal other areas of wider experience in the poem. In the original poetry of Wang Wei, the “luminous details” or images are presented with great sharpness and clarity. The justaposition of the images and the frequent ambiguity of the text create an imaginative challenge for reader of the Chinese, and for translators.\textsuperscript{442}

One scholar has identified in Pound’s translation of \textit{Cathay} an essentially “comfortable, humane, conversational” tone; Pound’s short, clipped and musical phrases echo the intricate sound of the original Chinese verse.\textsuperscript{443} At the linguistic level, certain pronouns, archaic verb forms, and clashing lexical registers are all pruned away to give the end text a neutral, contemporary outlook.\textsuperscript{444} Other than trying to fill the semantic


\textsuperscript{441} \textit{The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941}, ed., D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), 37. Willard. N. M., in “A Poetry of Things,” \textit{Comparative Literature} 17.4 (1965): 318, quotes Pound’s view of the poetic endeavour to embrace and transcend the world of things: “Language may be seen as a pyramid of ascending abstractions, moving away from the concrete world toward the apex “being.” At the bottom lie the things, stunned, that can never know themselves unless they pass up and down the layers of the pyramid ... The poet must save them from the pyramid, he must find … a rhetoric of things.”


\textsuperscript{444} Ibid.
“missing links” created by the original text, Pound focuses on constructing a scene or a situation into which each reader may move, to participate in the experience by being immersed in the phenomenon directly. The poem “Liu Che” is remarkable in constructing an “ideal image,” with an effect that is, to quote the Tang-Dynasty critic Sikong Tu (837-908), “immediate but not fleeting, far-reaching yet inexhaustible 近而不浮，遠而不盡.” His translated text (based loosely on Giles) is driven by verbs, and is enlivened by the subtle use of color and tone, and also by the dramatic shift of direction and perspective in the narrative. These elements combined evoke a mood, to quote Si Kongtu again, “the ineffable ‘meaning beyond flavor 味外之旨.’” For readers who are familiar with the original text of “Liu Che,” there is a perceptible Qingqi 清奇—a spirit which “comes from the ancient and rare,/Tranquil and ungraspable 神出古異，澹不可收.” The spiritual resonance of Pound’s text with the original text exemplifies this preserving of the highest mood envisioned by classical Chinese poets. This accomplishment of Pound as a translator is partly due to the ingenious way in which he selects an analogous western key to fit the mood of an original Chinese poem.

Demonstrations

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446 Sikong Tu shi pin zhushi ji yiwen, ed. Zu Baoquan (Hong Kong: Shangwu, 1966), 68–69.
447 Ibid.
448 Sikong Tu, 52.
449 Hawkes, Classical, Modern and Humane, 93.
The demonstration of the thoughts of continuity and influence in Chinese poetry, which were discussed briefly in the first part of this chapter, will be carried out with an emphasis on one fundamental difference between the Western and the Chinese literary tradition. As some Western critics of Chinese classical verse have rightly observed, Western poets were generally motivated by the desire to create new worlds, while their Chinese counterparts were more focused on rediscovering immanent correlative categories linking Heaven, Earth, and Man; Chinese poets attempted to piece together formulae, topoi, and allusions already established in precedent texts. This adherence to tradition on the part of traditional Chinese poets contrasts with their modern successors whose primary concern is how to deal with their own belated arrival on the poetic scene, and how to actualize their individual talents and creativity. In the case of Mu Dan, the assessment of his achievement and legacy as a poet should include his relationship with his ancestral roots: as a modern explorer of the soul facing the challenges and opportunities of his time, did he establish himself as an inventor, as a shrewd or awkward imitator of Western styles, or as a blend of the two? Despite his open rejection of tradition, did he eventually tread a path similar to that trodden by the poets from that very tradition? If so, how did his poetry become an inextricable part of the copious body of precedent texts of Chinese literature, a literature which boasts of its all-absorbing sense of

continuity, familiarity and homogeneity? To what extent are Mu Dan’s poems a re-
cognition, a return to the tradition itself, a “coming round again?”

In my demonstration I will provide two examples designed to illustrate the interaction between two texts against the background of the evolution of Chinese poetry, especially, the poetry of Mu Dan. Both examples focus on “the specific, specialized signs” of the texts, whose underlying propositional structure remains constant. The theoretical frame is largely derived from Michael Riffaterre’s semiotic poetics. In the first example, I will try to discern a specific descriptive system developed by traditional Chinese verse that continues to function as the defining structure in the new free verse. And with this, I will explore how new meaning has been derived by filling the “empty slots” within the traditional system with the intruding words—in this particular example, virtually a whole block of text in the form of an elaborated episode. In the second example, the descriptive system will combine with the analysis of a single image metaphor: how an array of input spaces combined constitutes a blended space of their own, with “the emergent structure” of the resultant blended space, providing an effective tool for understanding the creativity of literary metaphors. This blending can also provide a unique perspective for the explanation of the rhetorical effects created by the proof texts through the multiple puns and allusions that operate around an evolving metaphor or theme.

For the sake of accentuation and contrast, I will employ a radical approach by converting some of the proof texts, written in the modern vernacular (baihua), into refined literary Chinese (wenyan), with its characteristic scheme of syntax, meter and

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rhyme. As an inverted form of the way Pound translated *Cathay* into modern English, this approach may serve as an effective way to bring to the surface a descriptive structure operating at subtext level. Readers will find, by comparing the two differentiated texts, that the elements thus elided or suppressed, whether linguistic or semiotic, are secondary to the underlying matrix. Indeed, the converted text even reinforces in a graceful manner the tenor and sentiment of the original poem. The whole idea is to revive for the reader “the life itself,” the phenomenon that once inspired the poet in the first instance of poetic creation. With the “luminous details” of the original texts reiterated and stressed, the ethos of the poem is largely preserved, and the balance between sound and music, posture and meaning is maintained.

*First Demonstration: Discerning the Descriptive System in “Winter”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original text</th>
<th>Converted text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>我愛在淡淡的太陽短命的日子,</td>
<td>我老懶耕作</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>臨窗把喜愛的工作靜靜做完;</td>
<td>唯喜理殘篇</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>才到下午四點, 便又冷又昏黃,</td>
<td>臨窗半觴酒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>我將用一杯酒灌溉我的心田。</td>
<td>昏黃日已偏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>多麼快, 人生已到嚴酷的冬天。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>我愛在枯草的山坡, 死寂的原野,</td>
<td>草枯林猶寂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>獨自憑吊已埋葬的火熱一年,</td>
<td>愚忽又一年</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>看著冰凍的小河還在冰下面流,</td>
<td>不聞冰下語</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>不只低語著什麼, 只是聽不見。</td>
<td>泉流自在斯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>呵, 生命也跳動在嚴酷的冬天。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>我愛在冬晚圍著溫暖的爐火,</td>
<td>天地暗爐火</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>和兩三昔日的好友會心閑談,</td>
<td>知心話轉開</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>聽著北風吹得門窗沙沙地響,</td>
<td>但逐北風緊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>而我們回憶著快樂無憂的往年。</td>
<td>猶堪憶往昔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>人生的樂趣也在嚴酷的冬天。</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On a day of pale, short-lived sunlight/I enjoy sitting by the window
To finish my favourite work quietly./It is barely four o’clock in the afternoon,
The freezing twilight is already setting in./I’ll warm my heart with a glass of wine.
Life has reached harshest winter, all too soon!

I like to stand all by myself/On a desolate hill, or in a deathly-silent field,
To mourn the passion of the past year, already interred;/And watch the rivulets still flow
Beneath their frozen surface./Whispering a secret,
Something inaudible./Ah, Life throbs even in harshest winter.

I love to sit by the fireside./Chatting with a few friends and
Reminiscing about our past carefree years,/With the north wind rustling at the windows and doors./Life’s joyous moments are there, even in the harshest winter.

On a snowy, sleepless night/I love to view with my mind’s eye
All my dearest friends and family, departed or alive./When white snow covers the world in oblivion./I fill my heart with currents of warm feeling,/To thaw Life’s harshest winter.

My converted text of the poem can be translated as follows:

Growing old I am lazy in the housework./Except for sorting out my unfinished poems./(Sitting) by the window with half a pot of wine,/so quickly (I see) the sun slant.

The grass is dry, and the woods unrumpled./Another year has hastily gone by./Words beneath the ice are unheard./And the spring flows in self-content.

Time casts its shadow on the stove./Idle talks between bosom friends./Chasing closely the north wind/(We) can still remember the past.

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452 This passage is adapted from an excerpt from Pang Bingjun’s unpublished manuscripts of Mu Dan’s poems.
Why keep vigil in this long night? (If we die) Each death will be treasured/Let the falling snow on the eastern hills/Accompany my sleep.

The verse quoted is the first strophe of “Winter,” which was probably Mu Dan’s very last poem. This poem shows the poet, now physically restrained due to illness, in his most unaffected mode of writing. Its remarkable straightforwardness, lucidity and refinement are expressed in eloquent, simple, and symmetrical form: of the four stanzas that comprise this strophe, each stanza consists of five lines, with the concluding one weighing in to prompt a subtle change of opinion or gradient of thought. This highly patterned feature is designed, according to Mu Dan writing to his friend Du Yunxie, to inject some novelty into an otherwise “banal text,” a method that was consciously borrowed from Yeats. The overall mood, the poet maintains, is one of relief and joy in the severe, harsh winter.

The first impression of the converted text is the tightening of each stanza from five to four lines, with each line being condensed to five words. Extensive pruning of the semantic and syntactic elements has created a completely different textual surface: objects and adverbs are kept to a minimum; subject pronouns, the poetic “I” that opens each stanza, are elided except in the first stanza; as in classical verse, verbs function as the crucial markers or pointers to make metaphors operate. However, as one may notice, the central images and metaphors of the original remain intact, being either retained or replaced by ones from the same category of descriptive objects—topics or

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454 Ibid.

themes grounded in the same original text.\textsuperscript{456} The result is in strict five-character verse, 

\textit{Gu Shi} \textsuperscript{\textit{古诗}}, but not using rhyme or tonal rules, as in a typical Tang poem; it aims to create a straightforward, artless expression that accentuates the inner vividness and refined temperament of this particular genre. My presumption is that, if Mu Dan had lived in the time of the “Nineteen Old Poems\textsuperscript{古詩十九首}” (roughly the Eastern Han period, A.D 25–220), or that of Tao Yuanming, or even Du Fu, he would have written in a similar fashion, though most certainly with a far superior command than my simulation.\textsuperscript{457}

The theme of “Winter” is old age, the poet’s awareness of the passage of time and his longing to engage in his work which he equates with peace and freedom. Reading it, we sense an obligatory intertext, and a conscious manipulation of what Barthes calls “the circular memory of reading.”\textsuperscript{458} We are aware of Mu Dan’s rekindled passion for classical poetry in the last years of his life, a passion he expressed in his letters.\textsuperscript{459} Pertinently here, the sadness and yearnings of the poem are not addressed by name, but called into being by echoing the voice of the anterior poets: as an established theme, it proceeds and passes onto another in a predictable way, without veering off its preconceived common direction. The pleasures of everyday life interfuse with the simple, quiet grieves of the poem, giving substance to its relaxed style; Mu Dan’s calm and


\textsuperscript{457} Both Tao Yuanming and Du Fu contributed a significant number of poems composed in styles recalling the “Nineteen Old Poems” and subsequent Yue Fu ballads.


undramatic treatment of the theme gives a good account of his own thoughts of “Illness and Idleness,” echoing Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846)’s reflections on the subject:

I reflect on my fate in meditative stillness
Poetry has borne most of my worldly burden.

我亦定中觀宿命，多生債負是歌詩

(“Self-Explanation 自解”) ④60

Illness and idleness give me much leisure.
What do I do with my leisure, when it comes?
I cannot bring myself to discard inkstone and brush;
Now and then I make a new poem.

懶病每多暇，暇來何所為。
未能拋筆硯，時作一篇詩。

(“Illness and Idleness 自吟拙什，因有所懷”) ④61

Despite the resemblance to Bai Juyi’s lines, the pathos of “Winter” belongs more to the late Tao Yuanming or Du Fu:

Hemp and mulberry grow longer every day
Every day the fields I have plowed are wider;
Often I fear the coming of frost and hail,
When [my crops] will wither with the weeds.

我麻日已長，我土日已廣,
常恐霜霰至，零落同草莽。

(Tao Yuanming, “Return 選園田居” #2) ④62

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④61 Quan tang shi, vol. 13, 4732.

What an often sick man needs is only medicines; 
Beyond these what should an insignificant person seek?

多病所須唯藥物，微軀此外更何求?

(Du Fu, “River Village 江村”)463

As Mu Dan, like Du Fu, takes stock of his “resource for old age,”464 he too has obtained the same awareness that the “hundred years” of life are coming to an end, and the neglected man of worth has to accept, with peace and dignity, his inevitable fate. The simplicity and equilibrium of life achieved at the present moment is what the retired man of letters of the past commonly desired.

Structurally, the whole first strophe of “Winter” operates—as is emphasized and intensified by the converted text—as one semiotic unit, whereby a group of symbolic images proceed and interact toward a specific theme. Together with the poet’s largely reclusive life, his quiet, modest residence recalls Du Fu’s “thatched hut 草堂” or Tao’s country retreat as a spiritual sanctuary, thus instantly placing the utterance within the frame of an established narrative. The image of the window—serving as a “tag” in Stephen Owen’s deconstructing of classical Chinese poetry—precipitates a “train of thought,”465 and of feeling, both at a cognitive and rhetorical level. Take the following lines for example:

Wounded in spirit by gazing north, I sit in the northern window


464 Ibid, 92.

北望傷神坐北窗

(Du Fu, “Sailing on a Boat 进艇”) 466

And

The melody is half played through
And the sun is sinking at the western window

曲調將半，景落西軒

(Tao Yuanming, “An Ode to Leisure閒情賦”) 467

As a symbolic divider between here and there, between illusion and reality, the window demarcates the boundary between the inner and external worlds while accentuating the contrast and tension between these two worlds by virtue of an unfulfilled dream or yearning. However, the sense of resignation may also give rise to an extra dimension of self-transcendence: the absence of the rhetorical “I” in Tao’s verse elevates the poet’s ego onto a higher plane, asserting an aspiration to something higher than “ego,” and focussing instead on the steadily setting sun. 468 In Du Fu’s verse, the poet’s continued concern for his country’s plight outweighs his own isolation or morose.

Note the orientation of the window, an implicit marker of time and a key psychological indicator of desire. It triggers a subsequent flow of emotions: in Du Fu’s verse, it is the grievance of the banished poet who dreams of recovering his lost homeland in the north (the word “north” is repeated in the simple line); in Tao’s verse, it...

466 Davis, Tu Fu, 77.
468 This is precisely what the great critic and poet Wang Guowei (1877–1927) termed in his Poetic Remarks in the World人間詞話 “the realm without ego,” or 無我之境. See Wang Guowei wenxuan (Selected Works of Wang Guowei), ed. Lin Wenguang (Sichuan Wenyi, 2009), 33.
is the life-long yearning to merge one’s own life into the celestial movement of the universe (the west, the setting sun). Whereas the direction is often not overtly specified in traditional poetry, it tends to be hinted at by the carefully elaborated situations or scenes to illuminate the inner state of the speaker:

Tonight I feel the warm air of spring  
The insect’s first sound seeps through the window’s green gauze.

今夜偏知春气暖，虫声新透绿窗纱

(Liu Fangping 劉方平, c. 758, “Moonlit Night 月夜”) \(^{469}\)

For the slumberer, the signs of the renewing season emerge with the first gleam of light in the early dawn; an east or south-facing window is advantageously positioned to capture these early signs. They arouse in the poet a desire to appreciate, to perceive, and to explore the wonders revealed by nature. Compared with this evocative air of yearning and dreaming, the setting of “Winter” is the late afternoon, thus foreshadowing an inevitable sense of withering and solitude.

Tao Yuanming’s much-acclaimed stoicism and pastoral yearning are based on firm philosophical, moral and aesthetic convictions about life, society and nature. A cup of wine—another “tag” in the classical semiotic structure—is a vehicle to achieve his inner peace and a scholar’s integrity. Like all Chinese literati who tend to sip wine to enhance their awareness of the ten thousand things in the universe, Tao raises his cup to please his mind, in the line “a cup of wine, and all my cares are gone 酒能祛百慮.” \(^{470}\)

\(^{469}\) Quan tang shi, vol. 8, 2840.

\(^{470}\) Tao Yuanming Ji (Collected Poetry of Tao Yuanming), ed. Lu Qinli (Zhonghua Shuju, 1979), 39.
over a jar of wine is a customary gesture of friendship, as demonstrated by this lovely verse of Bai Juyi:

Green bubbles, newly brewed wine;  
Lumps of red, a small stove;  
Evening comes, the sky threatens snow—  
Could you drink a cup, I wonder?

綠蠟新醅酒，紅泥小火爐。  
晚來天欲雪，能飲一杯無？

(“A Question Addressed to Liu Shijiu 問劉十九”) 471

Du Fu’s famous poem “To Recluse Wei,” which Mu Dan cites in full length in a letter to a friend, 472 registers a brief reunion with an old friend featuring the familiar set of images, the stove and the consumption of spring onions and wine. The poem concludes with the poet’s anticipation of their parting like “Orion and Lucifer,” and the somber reflection that “man and world’s affairs are both uncertain.” 473

This stereotypical pattern of poetic signs, as is abundantly recorded in the rich Chinese literary canon, re-emerges in “Winter,” on the same theme of the brevity of life, death and shared pleasures, and also, as their derivatives, the cherished bonds of kinship and brotherhood. 474 My converted version of Mu Dan’s text in refined Chinese brings out the hidden structure even more clearly—a structure which takes and anchors the specific


472 Letter to Dong Yansheng, December 5, 1976, *SWJ*, 163.

473 Davis, *Tu Fu*, 63–64.

474 A list of poetic lines describing “human life is brief” was collated by Suzuki Shūji, in *Kan Gi shi no kenkyū*, and was quoted by Owen in *The Making of Early Chinese Poetry*, Appendix E, 327, as an example of the echoing of the “old poems” by the succeeding poems in early classical Chinese poetry.
meanings of a past, and triggers a “chain of causality” from within literary history. Mu Dan unconsciously follows this already laid-out path through the matrix of signs, whose ostensible complexity, as Omen observes, is mere illusion: “Once the rules were mastered, the course of virtually the entire poem was mapped out for the poet.”

However, a true, creative poet must do more than merely rehearse the canonized discourse. He must go beyond the “mix and match” practice, and frame the stereotyped uses in a new context that changes their meaning. I cite in full length the remaining sections of Mu Dan’s “Winter”:

2.
Freezing winter ties up hands and feet;  
Ice seals up rivulets’ lips and tongues.  
Summer days’ cicadas and frogs are now silenced.  
The Earth’s laughter, noise and bloom  
Are wiped out at one fell swoop of its writing brush.  
Caution, caution and caution again  
Defeats Life’s purpose.  
Where are the flowers? Where the greenery?  
After countless days of haze, gloom and prevarication,  
At long last, from under the dead tree-tops,  
There leak a few dribbles of sunlight.  
Strange! So deeply has Spring concealed herself,  
It is quite impossible to find her whereabouts.  
Everybody is afraid to stick their necks out;  
Youthful ghosts have crawled into the shells of age.  
It seems we’re all wearing doubly padded coats.

3.
You no longer show anyone how you feel;

Letters are half written and left unfinished.
Beyond the window the sky looks so harsh and stern.
For Winter is the killer of all warm feeling.

It is time for you to bring out
Some of Summer’s gifts:
Honey, or fruit, or wine.
You can sit by the fireside
And enjoy your rich repast at your leisure.
For Winter has emaciated you, body and soul.

Or you can lie in bed reading a novel,
And lose yourself in a world of fantasy.
You may marvel at it; you may yearn for it.
For Winter has sealed your doorway.

After a long day’s exhausting work
You long for a few hours’ sleep.
But listening to the trees, grasses and rocks
Hiss and howl from beyond the window,
You lie abed, but cannot dream.
For Winter is the executioner of sweet dreams.

4.

Into the small mud hovel next to the stable,
With its papered-over window rustling in the wind,
Stumble a few farm laborers,
Shoes covered all over with mud and snow.
They go into the stable to feed the horses,
Leaving their carts waiting outside in the wind.

Tall or short, they sit around the fire.
One feeds the fire with wood,
Another dries his clothes by the fire,
Another rolls a cigarette in his stubby fingers.

A kettle comes hissing to the boil,
Filling the room with white steam
That mingles with the cigarette smoke.
Humming some tunes as they eat,
Talking dully about things in the dull countryside.

From the power lines the north wind calls to them,
On the desolate land the track fades into the horizon.
A few warm bodies step out of the house,
And hurl themselves into the freezing cold air.⁴⁷⁸

2.

寒冷，寒冷，盡量束縛了手腳，
潺潺的小河用冰封住了口舌，
盛夏的蟬鳴和蛙聲都沉寂，
大地一筆勾銷它笑鬧的蓬勃。

謹慎，謹慎，使生命受到挫折，
花呢？綠色呢？血液閉塞住欲望，
經過多日的陰霾和猶疑不決，
才從枯樹枝漏下淡淡的陽光。

奇怪！春天是這樣深深隱藏，
哪兒都無消息，都怕崢露頭角，
年輕的靈魂裹進老年的硬殼，
彷彿我們穿著厚厚的棉襖。

3.

你大概已停止了分贈愛情，
把書信寫了一半就住手，
望望窗外，天氣是如此蕭殺，
因為冬天是感情的劊子手。

你把夏季的禮品拿出來，
無論是蜂蜜，是果品，是酒，
然后坐在爐前慢慢品嘗，
因為冬天已經使心靈枯瘦。

你那一本小說躺在床上，
在另一個幻象世界周遊，
它使你感嘆，或使你向往，
因為冬天封住了你的門口。

你疲勞了一天才得休息，
聽著樹木和草石都在嘶吼，
你雖然睡下，卻不能成夢，
因為冬天是好夢的劊子手。

⁴⁷⁸ Based on excerpts from Pang Bingjun’s unpublished manuscripts of Mu Dan’s poems.
4.
在馬房隔壁的小土屋裡，
風吹著窗紙沙沙響動，
幾隻泥腳帶著雪走進來，
讓馬吃料，車子歇在風中。

高高低低圍著火坐下，
有的添木柴，有的在烘干，
有的用他粗而短的指頭
把煙絲倒在紙裡卷成煙。

一壺水滾沸，白色的水霧
彌漫在煙氣繚繞的小屋，
吃著，哼著小曲，還談著
枯燥的原野上枯燥的事物。

北風在電線上朝他們呼喚，
原野的道路還一望無際，
幾條暖和的身子走出屋，
又迎面扑進寒冷的空氣。

The entire poem of does not accord with any particular philosophy of life. It is a
subjective self-revelation expressed in the voice of the poet’s literary ancestors. It
unfolds, playing unconsciously with detectable sources, as a kind of rehearsal of the
canonized discourse. We follow Mu Dan’s train of thought, in the first strophe, on time
and fate, on illness and passion. In the second and third strophes, more of the poet’s
agony and plight are revealed: winter has “bound up the hands and feet” of all living
beings, has “sealed up the lips and tongues” of rivers and creeks, and threatens to strangle
all warm feelings and the sweet dreams of man. So far the narrative remains a reiteration
of the poet’s self-knowledge characterized by an old-fashioned lamentation of old age,
until suddenly this universal movement of a theme is interrupted and veers to a
completely new domain—the troubled realm of the unconscious. The vivid scenes depicted in the last fourth section break the structure of the discourse, signaling its own departure from it. A flash of memory, illusion or dream reveals a sequence of mesmerizing moments: a small band of workmen stagger into a mud house beside a stable; they sit and warm their wearied bodies by the fire; they eat, smoke, hum, and talk casually about the “dull” people and things of the barren land; then they once again drag themselves out into the tumultuous night:

From the power lines the north wind calls to them,
On the desolate land the track fades into the horizon.
A few warm bodies step out of the house,
And hurl themselves into the freezing cold air.

(“Winter 冬,” CP, 362)

This textual foreign body marks the departure from a predetermined course prepared by the previous signs; it breaks the inertia of grief, and introduces with it a completely “alien mode of thought.” The sheer unexpectedness and forceful momentum of the change prompt a dialectic turn towards a more powerful, seemingly open-ended conclusion for the tormented, exploring mind. There is no explanation from Mu Dan as to the exact context and reference of this recounted event. However, for readers who are familiar with the poet’s late work, the strong moral connotation and political overtone, the exposure of trauma and shattered individual life, are just too predominant to be ignored in this very last poem. The gestures of the anonymous men who hurl themselves into the wind, and whose fate is consigned to the raging weather and beckoning horizon, evoke something more grave and exigent for all who have suffered. With a hint of courage, perseverance

and hope arising from this last strophe, the poem’s overwhelming sense of deprivation and lament is drastically overturned.

In classical Chinese poetry, when an old man speaks of his joy, he usually mentions the leisure of retirement. Whether this leisure is coloured by contentment or discontent depends on the poet’s state of mind, especially in connection with his worldly ambition and moral judgment. Many retain a Confucian sense of service and moral duty to mankind. Neither Tao Yuanming nor Du Fu ever truly absolved themselves from their obligations to society, despite their evident enjoyment of a reclusive life. This same mentality underpins “Winter”: we sense that the poet’s glimpse beyond the window represents but a momentary lapse from his work; his inner serenity depends entirely on how much of his work can be done before the sun sinks permanently into the annihilating darkness. This motif of work also propels the development of an existent structure, filling the textual gaps in the conventional perception of peace and leisure. As the narrative proceeds, the desire to work is challenged and temporarily suppressed by feelings of loss, but is revived in the figures of the workmen seemingly bearing with themselves greater obligations for the future of man. This abrupt and subtle shift of cognitive plane and moral viewpoint enables a double-voiced discourse, whereby a monologue in verse genuinely becomes a dialogue, and a worn-out expression of a theme gives utterance to a truly “good dream” or vision: the two world views, on the one hand, the intense melancholy of old age and on the other, irresistible yearnings for rebirth, are not alternatives, but are woven together. It is also at this point that a second reading of this poem becomes possible.

“Winter” shows how a stereotyped lament, a recurring theme of classical poetry, is reiterated and developed in a single modern poem. The emotion of a latter-day poet is thus absorbed into the extant corpus of Chinese literature. With its numerous variations, this modern poem, along with the extant corpus from which it grows, must be read, in the words of Stephen Owen, as “one poetry,” representing the single continuum of a metaphor or theme.\(^{481}\) One particular problem for Mu Dan, the modernist who had “gone the farthest” and had most adamantly rejected classicism, was his constant wrestling with his literary predecessors, from both the western and the vernacular traditions. It was not until the last years that he truly mastered his feeling for the vernacular language by reconnecting with his vernacular roots. He shrugged off a “shallow and world-weary mannerism” that had occasionally resulted in ostentatious yet lifeless mimicry or repetition.\(^{482}\) His previously laboured style of writing became more straightforward and solid, anchoring the vigour of his creativity and his relevance to reality.

Second Demonstration: “Empty City” in Classical and Modern Chinese Verse

This second demonstration deals with a single motif that evolves with time in verse. In Riffaterre’s framework, a motif—a theme or a conception—binds a poem as an organized whole, while at the same time, the overall structure of the narrative remains necessarily an open system, inviting poets of a later time to incorporate material of their own. The


\(^{482}\) Burton Watson writes that maintaining the level of creativity, the range and depth of feelings and thought, of a glorious tradition, was the difficult task of the Late Tang poets: “They no doubt hoped in this way to recapture something of the brilliance that Tu Fu and others had earlier achieved in these forms. Unfortunately, they succeeded for the most part in reproducing only the orateness and technical dexterity of the earlier age. In theme and feeling their works seemed unable to rise above a shallow and world-weary mannerism.” Watson, 191.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Converted text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>五歲的黎明</td>
<td>錦繡春江，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>五歲的馬</td>
<td>偏鞍逐馬，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>你面朝江水</td>
<td>幾度趁黎明。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>坐下。</td>
<td>疏楊拂柳，</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>倦引郊游，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>四處漂泊</td>
<td>此番在城中。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>向不諳世事的少女</td>
<td>低聲問；</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>向安慶城中心神不定的姨妹</td>
<td>街鄰櫳畔，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>打聽你。談論你</td>
<td>何處向春生？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>可能是妹妹</td>
<td>隨定姻緣，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>也可能是姐姐</td>
<td>或分姊妹，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>可能是姻緣</td>
<td>青衫贈友情。</td>
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<tr>
<td>也可能是友情。483</td>
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</table>

(A literary translation of this poem reads:

Five-year old dawn
Five-year old pony
You gaze at the river
And sit down.

Roaming around
Asking where you are
From girls still naïve about the world
From the unquiet sister-in-law in Anqing Town.
Talked about you.

Perhaps the younger sister
Perhaps the elder one
Perhaps a marriage
Perhaps a friendship.

My converted version of this poem reads:

Brocade-covered spring river/Riding a horse of light saddle/In the best time of
dawn./Amid sparse and swaying willows/Tiring of this spring excursion/I find
myself now in Anqing.

Asking softly:/In the alleys and lanes/Where the spring is born?/Marriage is a
matter of destiny/Sisters are given out at will/A lover’s shirt is given to a friend.)

As in the first demonstration, I have employed a similar method, converting a
modern poem into a classical one—this time, following the tune “Wandering of a Youth”
(Shao nian-you) of the traditional Chinese lyric or Ci. The use of the Ci here is based
mainly on the formal characteristics of Hai Zi’s poetry: his uneven length of lines, his
free-flowing rhythm, which together create a remarkable sense of vigour and vivid
musicality. These are also the predominant features of the Ci lyric, as compared to the
formal rigidity of regulated verse, or Shi. Despite the innate constraints of the Ci in the
designation of feelings and scenery,484 this particular genre occurs to me as the ideal
medium to convey the drama and subtlety of this poem by Hai Zi.

Along with Mu Dan, Hai Zi is widely considered as one of the few “pure poets” in
modern Chinese literature. A fervent admirer of Nietzsche, Hölderlin and Van Gogh, Hai
Zi expressed profound disagreement with “the sickliness and overweening of the
traditional literati.”485 For Hai Zi, the indisputable purpose of poetry is self-regeneration,
a manifestation of life in its most primitive state. While his poems are incomparably
passionate, radically sensual, emotional and exceedingly individual, his poetic diction
shows inspiration and influences from both foreign literature and his indigenous roots.

484 Miao Yüeh, Shih tz’u san lun (Essays on Shih and tz’u Poetry) (Taipei: K’ai-ming, 1953, rpt.), 5.
485 Hai Zi Shí Quan Bían, ed. Xi Chuan (Shanghai: San Lian, 1997), 897.
Many of Hai Zi’s poems illustrate the anxiety of modern man at the loss of his spiritual home. 486 “To Anqing,” however, is purely lovelorn. It tells the story of a modern vagabond, the poet himself, who wanders in a southern town looking for his lover. The search, as it turns out, is impelled by pure fantasy, as the object of the search is never truly revealed throughout the poem. At times the reader may mistake the lover for other figures encountered haphazardly by the vagabond—an unknown young girl coming of age, or a sister-in-law from whom he eagerly seeks messages. The double sense of uncertainty and bemusement culminates in a stream of self-imposed questions forcing the vagabond to reconsider the exact nature of the relationship: is the lover the younger or the elder sister, or, in case of some affection explicitly shown or hinted, is it love or mere friendship? The time is May, a season of dreaming for romance; someone is riding a horse at daybreak; the dreamer-lover is sitting on the riverbank, anticipating a long, mesmerizing day ahead of him. With all the promises and portents overhanging the vagabond’s adventure, each nook and cranny that he strolls along invites him to explore further; the streets and alleys where he pauses and lingers form an enchanting maze of rewards and failures. The little southern town becomes simultaneously genial and severe, full and empty, depending on the lover’s ardent, tentative quest, and its contingent results. It is above all an “empty city” per se, a metaphor deeply rooted in Chinese literature.

Empty City in Classical Chinese Poetry

By “empty city” I do not refer to any urban locality depicted literally as a physical entity in poems such as:

Grass grows full, west of Ba is green,
In the empty city, daylight lengthens.

草滿巴西綠，空城白日長

(Du Fu, “On the Fortress 城上”) 487

or,

All around, mountains encircle homeland
Tide pounds the empty city, receding in loneliness.

山圍故國周遭在，潮打空城寂寞回

(Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫, 772–842, “Stone City 石頭城”) 488

Rather I have in mind a space perceived as an external projection of the poet’s
subjectivity. As a thought or idea either carefully contrived or spontaneously derived, the
“empty city” reflects the author’s sense of self-identity in a specific place, among a group
of people or in society. It tends to incite specific feelings of love, yearning and loss, as
perceived in everyday experience.

The fancy of love in “To Anqing” recalls another anecdote narrated by Zhou
Bangyan 周邦彥 (1056–1121) of the Song Dynasty. The two poems have a shared pathos
and a similarly exquisite language. Here is Zhou Bangyan’s lyric, also to the tune
“Wandering of a Youth”:

A Bingzhou knife like water
Salt of Wu surpassing snow:
Slender fingers peel a new orange.
The brocade bed-curtains grow warm

487 Quan tang shi, vol. 7, 2470.
488 Quan tang shi, vol. 11, 4117.
Incense rises from the burner,
She sits opposite playing her flute.

Quietly she asks, With whom will you spend the night? 
The third watch has already sounded from the city wall, 
A horse slips on the thick frost. 
Best not leave, there will be few out so late. 489

少年游

並刀如水，吳鹽勝雪，纖指破新橙。
錦幃初溫，獸香不斷，
相對坐調箏。

低聲問：向誰行宿，城上已三更。
馬滑霜濃，不如休去，直是少人行。

In this episode, the lover, perhaps a client in a singsong house, is urged by the singsong girl to stay longer. As the girl probes for an answer, the sensually lascivious setting of the pleasure house contrasts dramatically with the deserted streets, where the night watchman is heard. The lover weighs between the hospitality and the pleasure he will further receive from the girl and the prospect of venturing out on his own into the frost empty streets. The disparate experiences anticipated at the end of the poem prompt the poet, and the reader, to ponder: the night is permeated with fancied probabilities, but from the girl’s point of view, the emotion is one of desolation: the midnight town outside is completely bare and empty.

Both Hai Zi and Zhou Bangyan’s poems are about desire and its projection onto the external world in the poetic act of perceiving and representation. The desire involves an intricate mechanism of arousing and actualization. I cite Riffaterre’s lucid exposition:

Desire, sexual or otherwise, can only be represented in terms of a frustrated present, or of a future, in the anticipation of what is to come. Lasting only as long as it remains unsatisfied, desire must be depicted through suspense or delay, or through an impossibility to satisfy it. Any literary mimesis of desire therefore contains an element of desirability (hope, for example), and an element of interdiction.\footnote{490}

The constant interplay of these two elements delineates the contour of the feeling of desire, ranging from satisfaction to despair, from passion to disillusion. The “empty city” metaphor enhances this interplay in the manner that the two elements clash and are superimposed over each other, resulting in instant tension and drama. The ambiguous feeling it evokes implies the paradoxical status of the mind in relation to the external world—its varied perspectives and multiple realities offer both negation and appeal, sending the percipient into further perplexity and delusion.

Curiously, though deeply entrenched in the Chinese poetic tradition, the empty city as both a theme and metaphor has never been systematically explored by scholars. I shall therefore probe a little further into its philosophical and aesthetic background and its representations in verse.

In Taoist discourse, the ascendancy of stillness and quietude over the vicissitudinous, teeming world is considered as beyond the reach of the physical ear and eye:

\begin{quote}
Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all thing. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.\footnote{491}
\end{quote}

\footnote{490}Michael Riffaterre, “Compulsory reader response,” 59.

“Emptiness and stillness,” the Taoist *xū jìng* 虛靜, from which “spiritual thought” (*shén sī* 神思) arises, surpass the physicality of objects and things (*jìng shēng xiāngwài* 境生相外) and propel the unimpeded inner vision to traverse ten-thousand miles. In the words of the ancient literary classic, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*, the thoughts and emotions of one thousand years defy the specificity of time and place, and the literary mind or imagination communicates with the spirit of Tao (*sì qí qiān zài, shì tōng wàn lǐ* 思接千載，視通萬里). Emptiness is the creator of all things, and its greatest manifestations tend to be inaudible and formless (*dà yīn xī shēng, dà xiāng wú xíng* 大音稀聲，大象無形).

François Cheng maintains that Chinese poetry, the manifestation of human drama and the rapport of that drama with the universe, involves the fundamental triad of Heaven-Earth-Man. Generations of poets have made this triad concrete by means of images. These images, as exemplified in Chinese verse, contextualize a cosmology of their own, based upon a web of correspondences between human feelings and the elements of the universe; the emphasis on a “universal resonance” (*gǎn yìng* 感應), or

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493 Ibid.

494 According to Zhuang Zi, “All things are created by themselves from their own inward reflection and no one can tell how they come to do so.” See Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Pantheon books, 1969), 285.

495 *Lao Zi*, 41.14.

total communion, is perfectly indicated in the Chinese expression “contextual landscape” (qing jing 情景) as the actualization of poetic symbolization.\textsuperscript{497} In the process of poetic creation, an image or a scene leads to something else, to something beyond, towards what Si Kongtu described as the “image beyond images” (xiang wai zhi xiang 象外之象) and the “meaning beyond images” (xiang wai you yi 象外有意): “This something beyond is properly embodied in Heaven; Man is not an isolated subject any more than Earth is a pure object; the link between them has no meaning except in an openness, for which Heaven is the indispensable symbol.”\textsuperscript{498}

In the “empty city,” this openness manifests itself in the poetic situations elaborated by the poet. By doing so, the poet establishes a deeper and broader connection with his environment; he exploits this connection which potentially expands his perception beyond the limits of time and space. But in order to create this desired openness, poetic experience must first achieve the harmonized state of fullness and emptiness so that the poet can participate internally in the true universal transformation through time and space.\textsuperscript{499} The complex and dynamic process of this transformation will see the words come to an end while the meanings they convey remain endless (yan you jin er yi wu qiong 言有盡而意無窮). A poem stretches the bounds of the word to a higher level of reference and expression.\textsuperscript{500} A typical Chinese poem tends to demonstrate this poetic expansion and elevation by its concise and suggestive expressions, one that

\textsuperscript{497} Ibid, 45–46.
\textsuperscript{498} Ibid, 47–48.
\textsuperscript{499} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{500} Yan Yu, Cang lang shi hua jiao shi (Canglang Discourse on Poetry), Collated and Interpreted by Guo Shaoyu (Beijing: Renmin, 1983), 26.
conforms with the principle of saying more by saying less. The “empty city” metaphor is a vivid illustration of this process, in which we see a poetic impulse transformed into a vision. To cite the following poem by Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852) as an example:

For a thousand miles the oriole sings, crimson on the green.
Riverside villages, mountain ramparts, wineshop streamers in the wind.
Of the four hundred and eighty monasteries of the Southern Dynasties,
How many towers and terraces loom in the misty rain?

千裡鶯啼綠映紅,水村山郭酒旗風。
南朝四百八十寺，多少樓台煙雨中。

(“Spring in Chiang-nan 江南春”) 502

Amid the bourgeoning scenes of spring, the poet is acutely aware of himself standing between the present and the bygone days about which he is reminiscing. A hundred years of time are condensed into a single panorama, as the misty rain, imbued with traces of dynastic vicissitude, shrouds the great city of Jiankang (now Nanjing). Expansive views of the countryside and towns of the southern Chinese landscape impinge upon the poet’s eye, both vague and clear, both full and empty.

In another poem, Lin Sheng 林升(c. 1106–1170) presents a similar historical view of the change of dynasties:

Beyond the hills blue hills, beyond the mansions, more mansions—
When will there be an end to song and dance on West Lake?
Idlers fuddled on the fumes of the warm breeze
Will make of the Hangzhou of today the old capital that fell.

山外青山樓外樓，西湖歌舞幾時休。


暖風熏得游人醉，直把杭州作汴州！

（“At An Inn in Hangzhou 題臨安邸”）503

In this famous verse, the carpe diem atmosphere hovering over the surrogate South Song capital, Hangzhou, is depicted in scathing satire, with an acute knowledge that the Mongols are rampaging through the northern part of the empire (where the old capital Kaifeng was located) and are rapidly advancing south. The sense of material opulence and leisurely peace felt in the balmy breeze are mere illusions of the spring revelers, ignorant, despite all portents of danger, of the truth that the temporary capital is soon about to fall.

The perception of place might be linked directly to an ancient scholar’s self-reassessment of his ambition and status. Entering and leaving by the city gate is a symbolic gesture in a Chinese gentleman’s official career (climbing the ladder) and in his return to his spiritual home which is nature. The grand, imperial cities, while they may have temporarily satisfied man’s thirst for fame and fortune, are not a permanent home for man whose heart yearns eternally for nature. To cite the following quatrain by Li He 李賀 (790–816):

Leaving by the gate I drive my horse  
And leave my soul in lonely Chang’an.  
With whom shall I discuss these two things?  
I shall just compose an ode to the autumn wind.

驅馬出門意，勞落長安心。  
兩事誰向問，自作秋風吟。

The poet consigns “the two things”—his worldly ambition and individual self-perfection—to the autumn wind. His heart, the carrier of his commitment and passion, is now freed of its brokenhearted content like the empty city of great Chang’an. He bids farewell to the city, while his mind still wanders there, in the site of his lifelong struggle, of his hopes and disillusionment, in a city that is still haunted for him, simultaneously full and empty.

Compared with the wilderness and with nature, the city provides more of an occasion for human love to unfold and flourish, as is duly recorded in numerous tales in Chinese literature. Exuberant and heightened dramas are more likely to happen amid the phantasmagoria of busy urban life. Ouyang Xiu (1007–1073) in the following lyric, gives an immaculate illustration of the lover’s mood-swing in the event of a New Year celebration:

Last year the night of the first full moon—/ Flower Market lanterns bright as day—/ The moon climbed high into the willows—/ As after dark, we met

This year, the night and time are the same/Moon and Lanterns are as bright/But where is the you of yesteryear?/Tears stain spring, wet my sleeve

去年元夜時，花市燈如晝。月上柳梢頭，人約黃昏後。
今年元夜時，月與燈依舊。不見去年人，淚滿春衫袖。

(“Sheng ch’a tzu 生查子”)\(^{505}\)

\(^{504}\) Quan tangshi, vol. 12, 4434–5.

The cheerful atmosphere of the lantern festival has a debilitating effect on the speaker, because of the absence of his loved one, who had made the rendezvous with him in the same setting the previous year. As his tears spill onto his gown the speaker’s sorrow over his lost love is inconsolable.

In another lyric by Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 (1140–1207), the lover’s sense of isolation and loss is reversed completely, in a similar urban setting:

I look for her in the crowd a thousand times—/Suddenly, a turn of the head—/There she is in the waning lamplight!

眾裡尋他千百度。驀然回首，那人卻在，燈火闌珊處。

(“Qing yū an: Lantern Festival青玉案: 元夕”)506

Despite the pageant, the urban carnival only comes to life for the speaker at the sight of his mysterious lover. With this the festive town instantly resumes its usual vigour, filling the lover’s empty soul with blissful joy.

Desire in these two cited lyrics goes beyond the objective description of an urban festival scene, as the mind strives to communicate with the greater truth of the feeling of love, of human existence in the capricious human world. The insight revealed in this poetic communication opens up a potentially infinite moment of the present; it shows that, in poetry, isolation and loneliness can be sublimated to a unique poetic experience—a new dimension in the human mind, where unexpected and remarkable things can happen.507 This new experience is conceived and rendered by the poet in the form of a

506 Adapted from Laudau, Beyond Spring, 196.

507 Hang Jingtai, Zhongguo Shixue yu Chuantong Wenhua Jingshen (Chinese Poetics and Spirit of Traditional Culture) (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin, 1989), 82.
poetic drama, a myth, or a living tale, born out of the idealized “contextual landscape”—in our inquiry, the landscape of the paradoxically intriguing “empty city,” which is capable of propelling the poetic imagination towards cosmic reflections.  

**Empty City in Modern Chinese Verse**

Chinese poets in the modern era from the start set themselves the task of reflecting modern life and its “moods,” by turning their “illusory eye” to the everyday life of the metropolis. Their depiction of the modern city exhibited a profound western imprint in regard to the feelings of destitution, alienation and melancholy felt by modern man—a psychic condition that can be traced back to the works of Baudelaire. City life emerged as one of the fashionable themes in literature from the late 1920s. Li Jinfa (1900–1976), for instance, offered some exquisite images from his own peregrination to Paris and Berlin, drawing inspirations from works such as *Les Fleurs du mal*. But despite the thematic novelty and chimerical fancies of Li’s poems, they barely touched the deeper soul of modern life, from perspectives of its moral, political or social dilemmas. Seen in a broader picture, the main focus of the new Chinese poetry in the early period of modernization was still restricted to the expression of the poet’s contingent moods and sensations.  

Kai-yu Hsü’s comments on Li Jinfa can also be applied to most of his

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508 Ibid, 83.


510 See the quotation from Lu Xun below.

511 Lu Xun, in his introductory article on the Russian Poet, Blok, gives a succinct remark on the status quo of Chinese urban poetry as it then was: “What makes him [Blok] an urban poet in character is his use of illusion—the illusory eye of poetry—which lights up the everyday life of the metropolis. He symbolizes vague impressions; he brings out essence from the phenomena delineated by his pen, to give them a new
Li Chin-fa … has acknowledged his debt to Verlaine and Mallarmé …
He seems to have assumed that outside of the world of impressions, which he captures with his symbols, no meaning exists.”

It is evident that Chinese poetry was still in the early stage of absorbing the essence and complexity of modernity—a situation similar to that experienced by American urban poets in the first two decades of America’s modernization.

Modern Chinese poets have ardently experimented with new techniques and styles. Some of their experiments have featured the combination of classical elements with new forms and sentiments. To take the following poem “Mistake,” by the Taiwan poet Zheng Chouyu 鄭愁予 (1933–), as an example:

Mistake

I travelled south of the Yangtze
The visage awaiting in the seasons, blooming and falling like a lotus

The Easterly wind not stirring, the March catkins taking no flight
Your heart is like a lonely little town
Like a green-cobblestoned street leading towards the night

life; he unearths elements of poetry from the triteness and obscenity of life, from the noise of the modern streets … We don’t have this type of poet.” See epilogue to “Shi er ge” (The Twelfth), in Lu Xun quanji, vol. 7, 719.


513 The practice of early American urban poets shows that, when depicting urban experience, prose was the preferred and more suitable medium rather than verse; when verse was used as the medium, free verse was more powerful than conventional verse. See Timberman J. Newcomb, “The Housetop Sea: Cityscape Verse and the Rise of Modern American Poetry,” American Literature (June, 2004): 283–84. In the Chinese context, movies, and, to the lesser degree, fictions and dramas of the 1930s and 40s, were more powerful and more frequently used to illustrate the phenomena of city life. See Zhang Yingjin, The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), xvii.
The sound of hooves is not heard, nor is the spring curtain of March raised
Your heart is a tightly sealed little window

The clattering of my horse’s hooves is a beautiful mistake
I am not coming home, but passing by ...

錯誤
我打江南走過
那等在季節裡的容顏如蓮花的開落

東風不來，三月的柳絮不飛
你底心如小小寂寞的城
恰若青石的街道向晚
跫音不響，三月的春帷不揭
你底心是小小的窗扉緊掩

我達達的馬蹄是美麗的錯誤
我不是歸人，是個過客……

The poem is driven by a double movement of the soul which accounts for the lover’s
inhibition and desire, the latter incited and frustrated by the early season of ferment. The
clattering of the horse’s hooves echoes perhaps an ancient tale—a returning vagabond or
soldier\footnote{In classical Chinese verse, the image of a figure on a horseback alludes to a vagabond, more often a soldier, who leaves for or returns from, the borderland. We find these images, for example, in Li Bai 李白’s “Red Chestnut Horse 紫骝马” (“Waves the whip, and travels to ten thousand 里/Disregarding the waiting lady at home 挥鞭万里去，安得念春闺”) and Yue Fei 岳飞’s “Cuwei Pavilian at County Chi 池州翠微亭” (“How can I take a full view of the beautiful mountains and rivers, /The horse hooves urge me onto the moonlit road back home 好水好山看不足，马蹄催趁月明归”).}—but cuts deep here on a psychological level, resonating with a permanent note
of the enchantment of human love. It is a “beautiful mistake,” only because the lover’s
sense of loss, epitomized in the “lonely little town,” conditions the true nature of the
yearning for love, its caprice, its futility, and its eternal appeal, which has amazed and
impelled Chinese poets of all ages and eras.
In another famous poem, “The Alley in the Rain 雨巷” (1927), by Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950), a single classical allusion is given a fuller treatment in the rendering of a fancied love:

The Alley in the Rain

Holding an oilpaper umbrella, alone,
Wandering the long, long,
Desolate alley in the rain.
I hope to encounter
A girl who holds her grief
Like a lilac.

Holding an umbrella, I’m alone
Wandering about the long, long,
Lonely alley in the rain,
Hoping to encounter
A girl who bears her melancholy
Like a lilac flower.

She has
The color of a lilac,
The fragrance of a lilac,
And the melancholy of a lilac.
She looks sorrowful in the rain,
Sorrowful and depressed.

She paces the lonely alley,
Holding an umbrella,
Like me,
Just like me –
Walking quietly and slowly
In coldness, solitude and melancholy.

Quietly she comes close,
Close to me and casts
A glance, like a sigh.
She drifts away
Like a dream–
So dreary and deep.
Like a lilac flower drifting by
In a dream,
The girl passes by me;
Quietly she is walking away and away,
To a broken hedge,
To the end of the alley in the rain.

In the plaintive tune of the rain
Her color fades,
Her fragrance disappears,
So do her sighing glance
And lilac-like melancholy.

Holding an umbrella, I’m alone
Wandering about the long, long,
Lonely alley in the rain,
Hoping to see passing by
A girl who bears her melancholy
Like a lilac flower.

(Translated by Tang Zhengqiu)
像我一樣地，
默默彳亍著，
冷漠，淒清，又惆悵。

她靜默地走近
走近，又投出
太息一般的眼光，
她飄過
像夢一般的
像夢一般的淒婉迷茫。

像夢中飄過
一支丁香地，
我身旁飄過這女郎；
她靜靜地遠了，遠了，
到了頹圮的籬牆，
走盡這雨巷。

在雨的哀曲裡，
消了她的顏色，
散了她的芬芳，
消散了，甚至她的
太息般的眼光，
丁香般的惆悵。

撐著油紙傘，獨自
彷徨在悠長，悠長
又寂寥的雨巷，
我希望飄過
一個丁香一樣的
結著愁怨的姑娘。

Here we see the panoramic view of Du Mu’s dynastic towers and terraces of Nanjing in
the misty rain echoed in a concentrated fashion by the web of long alleys where an
imagined amorous encounter takes place. An unknown urban setting, simultaneously
empty and full, looms in the background overlooking this enactment of a modern
romance.
Thematically, the poem recalls Baudelaire’s famous “Une Passante” (“To A Passer-by”) in which an unfulfilled erotic dream leads to revelations of chance and alienation that perturb modern man:

The deafening road around me roared.
Tall, slim, in deep mourning, making majestic grief,
A woman passed, lifting and swinging
With a pompous gesture the ornamental hem of her garment,

Swift and noble, with statuesque limb.
As for me, I drank, twitching like an old roué,
From her eye, livid sky where the hurricane is born,
The softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills,

A gleam ... then night! O fleeting beauty,
Your glance has given me sudden rebirth,
Shall I see you again only in eternity?

Somewhere else, very far from here! Too late! Perhaps never!
For I do not know where you flee, nor you where I am going,
O you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it!

(Translated by Geoffrey Wagner)

In Baudelaire’s poem, the delight of the city-dweller—himself the chance love—arises only at the last sight of the subject of his love; in Dai Wangshu’s “The Alley in the Rain,” the encounter is self-generated from the poet’s own melancholy. The girl who emerges and eventually passes the poet is the objectification of his deep yearnings, as implied by repeated “I hope” in the opening and last stanzas of the poem.

Dai was a keen follower of French symbolist poetry. “The Alley in the Rain” shows him worthy of his poetic guide, Paul Verlaine, with its echoes of “effeminate

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charm, languorous grace, and mellifluous music.” The girl’s glance through the rain curtain reveals exactly the “beautiful eyes behind veils” (“des beaux yeux derrière des voiles”), as depicted in the poem “Ars Poetica” of Verlaine. However, for an informed reader of classical Chinese poetry, the images and sentiment of this poem readily evoke another poem by the Southern Tang Emperor Li Jing 李璟 (816–861), a lyric to a variation of the tune “Wash Creek Sands”:

The blue bird does not carry a message beyond the clouds.  
The lilacs gather in vain the sadness in the rain.

青鳥不傳雲外信，丁香空結雨中愁

(“Tan po huanxisha 攤破浣溪沙”) According to Bian Zhilin, “The Alley in the Rain” is a modern interpretation and adaptation of Li Jing’s famous couplet. To me it is evident that Dai’s poem is infused with allusions from both two sources—Verlaine and Li Jing. In terms of emotional evocation and borrowed allusions, it belongs to the world of classical verse; in terms of rendering experience as a fleeting enigma set in a Chinese urban context, it is utterly modern. The central image of the lilac, an aesthetic object in classic verse, is given a new life in the modern context; the rain-drenched alley lends the poem a blurred vision,

516 Lin, Modern Chinese Poetry, 166.
518 Tang Song Cixuan (Selected Tang and Song Poems) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2001), 63.
framing the poet and his imaginary love within an enduring antique dream. In the words of Michelle Yeh, the “elusive, dreamy, wistful beauty” surrounding this marvelous poem by Dai, connects the sentiments of French Symbolist poetry and traditional Chinese verse.

Compared with Dai, Mu Dan’s depiction of urban life is more concerned with the psychic conditions of modern man presented symbolically in verse. A panoramic illustration of an urban landscape or a close-up portrayal of its residents illuminates the poet’s own inner doubts and agonies. His ironic tone is generally acerbic, sometimes apocalyptic, expressing his strong moral convictions concerning a society savaged by so-called civilization.

The Dance of the City

Why, why? But we have leaped into this dancing whirl, into this city—
Its high-speed swooning, sweltering heat in the heart of the streets.
Countless vehicles incite us, with their endless screeching,
Invite us, hand-in-hand giant towers teach us how to bow:
Ah, gods of iron bone and steel tendon, we are just parasites within your glass windows.

You cut and cut, and soon we are ground into monochrome powder.
Those dissident individuals have died, with the life in the soil;
Sunlight, water and wisdom can no longer nourish us, and our growth is enabled
Only by striving in the office or for better clothes, or on the ladder of rewards and titles,

520 Mi Jiayan, by applying de Certeu’s theory of memory in his analysis of “The Alley in the Rain,” contends that the poem shows the poet’s inability to construct an ideal self through the power of the Mnemonic; the central trope of the lilac blossom epitomizes the division between the ideal and reality, enhanced by the dreamlike atmosphere of the poem: “The impossibility of bringing back the ideal beauty/self as represented by the girl is revealed through the trope of the lilac flower, which serves as an inanimate thing, a reified, depersonalized object that is ephemeral and susceptible to withering, thus rendering the object desired in memory ungraspable and evasive.” See Jiayan Mi, Self-Fashioning and Reflexive Modernity in Modern Chinese Poetry, 1919–1949 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004): 199–200.

Thinking a thought of an avenue, or its splendid, tidy void.

Where are the tears and smiles? Engineers, entrepreneurs, concrete and steel—Civilization unfurls a sublime view, we follow with haste, with our struggle. Many important and complete forms of deceit, the empire “moving” at the direction of high towers.

Aberration is the general way of life, life hunts for death, despite occasionally letting out a cry in “silence”:

Why, why? But we have leaped into this dancing whirl, into this city.

The poem written in 1948 recalls some of Mu Dan’s earlier views on history and enlightenment. Social and material progress cannot change man’s nature, it only increases greed and vulgarity, and self-consciousness brings more pain than pleasure in the face of a treacherous world and a brutally nonchalant era.

“The Dance of the City,” despite its apparently sloppy language and over-generalization, further develops this view. The city is depicted as a modern ruin
consisting of enclosed boxes and concrete tombs; the magnificent man-made structures are reduced to a “splendid, tidy void.” Each individual is whirled into the historically frenetic dance and becomes faceless. In this deeply dehumanized industrial world, humanity is at once saved and damned, simultaneously alive and dead.

In Mu Dan’s last poems, the theme of authenticity and absurdity deepens with the poet’s awareness of old age and his exposure of the ills of a totalitarian society. In “Spring” (1976), life is allegorized as an isolated, impenetrable fortress resounding with the hollow sound of chirping birds, and the cries of blooming flowers; the heart of a disillusioned man is seen as a stone enclosure laid out and eventually to be destroyed by time (CP, 326).

In another poem by Mu Dan, “The Heart of the City Streets 城市的街心” (1976), the bustling of the urban streets is seen through the eye of an abstract artist:

The Heart of the City Streets

The streets extend like a musical stave,
Symbols of people, of vehicles, of houses
A dense array flowing over my heart.
Desire rises and ebbs—what melody is being played?
Heeding neither my sorrow nor your joy,
Caring not if anyone will ever come tomorrow.
It just sings a desolate song beyond time.
From the morning bustle to the solitude of midnight,
Year after year, life becomes a passerby
Who feels his own heart older than the heart of the streets.
Only occasionally, in a flash of lightning,
Can I see its laughing protest.

城市的街心

大街伸延著像樂曲的五線譜，
人的符號，車的符號，房子的符號
密密排列著在我的心上流過去，
起伏的欲望呵，唱一串什麼曲調？——
Despite the symphonic undulation of colors and sounds giving life to the street, there is a predominant feeling of loneliness due to the lack of “inner resonance”\(^{522}\) of the soul with its surroundings. The streets perceived are still haunted by memories of the woeful past and by concerns for an uncertain future. The “desolate song” that entertains its people in their everyday activities also renders their lives ephemeral and meaningless. The alternating faces of the same cityscape, from its incipient bustle to its midnight silence, reveal a harrowing condition of life, laid bare only by the occasional flash of lightning. This revelation is part of what Mu Dan calls the “curse of wisdom” and amounts to a “rigid and cold philosophy 我的哲學愈來愈冷峭” (\(CP, 332\)).\(^{523}\)

Sometimes this intensive feeling of anguish and defiance may relax and give way to a tender reflection of life’s enchantment and wonder:

Now as I slowly roam this city  
I can no longer see any trace of you.  
But gazing at its enveloping smoke  
Instantly I feel touched by its enchantment.

\(^{522}\) Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Problem of Form,” [http://faculty.txwes.edu/csmeller/human-prospect/ProData09/02WW1CulMatrix/WW1WRTs/Kandinsky1866/Form1912/Kand1912Form.htm](http://faculty.txwes.edu/csmeller/human-prospect/ProData09/02WW1CulMatrix/WW1WRTs/Kandinsky1866/Form1912/Kand1912Form.htm)  
\(^{523}\) This expression is cited from the first stanza of the poem “On Parting.”
This poem of Mu Dan’s is about seeing off a young friend who has come to visit him in his reclusion. The visit, which comes like “a breeze,” has “thawed the ice” of the ageing poet’s heart, bringing with it a mixed feeling of relief and sadness. As he reflects on this event, the initially “unappealing city” (a city “without enchantment 不美麗的城”) that has trapped the poet like a spider’s web, suddenly takes on a fresh appearance which transcends the poet’s anguish or his “empty wishes” (CP, 332): it is full of enchantment, full of entrancing echoes and apparitions amidst the smokey haze, and his hometown now offers him new wonders, a potentially mythical world and a new life.

Let us briefly look at a short poem, “Past 往昔,” written by a contemporary poet, Kai Yu 開愚:

Past

Dawn. The father, holding his son’s little hand
Enters the Forbidden City

Dusk. The son left behind, his face creased with wrinkles,
Staggers out alone from the palace gate.  

往昔

早晨，父親拉著兒子的手

The fascination of this poem depends precisely on its carefully designated locality, which is at once forbidden and open, a city in a city. The poem’s Spartan lines and supreme self-restraint belie its universal lament of the evanescence of human life. A refrained sigh echoes deep within and beyond the empty walls of the imperial palace, evoking great empathy with readers for the common fate they share. We see here the “empty city” metaphor taking on another expression of minimalist elusiveness and grace, and an almost savage velocity.

As theme and metaphor, the “empty city” is rooted in classical literature and yet it evolves into a number of modern texts by writers from different backgrounds and eras. The demonstration I have offered aims to show that this particular motif and metaphor is more than a linguistic conceptualization, but rather, in the words of Heidegger, a “given presence”—“the form of the formless, the image of the imageless.”525 As a poetic experience, the numerous representations and mutations of the “empty city” do not depend on an explicit concept, but live through images and metaphors that encourage interaction between words and context; as poetic language, it grows and enriches itself at varied levels and extends its range into other realms which can be historical, philosophical, moral, or aesthetic. This process necessarily involves the breaking of

conventions while remaining open to time, which is itself, in the words of Plato, “the moving image of eternity.”

**Conclusion**

Both of the two demonstrations I have given involve poems by Mu Dan, with an emphasis on either a structure in a body of texts or the evolution of a single motif or metaphor from the classical to the modern. I intend these demonstrations to show at least partly that one poem can “throw light directly on the other poems,” and that once a poem is written, it exists potentially outside time and space, and can be re-created by a poet or a reader of another time and space. In the first demonstration, one underlying structure expands and regenerates itself through poets of different ages in their productive dialogue or communication with their ancestors. In this process, a poetic creation becomes, in the words of Heidegger, “an aim in itself,” which is a disclosed existence.

In the second demonstration, the late-poets search alternatives for the conventional values and norms that have become inapplicable or inadequate over time. In both cases, the succeeding poets use elements of their ancestors’ work, either consciously or unconsciously, as a point of origin in their own poetic creation.

Except for a few poems composed in the last years of his life, Mu Dan’s oeuvre contains few overt reference to the classics. A self-proclaimed modernist from the very

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526 Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d.


beginning of his writing career, Mu Dan wrestled between the thought of spontaneous composition and the temptation of craftsmanship, between coveted originality and shrewd imitation. This is manifested in many of his poems. Although he was attracted to Eliot’s view of the individual talent and tradition, tradition was largely neglected by Mu Dan in his early practice. His intention to create a new tradition of Chinese poetry was hindered to some extent by his limited understanding of modernism, whereby his poems written in this spirit manifest what Donald Davie describes as a practice which is “discontinuous, asymmetrical, open-ended and indeed adventitious.”

Mu Dan last poems, however, show fundamental changes to his earlier approach and become richer and more complete. These late poems show that tradition can be transformed by “subverting from within,” which is what Hardy achieved with English pastoral verse. This act of subversion is not a rebellion, but an act of crossing the borders between the extant body of texts and new experiences giving rise to new forms. It is a decisive move which saved Mu Dan from the arrogance and narcissism of modernism, failings which run the risk of leading to an impoverished imagination. The previous enmity between past and present gives way to a dynamic collaboration, his work growing into a complex body of complete and “inter-animating texts.” As his attitude to tradition changed from one of evasion to one of revision, he started to write in the manner of his predecessors, but with an uncanny effect that is completely his own. The unbearable burden of tradition felt by the young Mu Dan eventually became illumination.

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530 Davie is commenting on virtually all the modern arts of Western Europe and America in the 20th century. See Donald Davie, forward to Osip Mandelshtam, trans. James Green (Penguin Books, 1989), xvi.


in his search of proper form. This form, engendered from tradition in the authentic poetic language, offers a new way towards a higher order of self-understanding. A form, which has become highly schematized and is only passively “received” by the later followers of tradition, is further inherited, recreated and modified by the latter-day poets.\(^{533}\) Though Mu Dan never openly expressed his intention to activate tradition so as to “make it new,” his late poems did show subtle changes in rhythm and texture that render his work more organic in form and substance—a goal that the young Yeats set himself in rejuvenating Irish poetry.\(^{534}\) It is in this sense that the poet Mu Dan was holding an envelope addressed to him from an ancient sender. In the words of Jacques Lacan, “The sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form.”\(^{535}\) The envelope which arrives and is “returned to the sender” contains the irreducible essence of a poetic experience.

\(^{533}\) In his study of the aesthetics of Chinese regulated verse, Yu–kung Kao says of the “formal significance” in the process of poetic conception and the evolution of a specific form: “A schematized form can be considered artistically significant only if its formal components contribute substantially to the total artistic effect of the poem. In its most powerful state, poetic form plays a necessary role in shaping the creative process. Consequently, in a successfully executed poem, the form is an integral part of the poet’s intention and is inextricable from the realization of the poet’s vision … Individual poets and critics may change some of the formal requirements, but no single person can create the aesthetics of a form.” See Yu-kung Kao, “The Aesthetics of Regulated Verse,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice*, 333.

\(^{534}\) In Yeats’s case, the objective of “make it new” meant to give Irish poetry “a more subtle rhythm, a more organic form.” See Edna Longley, “‘Altering the past’: Northern Irish Poetry and Modern Canons,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35, Irish Writing since 1950 (2005): 3.

Appendix

A Chinese Poet

By Wang Zuoliang

A just estimate of wartime Chinese poetry must await better days of Chinese politics. A large tract of land north of the Yellow River remains to be explored. One hears vaguely that Yan’an, where most poets of pre-war eminence are, has experimented on new forms. They are not academic, these forms, nor pretty-pretty ivory tower. They are, one hears, adaptation of folk songs, very often strung together with harvest dances. But here on must end one’s hearsay, and come back to the young Kunming group.

This group is not very well-known. Most of them are printed in the ephemeral magazines; one or two have published their first volumes. But the thin copies of flimsy, yellowish native paper never get very far: there are still transport difficulties and postal restrictions. Their merit is, however, already recognized by friends, among whom can still be found circulating an occasional manuscript.

These poets have been in one way or another connected with Southwest Associated University, the Lianda, where, despite the low roofs of the classrooms and dormitories, and the haggard, almost beggarly, appearance of the scholars, there is still the old excitement for things of the mind. The library was even smaller in the early years of the war, but what few books if had, especially the precious new books from abroad, had been devoured with the hunger and its attendant lack of table manners of a Dr. Johnson. These still lie dog-eared, crumpled all over, often with the title-papers gone. But the young poets of Lianda have not read their Eliot and Auden in vain. Perhaps the Western world will find its own ignorance of the cultural East shocking when the truth is told of how, with what gusto and what dreamy eyes, there two poets are being read in distant China. For the strange things is that China, though lamentably out of touch with real political trends, is almost up to the minute in intellectual matters.

Of an afternoon, over a cup of nothing better than plain China tea, amid the clatter and chatter of farmhands and small tradesmen, the young Chinese scholars discuss eagerly the technical details. The hearted arguments sometimes stretch well into the evening, when they take long walks round and round the university campus. But life has not been easy for them. After graduation, as junior members of the university faculty or middle school teachers or bank clerks or merely as loafers, they have had to wage a continual despairing fight against the rise of prices. Some of them got married and have since come under a back-breaking burden of debts and still more debts. They wash, they buy, they cook, they fetch the doctor to care for the sick in the family, they haggle, quarrel, and are disgraced at the market place and before the landlords. There has never developed among them an exclusive, aristocratic society. They are deep in the mud, but every now and then, when things ease a little bit, when the year runs its round to spring again, from among the grindings of daily routine, they steal time and mind out to write.

War, however, meant more than prices. Some of them got much nearer to it than that on dodging the air-raids in cities. Two joined the artillery. One fought with the American Volunteers Group. Several became Ministry of Information officials. Others
helped build the Burma Road or cleared it of the enemy. But one man has gone through
the bitterest experience of them all. That was the Burma retreat in 1942. He fought
hopeless, almost suicidal, rearguards actions. He was hotly pursued by the Japanese. His
horse fell. His orderly died. He had been haunted for day on end by the staring eyes of
dead comrades. His legs became swollen under the tropical monsoon. Fatigued as no one
has ever thought man could be so fatigued, banished from time and almost from space as
well, the gloom and silence of the Assam jungles growing every day heavier and more
intolerable, sick with a deadly dysentery, bitten by leeches and huge jungle mosquitoes,
and, above all, driven crazy by starvation, this young man of twenty-three had yet
dragged his battered body to India. He has never been the same person. Afterwards, he
almost died of over-eating in recuperation, which took him a good three months. But the
slender, consumptive-looking poet had a toughness unexpected of him. He survived and
has lived to tell of it all.

But no! He never did tell. In fact, he treats it all casually, or else is too shy even
for that. Only once, when hard pressed and up to his neck in friends’ requests, did he say
anything about it and even then it was simply his horror of the earth, the elemental rains,
the strange, sickly exuberance of jungle growths among which he found the skulls of the
men who marched before him, perhaps his friends.

His name is Mu Dan. He has published two volumes and a third is appearing. But
it is not so much his poetry as his mother that is on his mind these days. For eight years
he has not seen her, and he is no longer a boy of eighteen.

This boy has not really grown up into a man. He is not sophisticated as most
established Chinese poets are. He had a good education, but that has taught him only the
necessary rudiments of technique. He is still eighteen years old in his curiosity, in his
being able to see things as elementals:

當我呼吸，在山河的交鑄裡，
無數個晨曦，黃昏，彩色的光，
從昆侖，喜馬，天山的傲視，
流下了乾燥的，卑濕的草原，
當黃河，揚子，珠江終於憩息…..

(I breathe in the fusion of rivers and mountains,
When Innumerable mornings, evenings and the lights of all colours,
Avalanche from the proud stare of the Kunlun, Tianshan and the Himalaya ranges,
Across the arid and misty prairies,
Until reposeful become the Yellow, Yangtze and Pearl rivers…)

If it be said that there is the grandiloquent in it, it should be pointed out that it was
composed as early as 1939, when the country was still in the flush of the early upheavals
of the war. What may be extraneous in others is an inner passion in this young, wild-eyed
poet.

The pure lyric gift, for which our poet is noted, is hard to get, especially in China,
where much of what is being written is a lifeless copy of the dubious masters of the West –
dubious, because one of the commonplace ironies in comparative literature is that often
the second-rate gains an influence in another tongue. Mu Dan has the best English poets
at his fingertips, yet he rarely imitates and never writes with a voice not his own. His anguish is authentic:

(I cry from the vastness of my heart,
because I have a glimpse of the beautiful word.
But misfortune fell when the days of doubt came to an end.
When I hanged my erring youth,
The passionate stubbornness and fast-held ideas!)

The dominant tone is one of pain:

(On the solid flesh the deep gullies
Of blood, where on greenish copper
The blood nourished flowers of white!
Through what miracle, from the purple red,
It stood, stood and of a sudden rose,
The wind beating out the rhythms of its agony.)

Indeed, it is this feeling for suffering which distinguishes Mu Dan from other Chinese writers. One would expect modern Chinese literature to be poignant about life and death. Yet apart from flashes of the savagely biting wit of Lu Xun and a few solitary cases of bitter outburst, Western-educated Chinese writers are singularly apathetic. Deaths are a common sight in the streets of china, yet many Chinese intellectuals choose to ignore them. Not so Mu Dan. He is a fiery Leftist, a veteran of many demonstrations and mass meetings. However, he distrusts verbal politics:

(You make us walk the long corridor, zigzagging,
To and fro, and accept your riot of words
As truth. Still, we are converted, because
You fill out our life and stuff it with agony)

然而這不值得掛念，我知道
一個更靜的死亡追在後頭，
因為我聽見了洪水，隨著巨風，
從遠而近，在我們的心裡拍打，
吞蝕著古舊的血液和骨肉！

(But this does not matter. I feel
A more binding death behind my ear,
As I hear the waters and the winds,
Beating from afar and in our hearts,
Devouring out ancient blood and bones.)

Even when he is confronted with a contemporary situation, he is consumed by a dark passion:

勃朗寧，毛瑟，三號手提式，
或是爆進人肉去的左輪，
它們能給我絕望後的快樂，
對著漆黑的槍口，你們會看見
從歷史的扭轉的彈道裡，
我是得到了二次的誕生。

(Browning, Mauser and the Model Three,
Or the revolver which explodes into man’s flesh,
All give me the sudden joy of a moment’s despair.
Looking into the dark muzzle, you will see
From the twisted rifle-groove of history
I get another incarnation.)

There is always something physical about him. Something that is there because the poet has ‘thought with his body’. His senses are always sharpened, almost to kill:

在一瞬間
我看見了遍野的白骨
旋動

(In an instant
I see the white bones on the plain
Whirling)
Even with love he is best in sensuous images:

你底眼睛看見這一場火災，
你看不見我，雖然我為你點燃；
唉，那燃燒著的不過是成熟的年代。
你底，我底。我們相隔如重山！

從這自然底蛻變底程序裡，
我卻愛了一個暫時的你。
即使我哭泣，變灰，變灰又新生，
姑娘，那只是上帝玩弄他自己。

(Your eyes have seen this disaster of fire.
But not me, though I have been ignited by you.
Alas, what is burning is only our mature years,
Yours and mine, we are separated by mountains!)

In this process of natural metamorphosis,
I have loved a transient you.
Thought I sob, becoming ashes, become ashes and rejuvenate,
Madam, that is only God mocking himself.)

I don’t know how others will take it, but to me, this blending of the physical with the metaphysical is one of the best love poems to have come from modern Chinese writers.

But the really paradoxical thing to be said about Mu Dan is that while he expresses best the tortured and torturing state of mind of young Chinese intellectuals, his best qualities are not Chinese at all. He is definite and says things with a bang where other Chinese poets are vague and mealy-mouthed. Amid the general thinness, his richness of texture and associations is a bit offending. That, perhaps, explains why he is little read and definitely not acclaimed. The achievement is, however, also one of language. For the problem facing a contemporary Chinese poet is essentially the choice of a medium. The old style is abolished, but its clichés have come through to weight down the new writings. Mu Dan triumphs by a wilful ignorance of the old classics. Even his conceits are Western. He manipulates the unwieldy Chinese characters and exposes them to new rigours, new climates. There are all kinds of unexpected juxtapositions and combinations. He makes a daring use of the spoken idiom. In such poems as ‘May’, he deliberately contrasts the old and new styles to achieve the effect of ‘time is out of joint’. The result is, there is a suddenness, a razor-edge sharpness:

負心兒郎多情女
荷花池旁訂誓盟
而今獨自倚欄想
落花飛絮漫天空

而五月的黃昏是那樣的朦朧，
在火炬的行列叫喊過去以後，
誰也不會看見的
被恭維的街道就把他們傾出，
在報上登過救濟民生的談話後
誰也不會看見的
愚蠢的人們就扑進泥沼裡，
而謀害者，凱歌著五月的自由，
緊握一切無形電力的總樞紐。

(The disdainful lord and the sentimental girl
Pledged to Love beside the lotus pond.
Leaning on a balustrade, lost in thought,
She saw a sky full of falling flowers.

But the evenings of May are such a blur,
When the shouting torchlight processions have passed,
The flattered street, without anybody notice,
Empties them all into the gutters.
After the papers reported speeches of poor relief,
The dupes immediately plunged into the puddle,
And the Murderer, singing of the freedom of May,
Held tight the main switch of all unseen electricity.)

Mu Dan has renounced a language to get a language. The style suits his sensibility perfectly.
But by far the greatest contribution Mu Dan has made to the new literature of China is in the way of creating a God. He has no theological battles to wage for any church, or any of the accepted religions, but there is a hunger of his flesh and spirit that cries for relief and consolation from something outside man. He has noted with dissatisfaction the hollowness of many Chinese writers. They are not atheists, they simply believe in nothing. In this they are perfectly traditional. Religious poetry has not flourished in the climate of the extremely balanced mind of China. To his death of great spiritual upheavals can also he attributed the apathy I mentioned earlier. But Mu Dan, with his childlike curiosity, his sounding of the deeps of the soul, is at least alive to struggle and doubt:

雖然生活是疲憊的，我必須追求，
雖然觀念的叢林纏繞我，
善惡的光亮在我的心裡明滅。

(Though life is wearing, I must quest;
Thought the jungles of ideas surround me,
There glimmers in my heart the light
Of Good and Evil.)
And a more straightforward resolution:

看見到處的繁華原來是地域，
不能夠掙脫，愛情將變做仇恨，
是在自己的廢墟上，以卑賤的泥土，
他們匍匐著豎起了異教的神。

(Seeing that prosperity everywhere is only Hell
Where there is no escape and love becomes hate,
On their own rules and from the humble soil
The prostrate erect the heathen God.)

And the problem of identity, expressed with such torturing, clogging rhythm in the poem ‘I’:

從子宮割裂，失去了溫暖，
是殘缺的部分渴望著救援，
永遠是自己，鎖在荒野裡，

從靜止的夢離開了群體，
痛感到時流，沒有什麼抓住，
不斷的回憶帶不回自己，

遇見部分時在一起哭喊，
是初戀的狂喜，想沖出樊籬，
伸出雙手來抱住了自己

幻化的形象，是更深的絕望，
永遠是自己，鎖在荒野裡，
仇恨著母親給分出了夢境。

(Since the womb splitting, I have lost warmth,
An uncompleted part crying for help,
The forever I, locked in vastnesses.

In dreams of quiet I have left the body of Many,
Painfully conscious of the time-flow, gripping nothing,
Incessant recollection does not bring back me.

Meeting a part of me we cry together,
The mad joy of first love. Fleeing the prison,
I stretch both hands to hold.
My metamorphosed image, to find only deeper despair,
The forever I, locked in vastnesses,
Hating mother for separating me from the dreams.)

This is a strange poem and has baffled many. There is the element of sex. The mother-motif, the love of a girl, ‘a part of me,’ who looks like the mother. I am reminded of the dialogues of Plato which Mu Dan and I read together in 1936, on a university campus in Peking. Parenthetically, I wish also to call attention to the word ‘womb’ which, though quite common in English poetry, has seldom been used in Chinese. But when a poet questions the secret of the womb, he is questioning the darkness of things. Sex and religion are related in blood.

For the time being, one must protest that the religion in Mu Dan is only a passive one. He knows suffering, but not beatitude. But that may be because he is only twenty-six this year. His mind is still groping. The fluidity is perhaps more satisfying for modern Chinese poetry than perfect piety. The God he eventually arrives at may not be a god at all, but Satan himself. The effort is laudable and the artistic process to climb such forbidding heights of the soul, almost totally new in China, will be worth watching.

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