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GEOMETRY OF EXPANSION: SCROLLS, FOLDS, AND CONCENTRIC SHAPES IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AND CHINESE LONG POEMS

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Abstract

Geometry of Expansion: Scrolls, Folds, and Concentric Shapes in Contemporary American and Chinese Long Poems treats recursive geometry as an analytic framework to study material, thematic, rhythmic, and epistemological innovations in recent long poems. Each chapter compares a book-length American poem with a Chinese counterpart, with the poems selected for their shared formal designs—the unwinding scroll, the self-embedding and self-duplicating folds, and the concentric squares and circles. The interest in recursive geometry, emerging in parallel in these two disparate literary traditions, situates the long poem within the tension between epic and lyric poetry, reconfigures many classic poetic concepts, and transforms the genre of the long poem into a tentative, piecemeal, yet committed engagement with contemporary reality. I further propose that the mathematical interpretation of these recursive shapes lends us critical vocabularies and insights, with which we can describe the *poiesis* of recent experimental works and conceive a hermeneutics not only for these specific poems but also for contemporary experience in general.

The introduction traces the evolution of the modern long poem into a hybrid, porous, and attractive genre epitomizing the interplay between epic and lyric, formal constraints and artistic ingenuity, as well as nationalism and globalization. Drawing from the interdisciplinary applications of recursivity, I discuss why scrolls, folds, and concentric shapes appeal to many poets as the structure to uncover and overcome materialism, commercialism, alienation, and political repression. The first chapter examines two poems written on scrolls—*Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) by A. R. Ammons and *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains* (2015) by Zhai Yongming. I discuss how the scroll's kinematic features enable the poets to transform an attention economy characterized by stimulations and incessant distractions into a sustainable commitment. The second chapter focuses on two elegies—*The Midnight* (2003) by Susan Howe and *An Ideal Couple in the Water-Paint Garden: Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan 1642—1651* (2019) by Bai Hua. Their rapid shifts in forms and themes reveal bifurcating, layered, and fractal patterns, which diffuse lyric sources and redemptions in everyday life. The last chapter concerns two family romances written in concentric shapes—Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980) and Yang Lian's *Narrative Poems* (2011). I argue that these poems organize familial and cultural memories centripetally and centrifugally to envision how a decentered poetic subjectivity is still capable of social effects.

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Acknowledgments

I initially became interested in the genre of the long poem during the pandemic. I picked up Wallace Stevens's "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" on an ordinary afternoon in Chicago, and when I finally emerged from the poem, it was already late at night. Initially, I thought of the long poem as a form that would instruct me to reflect on separation, loneliness, and the passage of time. However, the writing of this dissertation has taught me that it is the gracious support from my mentors, friends, and family that made each ordinary day feel tangible and joyful.

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Introduction: Extended Wings Flapping in the Air

In 1977, American poet Ron Silliman wrote a series of paragraphs in a notebook reminiscent of the bookbinding practice in premodern China. Then, he typed these brief ideas on leaves of blank paper, naming them “The Chinese Notebook” and incorporating them into his colossal long poem *The Age of Huts*. Two consecutive vignettes discuss how the change from a stitched notebook to unbound papers can affect the development of the poem:

18. I chose a Chinese notebook, its thin pages not to be cut, its six redline columns which I turned 90°, the way they are closed by curves at both top and bottom, to see how it would alter the writing. Is it flatter, more airy? The words, as I write them, are larger, cover more surface on this two-dimensional picture plane. Shall I, therefore, tend toward shorter terms—impact of page on vocabulary?
19. Because I print this, I go slower. Imagine layers of air over the planet. One closer to the center of gravity moves faster, while the one above it tends to drag. The lower one is thought, the planet itself the object of the thought. But from space what is seen is what filters through the slower outer air of representation.¹

Idiosyncratic mediums supply form, consciousness, and imagination to poetry. Visualized as either a “picture plane” or the uppermost paper that “tends to drag,” poetry’s material and linguistic medium is not an unrestricted empty space. Instead, it distorts the object of representation, be it the external reality or feelings deep inside. Neither is the medium of representation absolutely coercive: while certain aspects (like the uncut page, the curved patterns, and the wide line spacing) demand that Silliman adapt his habits of writing, other features (like the orientation and the curvature of the notebook) are more flexible and invite the poet’s innovative intervention. As shown by the alternation between the period and the question mark in the eighteenth entry, these constraints render writing a dynamic process. The seeming rigid and arbitrary constraints appeal to the poet differently at different moments. It is only through the dialectics between conjectures and self-observations during the process of writing that the poet gradually realizes his autonomy and limitations.

¹ Ron Silliman, *The Age of Huts (Compleat)* (Univ of California Press, 2007), 151.

Silliman depicts the notebook's leaves as thin, airy, and apt to float in the air. This image will appear more vivid if complemented by some technical knowledge about traditional Chinese bookbinding. The poet's notebook is bound in the so-called "wrapped back style" ("包背装"). Two pages are printed on one side of a sheet, which is then folded outward. After that, multiple sheets are aligned and bound together by their edges. The result is a codex format, where every page is printed single-sided, and every two pages are connected both by the book spine and the outer fold. Since every two pages are enclosed and all the sheets are further enclosed in a more robust paper fold, this style of bookbinding looks like numerous wraps within a larger wrap. Intriguingly, the predecessor of the wrapped back style is known as the "butterfly style" ("蝴蝶装"), a more fragile design where each single-sided printed page is folded inward and multiple sheets are bounded by their folds with paste rather than stitch. In the butterfly style, every page can be fully opened just as with codex books nowadays,² except that the print is not consecutive. Since ancient Chinese paper is thin and translucent, the bound book, when held by the spine, looks like fragile butterfly wings flapping in the air.

Even though the connected pages of Silliman's notebook create a tunnel through which air can flow, its practical structure restricts the previously spreading wings. However, this materiality can still lend indirect support to imagination. As shown by the nineteenth entry asking us to "imagine layers of air over the planet," the past vision of a book soaring in the air is traded for a new one, where the air itself becomes a flappable book. In fact, this is a scientifically precise metaphor because the earth's atmosphere is vertically structured into various layers according to correlations between temperature and altitude; if we plot the temperature and the altitude, we will obtain a zigzagging continuous curve, which conforms to the geometry of the wrapped back style.

² Notably, modern books are folded differently, as I will explain in detail in the second chapter. The similarity here only applies to the final product, not the process.

A few decades after Silliman's endeavor to manumit words and thoughts from their materiality, Chinese installation artist Xu Bing and poet Ouyang Jianghe imagined two phoenixes—mythical birds symbolizing power, beauty, and nobility—which cannot fly, reflecting on how industrialization incapacitates imagination, art, and poetry. Returning to Beijing in 2007 after living in the United States for several years, Xu was inspired by rapid industrialization and commercialization and built two gigantic birds—one male and one female—out of industrial debris from local construction sites.³ This project *Phoenix* is typically suspended by iron chains in display. Since their tarnished metal wings are so clumsy, it seems as if the birds will crash onto the floor at any moment.

Ouyang wrote an eponymous long poem based on this installation work.⁴ Its fourteenth section reflects on how Xu's art shapes that of his own:

然后轮到了徐冰。瞧，他从鸟肺
掏出一些零配件的龙虾，
一些次第的芯片，索隐，火力，
（即使拆除了战争，也要把凤凰
组装得像一支军队）。
他从内省掏出十来个外省
和外国，然后，掏出一个外星空。
空，本就是空的，被他掏空了，
反而凭空掏出些真东西。
比如，掏出生活的水电，
但又在美学这一边，把插头拔掉。
掏出一个本本，把史诗的大部头
写成笔记体：词的仓库，搬运一空。
他组装了王和王后，却拆除了统治。
组装了永生，却把它给了亡灵。
组装了当代，却让人身处古代。

³ *Phoenix* was initially designed as a public art project to be placed in a new business complex in Beijing, upon the commission of Lee Shau-kee, a Hong Kong-based real estate tycoon, and the invitation of Ravenel Art Group, a Taiwan-based art consulting company. Its designing and constructive process is made possible by many years of persistent negotiation among the funders, the artist, many art consultants, and the construction workers. For a thorough introduction to the artwork, see Junjie Jiang's "The Doubleness of Sight/Site: Xu Bing's *Phoenix* as an Intended Public Art Project." Meanwhile, Zhai Yongming, one of the poets who is studied in detail in my first chapter, wrote "徐冰《凤凰》作品始末," an experimental, journalistic essay of fifty-five vignettes.

⁴ The long poem was first published in the journal *Hua Cheng* in 2012. In 2014, it was published as a stand-alone book with literary scholar Wu Xiaodong's 134 annotations tracking allusions and quotations throughout the poem.

这白夜的菊花灯笼啊。这万古愁。
这伤痕累累的手艺和注目礼。
凤凰彻悟飞的真谛，却不飞了。⁵

Then, it comes to Xu Bing. Look, he took out from the birds' lungs
Some lobsters of spare and accessory parts,
Some ordered chips, catalogues, and firepower,
(Even if wars have been deconstructed, we need to assemble the phoenixes
Into an army).
He took out from introspection a dozen other provinces
And other countries, and took out outer space.
Emptiness, which was empty in the beginning, is emptied by him,
And he somehow takes out something real from the emptiness.
For instance, he takes out water and electricity in everyday life,
But unplug them from the aesthetic end.
He takes out a small notebook, turning the gigantic epic
Into notes: the warehouse of words, is completely emptied.
He assembles the king and the queen but disassembles the reign.
He assembles eternity but presents it to the dead.
He assembles the current era but situates people in ancient times.
Oh, these chrysanthemum lanterns of the white night. This sorrow has endured since ancient
times.
These wounded techniques and gazes of salute.
The phoenixes understand the truth of flying but no longer fly.

These lines wobble between descriptions of the artist's constructive process and its resulting deconstructive implications: in other words, the presence of the gigantic birds signifies the hollowness of grand narratives about rapid modernization—the ethos of post-Mao China. Ouyang was committed to reproducing the installation's techniques, aesthetics, and political criticism. While Xu executed an enormous project through the modest and even trivial means of collaging industrial waste, Ouyang claimed to compose an “epic,” a presumably sublime poem, through “notes,” as exemplified by the vignette we just read. Fragmentary literary allusions characterize the poem. For instance, “chrysanthemum lanterns” comes from “Chrysanthemum Lanterns Floating Over” (“菊花灯笼飘过来”) by contemporary poet Zhai Yongming; “sorrow having endured since the ancient time” is

⁵ Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, 长诗集, 1st edition (江苏文艺出版社, 2017), 150–51.

extracted from Li Bai's "Invitation to Wine" ("将进酒"); and "White Night" ("白夜") is the name of Zhai's bar, whose neon signs, as inferior replacements of the tender, ephemeral lanterns, trivialize both the sense of longingness in Zhai's poem and the carefree hermit spirit in that of Li. This almost unmediated juxtaposition feels so abrupt, and the modal particle of exclamation sounds so forced that the poet deconstructs cultural legacy into an emptied repository (a vacant "warehouse of words") unable to supply coherent narratives, lofty visions, and sustainable passion. Ouyang's professed epic turns out to be the very negation of this potential.

While Xu's creation of the flightless birds serves as a blueprint that predetermines Ouyang's writing of a pseudo-epic in form, content, tropes, and cognition, this writing practice incites the latter's originality when he feels most constrained. Specifically, the grandiose scale and the conceptual profundity of the phoenixes drive the poet to trace the symbolic meanings of their components (industrial waste as the symbol of domestic assembly lines, global commerce, and space exploration), a process expanding to interrogate the entire universe. Yet this thorough hollowing-out of language through art does not lead to a defeat of language. Instead, the phrase "for instance" right in the middle of the stanza suggests a potentially different list, where utility bills are scrawled down on a small notebook, where meaning is restored by attentive writing of the quotidian.

These excerpts from two very different long poems are asking the same question, which is also the primary interest of this thesis: how can idiosyncratic constraints help us reconfigure contemporary long poem, thus enabling imagination to soar in a genre that seems anachronistic to contemporary life characterized by utilitarianism, incoherence, scattered attention, and a lack of transcendence? Certainly, the constitutive role of constraints in literary creation is a consensus, as shown by numerous poets voluntarily submitting their writing to rhyme patterns, meters, specific themes, typographical designs, etc. Rather than such well-established constraints, this thesis focuses on unconventional ones. Some of them shape poems' material appearance like Silliman's notebook

that prescribes the size of his handwriting, the length of his word choices, and the interconnectedness of his discrete notes, while others shape poetry in loose, heuristic ways, like Ouyang's adoption of Xu's installation as the base of writing.

More specifically, I am intrigued by the fact that many of the unconventional constraints in the long poem manifest recursivity: for instance, in Silliman's notebook, the closure by curves on each page is absorbed into continuous, openable folds, which are further enclosed in an outer-wrap; or, in *Phoenix*, readers' observations of Ouyang's observations of Xu's observations of Chinese industrialization display a series of mutually embedding events. Moreover, recursivity is not only material and formal but also cognitive. It inspires poets ceaselessly to reflect on their writing to establish recursive meta-poetic discourse, as attested by Silliman's turning of air into a book by meditating on how his writing changes as his medium switches from a notebook to plain paper as well as Ouyang's rediscovery of the quotidian and the straightforward after he reflects on his and Xu's deconstruction of symbolization.

Selecting *scrolls*, *folds*, and *concentric shapes* as representatives of three kinds of recursive thinking—generative boundaries, continuous discontinuity, and self-embeddedness—this thesis compares a number of book-length recent American and Chinese long poems that employ these figures as material layouts, formal structures, and key themes. Since recursivity is a crucial concept in many other disciplines, especially mathematics, I often import geometric language and knowledge into my analysis, in order to address the following questions: Why is it that these particular figures can guide poets to comparable poetic insights? How do these shapes reconfigure crucial poetic concepts like attention, lyricism, and subjectivity? And how can they equip poets with extended wings, in adapting Wallace Stevens's phrase, as they probe downward into a seemingly overwhelming, banal, and disengaged contemporary existence? To lay the foundation for comparison across cultures and disciplines, the rest of the introduction will focus on three issues: first, justifying contemporary long poem as a

particular genre; second, identifying emerging paradigms for the reading and writing of the long poem over the past century; third, proposing recursivity as not only the core of many existing theories and practices of the long poem but also an effective method of reading and comparing.

A Genre Between the Epic and the Lyric

To avoid the prescriptive and structuralist connotations of the usual definition of “genre” as designating a set of properties, Stanley Cavell, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, imagines it in terms of family resemblance, where members “share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions.”⁶ Genre identification becomes a comparative reading practice. First, a genre’s characteristics are not provided as definitions but are gradually delineated through reading a set of works that are similar in certain ways; second, a genre and its members participate in mutually (even recursively) reflective dynamics, where our developing conception of a genre will impact how writers and readers approach a specific work, and simultaneously, a specific work’s employment of particular characteristics will inform, expand, and challenge our conception of a genre. In Cavell’s own words, features of family resemblance, and the exercises of recognizing them, “reflect upon one another, *looping back and forth* among the members” (emphasis mine).⁷

Following Cavell’s suggestion, this thesis regards the long poem as a loose and rather awkward category. It has striven for its existence since the beginning of the twentieth century by distinguishing itself from the epic and the lyric, while selectively marrying conventional assumptions about these two more established genres. Like epics, long poems are of extensive length and include miscellaneous information; but unlike epics, they question comprehensiveness and totalization. Like lyrics, they focus

⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 28. For the foundation laid by Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, see *Philosophical Investigation*, paragraph 65.

⁷ Cavell, 30.

on lived experience and convey a sense of intellectual and lyrical depth from time to time; unlike lyrics, they are often digressive and deliberately incomplete, refusing to be grasped as self-sufficient artifacts.

We might want to ask, why the long poem cannot be absorbed into the epic, a genre with a long history, a high reputation, well-known theories, and exemplary works. According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, an epic is a narrative delivered via an epic hero who integrates his people's modes of thinking and acting; it marks the source and the center of a nation's culture, expresses essential conditions of national survival that will be permanently applicable, and reveals a nation's unique spirit.⁸ As many critics and poets have shown, this vision of epic is infeasible in the modern context. Georg Lukács objects that the required unity is an illusion in the modern world characterized by moral chaos.⁹ Hegel's association of the epic to national building, as Sheldon Pollock points out, is based on a Eurocentric imagination of political state and deprives other non-Western civilizations of the potential of having proper epics.¹⁰ Even though Ezra Pound tones down the insistence on unification and rephrases the epic as "a poem including history,"¹¹ his epic enterprise is criticized as haunted by "the imperative and the impossibility" "as a historical object."¹² Moreover, as shown by Franco Moretti's cogent application of the term "epic" on hypercanonized works that are conventionally regarded as novels, the meaning of epic has already been diffused to other genres.¹³ In other words, the generic features, the scope of application, and the representative examples of "epic" are as ambiguous as, if not more than, the long poem.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1975), 1040–48.

⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (MIT Press, 1974), 56.

¹⁰ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (University of California Press, 2006), 546.

¹¹ Ezra Pound, "Date Line," in *Make It New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 19.

¹² C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism*, *Modernist Literature and Culture* 24 (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

¹³ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (Verso, 1996), 1–7.

The term epic has not lost its critical affordance, as shown by works like Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez* and C. D. Blanton's *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* that employ the genre's world-building ambition to launch insightful criticism. Yet the broadened usage and even the substitution of the term "epic" provide scholars and poets with the opportunity to reconsider how to categorize poems that are often too long to be read within a single setting. The term "long poem," which has been around since the 1850s, is gradually consolidated in this context. First included in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in 2012, it is defined as follows:

The term is used almost exclusively for mod. poetry, usually in Eng. Charles Altieri notes that the mod. long poem is distinguished by a "desire to achieve epic breadth by relying on structural principles inherent in lyric rather than narrative modes." Incorporating other texts, lost voices, political speech, or bits of memory, the long poem foregrounds the writer's role in making a distinctive way through such often-resistant material.¹⁴

At first glance, Altieri's introduction of another variable, "the lyric," into the formulation of the long poem makes this effort of categorization even less legitimate, for "the lyric" can encompass virtually all kinds of poetry in today's literary criticism. But given the context of Altieri's argument, he means a group of poems that are often short, intense, driven by a first-person perspective, and crystalized in delicate structures.¹⁵ The usual interpretations of lyrics are practiced through close reading informed by our familiarity with modernist short poems and the American New Critical theories, fetishizing the works under consideration as self-complete, self-determined, and even autotelic artifacts. Thus, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, long poems are usually categorized together by their shared resistance of two kinds of closure: first, the closure in traditional epics that present a linear, teleological narrative through a charismatic hero manifesting national characteristics; second, the closure of short

¹⁴ Stephen Cushman et al., eds., "The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics" (Princeton University Press, August 26, 2012), 813.

¹⁵ Charles Altieri, "Motives in Metaphor: John Ashbery and the Modernist Long Poem," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 11 (January 1, 1978): 653.

lyrics consisting of impeccable logic, absorbing emotions, and complete formal designs that converge upon a central, reifiable theme.

Despite the fact that the long poem is a fuzzy category claiming its significance through what it is not, it remains a fascination for anglophone modern poets. Partially inheriting readers' veneration for the epic, the long poem provides aspiring poets with a medium to summon up their full potentials and gain recognition.¹⁶ More importantly, while modern consciousness makes poets and readers skeptical of the existence of a unified moral base, world wars, global decolonization movements, and social upheavals in the twentieth century pressure poets to represent realities laden with overwhelming and contradictory information, ask larger questions about cultures, reimagine a relatively stable ethical base, and experience and intervene into the present moment as if it is a historical turning point.¹⁷ According to Altieri: "Most modernist lyric adheres to some of [the] ideal of the poem as a performative self-reference. Eliot, Pound, H.D., and Stevens wanted to extend this model to the long poem because that kind of poem conceived as performance might be able to measure the value of something close to an entire way of living rather than just highlighting segments of experience."¹⁸ Here, additional characteristics of the long poem emerge: it is self-referencing on various dimensions (it originates from the poet's own observations and thoughts rather than from those of an epic hero; it is conscious of its textuality and even materiality as I will discuss later; it incessantly reflects on the poets' rootedness in their realities); it is a way of living that involves not only contingencies and indeterminacies but also exploration and improvisation.

¹⁶ According to Herbert Tucker, "works of conspicuously epic shape and aspiration have continued to appear, on a nearly annual basis"; and according to M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, the genre of the long poem "has dominated the ambition of every great modern poet." See Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 5; M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, "The Modern Sequence and Its Precursors," *Contemporary Literature* 22, no. 3 (1981): 308, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208282>.

¹⁷ For example, see C. D. Blanton's analysis of Ezra Pound's eagerness in epic writing in *Epic Negation*, ch1.

¹⁸ Charles Altieri, *Modernist Poetry and the Limitations of Materialist Theory* (University of New Mexico Press, 2021), 146-147.

Similar to the anglophone case, the long poem in Chinese literature is conceived through the tension between the lyric and the epic. Hegel's claim that ancient oriental cultures like China are not capable of writing epics brings both inspiration and anxiety to the reading and interpreting of modern Chinese poetry.¹⁹ In response, many writers show how the absence of epic in Chinese traditional literature can help us establish this genre in the modern context. The next few pages will briefly track how such an interpretive move has been or can be employed in Chinese poetry throughout the twentieth century. As the foundation of modern Chinese literary study from an international perspective, *The Lyrical and The Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* by Czech sinologist Jaroslav Průšek uses the dynamism between the terms "lyric" and "epic" (as well as their derivatives like "lyrical" and "lyricism") to unpack the tension between classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese, as well as Chinese modern literature and Western literature during the first half of the twentieth century—a period where vernacular free verse emerged. According to Průšek, Chinese literature is a primarily lyrical tradition. When epic techniques like narrative, a centralized hero, and variegated voices became popular because of globalization and modernization, the lyrical tradition fused with the newly emerged epic intention. The overarching insight in *The Lyrical and The Epic* suggests that modern Chinese literature is characterized by a trend toward subjectivism and individualism. Průšek's understanding of the lyric and lyricism are informed mainly by Chinese classical poetry rather than Western Romanticist poetry, a fact that compels us to temporarily mute a more conventional understanding of the epic and the lyric. However, his own definitions of these terms and their cognates like "the lyrical" shift around: sometimes the dichotomy describes expressions of emotions versus narratives; sometimes the kind of literature attentive to psychological depth of a specific individual (often the authors themselves) versus the kind pursuing realist objectivism; and sometimes the charging of the external landscape with

¹⁹ Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 2:1062.

human but not individualistic emotions versus lengthy novels attesting to sociohistorical phenomena through the fate of a singular protagonist.²⁰

Building upon Průšek, David Der-wei Wang writes *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crises*, inquiring why during the first half of the twentieth century, which was a time of social uncertainties and national crises, works by major Chinese writers preferred exploring personal feelings to evoking collective sentiments that may directly contribute to the urgent needs of national independence and modernization. In Wang's context, the epic and the lyrical are two pathways to modernity—the former constituted by socialist movements derived from Western materialist beliefs and the latter by an aesthetics rooted in premodern Chinese culture that emphasizes nostalgia, subjective feelings, and affective responses to the external world.²¹ Průšek and Wang simultaneously distinguish and intertwine the epic and the lyrical to delineate a literary form that became significant in a moment of increasing exchange between China and Western countries through military conflicts and cultural communications²²: it is a kind of poetry that emphasizes the individualistic, subjective, and affective, while exerting social efficacy by questing for a base of collectivity. This gradually lyricized epic attempt identified by Průšek and Wang has also been addressed by Chinese critics and poets who experienced this literary trend first-hand, especially Guo Moruo.²³

²⁰ Jaroslav Průšek, *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1980), 1–28.

²¹ David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 1–40. For how the constructed dialectics between the lyrical and the epic could have led to not only unjust dismissals of socialist literature but also questions about the ethics of literary criticism, see Wendy Larson's review of Wang's book.

²² For an explanation of different Chinese translations of the term “epic” and the literary experiments inspired by these translations, see Rui Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis: The Canonization of the Poet Haiji and Cultural Discourses in Contemporary China* (Projekt-Verlag, 2012), 181–6.

²³ For Guo's theories and practices of the epic, see poet-critic Mai Mang 麦芒, “Shi shi qing jie yu Zhongguo xin shi de xiandai xing” 史诗情结与中国新诗的现代性 [Epic Sentiments and Chinese Modernity], *Shi Tansuo*, no. 3 (2005): 39–70.

The discussion of the epic versus the lyric continues into the second half of the twentieth century, with the vision of the new socialist country inciting many intellectuals' passion in writing poems that feature national and socialist heroes, tune people's sentiments toward continuing socialist reforms, and organize the rugged Chinese history of decolonization and modernization teleologically. Some influential works²⁴ include Li Ji's *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* (《王贵与李香香》) in 1946, Hu Feng's *The Time Has Began* (《时间开始了》) in 1949, and Zhang Yongmei's *Battle at the Paracel Islands* in 1974 (《西沙之战》).²⁵ Yet most poems from the Maoist period are still short lyrics exemplifying “revolutionary romanticism” (“革命的浪漫主义”) as Mao defined it in his talks in Chengdu in 1958. With their brevity, memorable rhythm, and rapid arousal of emotion, they constitute an effective tool to mobilize readers and hearers. As a result, even though we can identify some exchanges between the epic and the lyric in formal conceptions and techniques during the Maoist period, literature's forced subservience to politics resulted in a rather dull period in Chinese literary history: length was justified not by experiments in language but by the amount of information; lyrical impulse did not lead to sincere, individualistic voice but to revolutionary passion; narratives did not manifest sophisticated structural designs but instead exhibited obvious linearity.

More pertinent to the concern of this dissertation are the epic attempts and the emergence of the long poem as a self-conscious genre in post-Mao China. The end of the Cultural Revolution in

²⁴ Here, I focus on verse. Yet not all the poems mentioned here define themselves as epics: Li Ji's poem is usually described as a narrative long poem, Hu Feng claims his poem to be a “five-volume heroic epic” (“英雄史诗五部曲”) in its subtitle, and Zhang Yongmei's poem is usually characterized as a reportage long poem. I mention them as examples of epic writing in the Maoist period mainly because of their shared extensive scale, nationalistic motivation, and their combination of political lyricism with narratives. Beyond verse, epic ambitions also found expressions in other genres, such as long socialist novels like Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River* (《太阳照在桑乾河上》; first published in 1948) and Liu Qing's *History of Entrepreneurship* (《创业史》; first serialized in *Yan He* in 1959) and performances like *The East Is Red: A Song and Dance Epic* (《东方红：大型音乐舞蹈史诗》), which was later adapted into a film.

²⁵ The governmentally organized effort of collecting folk songs and epics of ethnic minority groups in the 1950s shaped contemporaneous writers' and readers' understanding of epic and narrative long poems. For a brief account of some of the outcomes of these literary movements, see Hong Zichen's *History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (《中国当代文学史》), especially the section titled “The pursuit of ‘Epic Qualities’” (“‘史诗性’的追求”), and Feng Wenkai's article “Reflections on Seventy Years of Study of Epics (1949—2019)” (《史诗研究七十年的回顾与反思(1949—2019)》).

1976, the opening up to the international world culturally and economically, as well as the relatively liberalized cultural policies offered writers opportunities to reorganize past literary legacy, invigorate the rich poetic potential of the Chinese language, and foster national and individual identities that are not reducible to homogeneous and replaceable constituents of socialism. Many critics and poets pointed to the epic as an effective avenue to these shared objectives. For instance, Zhu Guangqian's translation of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics was published in 1981 and reintroduced the issue of the absence of epic into Chinese literary discourse.²⁶ The Song brothers, poet-critics Song Qu and Song Wei, published "This Era Needs Epics" (《这是一个需要史诗的时代》), an article reflecting many poets' fascination with the epic in the 1980s. Its very first sentence reads, "Today, poetry is relieved from the throes of history" ("今天的诗正从历史的阵痛中走出"), bringing the fruitful exchange between the lyric and the epic back to Chinese modern literature through a quest of historical consciousness guided by aching feelings.²⁷ Song Qu and Song Wei insist on the term "epic" for two reasons: first, with Chinese contemporary poetry manifesting some patterns of Western literature, epic writing can situate the former internationally; second, as a genre of cultural history, epic enables us to reevaluate people's "long-time suffering" ("长时期的苦难") under Mao's reign.²⁸ The Song brothers describe these objectives as "vertical inheritance and horizontal appropriation" ("纵的继承和横的移植"),²⁹ where an organic integration of the epic and the lyrical would lead toward the dynamism of the international and the national.

²⁶ Hegel G. W. F., *Mei Xue (Di San Juan Xia Ce)* 美学(第三卷下册) [Aesthetics (III: b)], trans. Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (The Commercial Press, 1981), 108.

²⁷ Song Qu 宋渠 and Song Wei 宋玮, "Zhe shi yi ge xuyao shishi de shidai" 这是一个需要史诗的时代 [This Era Needs Epic], in *Cichang yu Mofang: Dangdai Shige Chaolin Huigu (Xinbao Shilun Juan)* 磁场与魔方：当代诗歌潮流回顾（新潮诗论卷），ed. Wu Simin 吴思敬, (Beijing Normal University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Song 宋 and Song 宋, 100.

²⁹ Song 宋 and Song 宋, 99.

Even though the Song brothers intended to vindicate Chinese contemporary literature, their submission to the Eurocentric assumption represented by Hegel shows the compromised nature of their fervent promotion of the epic. But they paved the road for many aspiring epic experiments in the 1980s, in particular, Haizi's "The River" ("河流") and "But Water, Water" ("但是水、水"), Jiang He's "The Sun and Its Reflection" ("太阳和他的反光"), and Yang Lian's "Giant Wild Goose Pagoda" ("大雁塔") and "Norlang" ("诺日朗"). These poems project a mythopoetic power onto the Chinese landscape, monumental cultural artifacts, and ancient tales, in order to instigate emotional and even sublime feelings which can be further channeled into an enthusiasm for social change and a yearning for cultural revival.³⁰ With these practices achieving extensive length, transcendental poetic subjectivity, and revelation on the nation's destiny, poets and readers became more confident about the potential of reinventing the epic genre. For example, in 1985, Xie Mian, an acclaimed literary scholar of post-Mao poetry, evaluated this "obvious creative trend to pursue epic qualities in poetry" ("追求诗歌的史诗性, 已经明显成为一种创作潮流") as follows:

史诗性的追求标志着诗歌的大跨度前进。当年为着变革艺术而集聚以显示力量的诗歌, 已从诗对社会生活的直接关照中走出, 也从仅仅是个人心史的精微传达中走出。诗歌在追求多种层次的组合, 而不再是单一的对于现实的反映和情绪的反映。诗的价值观念有了完全的转换, 不求近切而显示超脱。在艺术上一个明显的迹象就是: 在东方和西方的艺术借鉴上发生了重心的转换。开始, 他们从封闭的状态中醒悟, 有一股扫荡旧习的热情, 他们把旧光[sic]投向了西方的现代艺术, 萌生了所谓横向移植的观念。一旦接受了现代艺术的洗礼, 东方民族深厚丰富精神文化的磁场吸引他们回归; 加上历史反思的纵深推移, 很多韵思辨都集聚到对于中国文化和民族心理结构的剖析上去。³¹

³⁰ Some insightful articles on epics in the eighties include Jiayan Mi's "Poetics of Navigation: River Lyricism, Epic Consciousness, and Post-Mao Sublime Poemscapes," Chan Tah Wei's "Heroic Transformation and Narrative Logic in Jianghe's 'Modern Mythologized Epic'" (《江河“现代神话史诗”的英雄转化与叙事思维》), and He Zhaotian's "The Problematic Understanding of Lyricism and Time during the Epic Heat of the 1980s" (《作为问题的八十年代史诗热中的抒情理解与时间理解》). Notably, these three scholars are based in the U.S., Taiwan, and mainland China respectively. Their shared interest attests to the importance of epic writing in post-Mao poetry.

³¹ Xie Mian 谢冕, "Shi zai chaoyue ziji — lun dangdai shi de shishixing" 诗在超越自己——论当代诗的史诗性 [Poetry is Surpassing Itself: A Discussion of the Epic Qualities of Contemporary Poetry], in *Huang He sanshi zhounian jingpin wenku · wenxue pinglun* 黄河三十周年精品文库·文学评论, ed. Du Xuewen 杜学文 (Northern Arts Publishing House, 2015), 8.

The pursuit of epic qualities marks a huge step forward in poetry. Poetry of the past few decades served to revolutionize art and to mobilize the power [of the masses], and now poetry roots itself in direct attention to social life and precise conveyance of individual thoughts and feelings. Poetry is pursuing a multi-dimensional integration, not just the sole reflection of reality and emotion. The values of poetry are completely transformed, pursuing not what is right before us but what transcends us. An obvious artistic sign is that poetry changes its emphasis in its borrowing of Eastern and Western cultural legacy. In the beginning, poets woke up from self-isolation. They turned their eyes to Western modernist art with a passion for sweeping away past tradition, practicing the so-called synchronic appropriation. After poetry was baptized by modernist art, the rich and profound Eastern culture attracted poets to return. With diachronic reflections on history, many rhythms, thinking, and judgments reconvene in the analysis of the Chinese culture and the Chinese people's structure of feeling.

After a few years of practice, Chinese poets not only specify modernist long poems as their primary references but also gain growing independence: instead of appropriating the extensive form of Western epic to structure the Chinese experience, they are imagining a new form with its content, rhythm, and cognition all rooted in the Chinese literary history. Perhaps this turn explains why “epic” is used not so much as the name of a genre but as a group of poetic qualities: in the sequence of Xie’s elaboration, these qualities include transcendental perspectives that obscure concrete and embodied experience, historical reflections grounded in nationalistic objectives, and the ambition of organizing a structure of sensibility.

So far, we see how contemporary American and Chinese long poems, despite the fact that they emerged from very different literary traditions and historical conditions, share some features: both treat modernist long poems like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound, and *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams as their foundation; both consciously veer away from the narrative to the lyric. Their resonance grows more evident, if we consider the gradual disappearance of the word “epic” from the Chinese literary discourse, after Haizi’s suicide, Jiang He’s move to the U.S. in the 1980s, and Yang Lian’s exile from China after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. These biographical details of poets who identify themselves as epic writers were symptomatic of larger social changes. From the readers’ perspective, the Zeitgeist of utilitarianism and mercantilism brought by

liberal economic policy made epic anachronistic. Not only is it expensive to print and time-consuming to read, but its replacement of concrete experience with sublime visions is also at odds with popular pursuits of productivity and material enjoyment. From the poets' perspective, the profit-driven popular culture, the cruel crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests, and the tightened cultural policy following the crackdown forced them to question the social efficacy of literature. It seems that poetry can only bring suffering and death, as stated by Haizi in his epic *The Sun*: "Besides death/ What can we gain/ Besides dying tragically/ How can we be glorified" ("除了死亡/还能收获什么/除了死得惨烈/还能怎样辉煌").³² With passionate voices, magnificent views, and totalizing ethos becoming unviable, the widespread demoralization resulted in a recalibration of the long poem: the solemn history that is too heavy to bear needs to be disseminated into the quotidian and felt in fragments; enthusiastic lyricism needs to be replaced by calm intellectual meditations and patient weighing of social and political rhetoric³³; the heroic, messianic, and even martyrly voice needs to be channeled into practical wisdom that can overcome the banality of everyday life. It is in this context that we find the decreased usage of "epic" in poetry and poetics of the 1990s, and the establishment of "the long poem" as the consensual term for poetry exhibiting impressive length, inclusive content, relentlessly self-reflexive metapoetic discussions, and evident insecurity about its own content, form, and social efficacy.

Emerging Paradigms for the Long Poem

Seeming descriptive and neutral, the term "long poem" is not uncontested. Sometimes, opposition concerns the very intention of the term, namely, to underminie the intimidating

³² Haizi 海子, *Haizi Shi Quanji* 海子诗全集 [Collected Poems of Haizi], ed. Xichuan 西川 (China Writer Publishing House, 2009), 577. This is a quote from "The Sun·Decapitation" ("太阳·断头篇"), which takes the form of the drama and serves as the first part of *The Sun: A Septology* (《太阳·七部书》). According to Xichuan, the editor of *Collected Poems of Haizi*, who is also a major poet of the long poem himself, Haizi considered this section as a failure and intended to destroy it.

³³For details, see discussions on the concept of "midlife writing" ("中年写作") in the nineties, especially by Ouyang Jianghe and Xiao Kaiyu.

connotations of “epic,” so that poems of considerable length remain accessible to contemporary readers and writers. But as shown by Susan Stanford Friedman, this modesty may lead us to underappreciate the difficulties encountered by long poem practitioners. In particular, women poets, historically excluded from epic writing, still wrestle with “the phallic codes” of the long poem.³⁴ This kind of challenge originates from different critical priorities—for advocates of the long poem, the emphasis is the modernization of a traditional form, while for Friedman it is feminism—and such insufficiency in terminology can often be partially remedied by additional explanation.

More often, complaints foreground potential self-contradiction within the genre of the long poem, raising issues that need to be addressed with some reconfiguration of existing literary conventions. In particular, a different temporal awareness in reading and living is required. As Edgar Allan Poe stated, in a quote that appears in almost all scholarly discussions of the long poem, “I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, ‘a long poem,’ is simply a flat contradiction in terms.”³⁵ For Poe, the long poem’s large-scale unity (as an extensive work to be read “at a single sitting”) fails to convey aesthetic excitement, which is a momentary, unsustainable experience validating all poetry.³⁶ Certainly, our previous tracking of how the long poem navigates the tension between the epic and the lyric has already revealed that unity is no longer the prerequisite of the long poem. Sudden revelation requested by Poe tends to be unconvincing and infeasible in the contemporary world. The assumption that a long poem needs to be read at a single sitting implies an uninterrupted, slow rhythm of life that can no longer to be taken for granted. But Poe’s argument is still operative in our conception of the long poem, with many poets and critics feeling obliged to either justify or apologize for the genre’s incapacity to sustain aesthetic effects and even the poets’ intention.

³⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, “When a ‘Long’ Poem Is A ‘Big’ Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women’s Twentieth-Century ‘Long Poems,’” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. (ed. and introd.) Warhol and Diane Price (ed. and introd.) Herndl (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 724.

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays: A Library of America College Edition*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn and G. R. Thompson, Library of America edition (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1431.

³⁶ Poe, 1431.

For instance, in Canto CXVI, Ezra Pound first declares proudly that “I have brought the great ball of crystal;/who can lift it?”; he immediately shifts into a defeated tone, admitting that “And I am not a demigod, I cannot make it cohere.”³⁷ Conversely, other people argue that the long poem is sustainable, that the only thing sustained is digression. In “The Longing of the Long Poem,” Peter Middleton suggests that failure is constitutive of modern long poems: their scopes necessitate constant inquiries and hesitations, and thus the final poems will reveal themselves as a disappointment to the poets’ ambition and assertion when they just start writing.³⁸ Rachel DuPlessis describes the long poem as “creolized, inclusive, errant, omnivorous, palimpsestic, and over-written.”³⁹ She holds that despite its impressive scope, a poem’s finite length will always fall short before these sinuous and seemingly infinitely extendable threads of contemporary experience can be exhausted. She ventures further to propose that even though the long poem is “on principle inadequate within its own excess,” “its failure or inadequacy is its triumph.”⁴⁰ Manifesting sustained incompleteness (both in its curation of disconnected moments and scenes and its acknowledgment of its destined insufficiency), the long poem turns from failure to triumph, as the unity that Poe yearned for changes from the criterion of poetic success to “putative perfections beyond time” awaiting deconstruction.⁴¹

Regarding contemporary reality as entangled, filled with contingency, and processually formed, recent poets and critics further designate the long poem as the medium whose capaciousness can act out a multilayered, non-linear, and incomplete temporality. This belief has already sprouted in Louis Zukofsky’s half-rhetorical-and-half-genuine question in 1969:

I feel that life makes the curve. That’s why Williams kept adding to *Paterson*; he found he had more and more to say and that it was all part of the poem. (You know, the poet is insatiable. I could go on talking forever.) Otherwise, you get down to the old argument, there is no such

³⁷ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Reprint edition (New York: New Directions, 1996), 795–6.

³⁸ Peter Middleton, “The Longing of the Long Poem,” *Jacket* 40, accessed April 5, 2025, <http://jacketmagazine.com/40/middleton-long-poem.shtml>.

³⁹ Rachel DuPlessis, “Lyrical and Experimental Long Poems: Intersections,” in *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the Rhetoric of North American Avant-Gardism, 1963-2008*, ed. J. Mark Smith (McGill-Queen’s Press, 2013), 50.

⁴⁰ DuPlessis, 50.

⁴¹ DuPlessis, 50.

thing as a long poem; there are some good lines, and so forth. Maybe, I don't know. A long poem is merely more of a good thing, shall I put it that way?⁴²

Lived experience, creative impulse, and the resulting long poems are curves—serpentine, inflating, constantly adding upon themselves to reflect changes over time. In the same vein, Ron Silliman argues that “longpoem” integrates life and poetry more effectively because of its representation of time. In contrast to short poems that often strive to condense themselves into some absolute, timeless entity, the long poem presents atemporal visions like sudden emotional outbursts and transcendent revelations as “moment[s] of irony” that impress readers as consistency only because they are too overwhelming to be grasped.⁴³ Combining multiple temporalities, such as past, present, future, public cultural legacy, private reading history, etc., these moments manifest “entropy.”⁴⁴ To complicate time in the long poem even further, DuPlessis maintains that in addition to the compositional process, “there is hardly one ideal atemporal reading experience. Reading a long poem involves you in various changing temporalities, as you try to negotiate its extent in space and time, your relative pleasure in it, and even your time for reading it.”⁴⁵

As mentioned earlier, the term “long poem” in the Chinese context reflects many disappointments circulating in literary circles—the hope for democracy and change, the belief in the social power of poetry, and the ambition of reimagining Chinese cultural legacy and national characters to avoid future calamities. In 1990, Zang Di's famous long poem “Before Edgar Snow's Tomb” (“在埃德加·斯诺墓前”) declares, “This red freehand brushwork appears on the white paper/ we will not call it a masterpiece/ even though sometimes, I may say/ this is the blunting beauty” (“出现在白纸

⁴² L. S. Dembo and Louis Zukofsky, “Louis Zukofsky,” *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 2 (1969): 218.

⁴³ “Longpoem” is a term coined by Silliman to emphasize that the long poem is not only poetry that is materially long (e.g., requiring many pages to print, requiring a long time to write, etc.) but also a particular poetic tradition. Ron Silliman, “As to Violin Music: Time in the Longpoem,” *Jacket* 27, accessed April 5, 2025, <http://jacketmagazine.com/27/silliman.html>.

⁴⁴ Silliman, “As to Violin Music: Time in the Longpoem.”

⁴⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *A Long Essay on the Long Poem: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Practices* (University of Alabama Press, 2023), 6.

上的这幅鲜红的写意画/ 我们不会称之为杰作/ 虽然有时, 我会说/ 这是美在卷刃”。⁴⁶

While Chinese readers are so used to the color red being associated with sublime meanings like nationalist and socialist ideals, massive campaigns, and martyrdom throughout the twentieth century, Zang uncovers one referential meaning of the symbol that is often deliberately effaced, namely actual bloodshed. Even though collective narratives—some imposed by the official discourse and others formed because of shared emotional needs—have saturated our language, the poet believes that personal voices can still be visible through a careful distinction between the personal and the collective, the everyday and the historic. As the penultimate quatrain of the poem contends, “Dear Sir, silence is not any/ profound answer. In other words: just as day minus night/ does not equal zero, just as sunshine plus moonlight/ does not equal all the warmth we receive in a day” (“亲爱的先生, 静寂并不是什么/ 深奥的回答。换句话说: 就像昼减去夜/ 并不等于零, 就像阳光加上月光/ 并不等于我们一日所能得到的全部温暖”).⁴⁷ Zang envisions a kind of individually oriented poetry that can bring some comfort, when the official triumphant rhetoric (represented by Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*) and the unofficial nihilistic sentiment (represented by intellectuals’ “silence”) appear equally impotent. Specifically, as a form that incoherently reveals the inexhaustibility of contemporary reality, the long poem points us to residuals (the difference between day and night, which symbolize hope and pain respectively) and lacks (feelings left uncovered by the sum of sunshine and moonlight, which symbolize reality and poetry respectively), while collective narratives adhere to strict arithmetic principles to normalize different experiences and perspectives.

Discovered by a turn to the personal and the quotidian, these residuals and lacks evince new potentials for the long poem after the waning of epic ambitions. A popular term circulating in the

⁴⁶ Zang Di 臧棣, *Feng Chui Cao Dong* 风吹草动 [Blowing Winds Moving Grass] (China Workers Press, 2000), 244.

⁴⁷ Zang 臧, 257.

criticism of the genre from the millennium until today is “individualized imagination of history” (“个人历史想象力”). Initially proposed by Chen Chao, the “individualized imagination of history” is an effort to reflect on how the admission of minute details, humble voices, and personal predilections into poetry may offer sociohistorical insights previously unavailable.⁴⁸ On the one hand, Chen acknowledges that in the 1990s, poetic attention was redirected from relatable and collective experiences to individual lives and expressions; on the other hand, he is anxious that this stylistic turn may indulge poets in personal pleasures and restrict their imaginative intervention into the broader society. Chen argues that poets need to reflect on “how to coordinate the demonstration of real, individual lives with that of concrete historical context, and how to extract hidden historical qualities from detailed and anonymous personal experience” (“如何在真切的个人生活和具体的历史语境的真实性之间达成同步展示，如何在提取细节的匿名的个人经验中所隐藏着的历史品质”).⁴⁹ While these questions sound like a general paradigm for poetry in general, Chen’s textual examples focus on long poems, indicating a latent belief that scope is a convenient way to accumulate quotidian details into social significance. He is particularly drawn to moments where words change meanings as they are transported from personal contexts into various social usages, revealing how power structures reflect, tamper, and repress lived experience. With its capaciousness enabling poets to track the subtle process through which ideologies infiltrate language and life, the long poem bridges personal reflections with social criticism.⁵⁰ Since then, whether a long poem exhibits an “individualized imagination of history” has become an evaluative standard of the genre. For instance, well-known

⁴⁸ The concept started to take shape in Chen’s conversation with Li Zhiqing in 1996; see Chen Chao 陈超 and Li Zhiqing 李志清, “Shi de Xiangxiangli ji Qita—Wen yu Da” 诗的想象力及其它—问与答 [Poetry’s Imagination and Other Issues—Questions and Answers], *Mountain Flowers*, no. 5 (1996): 55–57. A comprehensive development of the concept can be found in his monograph Chen Chao 陈超, *Gerenhua Lishi Xiangxiangli de Shengcheng* 个人化历史想象力的生成 [The Formation of Individualized Imagination of History], (Peking University Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Chen 陈, *Gerenhua Lishi Xiangxiangli de Shengcheng* 个人化历史想象力的生成 [The Formation of Individualized Imagination of History], 12.

⁵⁰ Chen 陈, 1–30.

scholars like Jiang Tao and Yan Lianjun argue that many long poems in the twenty-first century fail: even though those poems' attentiveness to private experience and idiosyncratic use of words can deconstruct power dynamics in communal and official meaning-making, their deconstructions target local linguistic phenomena and proceed unsystematically—all too fragmented to propose an alternative sense of history and society that might serve as a less pernicious ground for individual survival.⁵¹

As shown by these critics' works, the dearth of such imaginative capacity is far more readily found than instances of its fulfillment. In my opinion, this phenomenon cannot be attributed to the innate insufficiencies of those contemporary long poems which they dismiss as *la petite histoire*—anecdotal, incoherent, and consciously avoiding generalizable lessons about life. If we follow these critics' starting assumption that contemporary long poems resist collective heroic narratives, a thorough resistance can hardly appear otherwise than as fragmented and trivial. Otherwise, long poems will easily fall into self-contradiction, where a totalizing narrative of history based on the poets' own imagination will be imposed on readers. Reading long poems is a strenuous process, and systematic progression and coherent argument can appear irresistibly appealing. If that is the case, official propaganda is replaced by the coercive vision of a poetic “demigod,” as Pound would say. In fact, Chen, Jiang, and Yan intend to deconstruct history only to the degree that the official and oppressive structures are defused. They believe that the concept of history must still manifest certain structures if poets and readers are to have a context for their reflections on how to think and feel more

⁵¹ See Jiang Tao 姜涛, "Lishi xiangxiangli' ruhe keneng: ji bu changshi de yuedu zhaji" "历史想象力"如何可能:几部长诗的阅读札记 [How to Make “the Imagination of History” Possible: Notes on Reading a Few Long Poems], *Literature & Art Studies*, no. 4 (2013): 13–24; and Jiang Tao 姜涛, “Gerenhua lishi xiangxiangli: zai dangdai jingshen shi de gouzao zhong” 个人化历史想象力: 在当代精神史的构造中 [Individualized Imagination of History: Amid the Constructive History of Contemporary Thoughts], *Xin Shi Ping Lun*, no. 1 (2016): 21–46; and Yan Lianjun 颜炼军, "Daguo Xiezuohuo Xiangwang Da Shi Da Fei —— yi sige Wenben Weili Tan Dangdai Hanyu Changshi de Xiezuokunjing" 大国写作”或向往大是大非——以四个文本为例谈当代汉语长诗的写作困境 ["Great Country Writing" or Longing for Fundamental Values——Taking Four Samples to Discuss the Plight of Contemporary Chinese Long Poem Writing], *Jiang Han Xue Shu* 34, no. 2 (2015): 19–25.

authentically, as they navigate other material, cultural, and social conditions prevalent in contemporary life. These scholars are envisioning a structure of the long poem, where the authoritarian discourse can be dismantled without the illusion of complete freedom, and where individuals are fully aware of their limitations without being deprived of the belief in agency and creativity.

Recursive Expansion

As typical conceptions of the long poem, Pound, Middleton, and DuPlessis's rhetoric of failure, Zukofsky and Silliman's serpentine and intertwined temporality, Zang Di's porous algorithms, and Chen, Jiang, and Yan's yearning for a balance between destructuralization and structuralization converge upon several interrelated formal qualities: 1) constraints—rather than a transcendental poetic voice with absolute freedom of expression, all writers imagine a modest poetic ego grounded in some kind of constraints such as the mortal life, sociopolitical pressure, and predetermined compositional rules; 2) processuality—not only are revelation and coherence temporary effects, but the sense of failure during the writing of a long poem can soon give way to supplements and revisions; 3) self-reflexivity—the long poem should be characterized by various reference to the self, such as returns to previous moments to bend temporality, regular evaluations of the very poem that is currently being written, and meditations on how the poem's perspective is contextualized in specific poetic traditions and real-life power structures; 4) contingency—the writing of the long poem depends as much on the successful execution of previous qualities as on their failures, so that improvisation in reading, writing, and living can be incorporated to undermine and even subvert rigid constraints and mechanical processes.

These features can be further grasped as recursivity—a looping development where a system (in our context, a poem in the course of formation that aggregates variegated words, ideas, and emotions) determines its current existence by referring to its previous existence. Mathematically speaking, recursivity can be written as $f(x + 1) = f(f(x) + a)$, a nonlinear process of becoming

where an item's previous forms are embedded in its current expression; geometrically visualized, recursivity manifests dynamic patterns where deviations are embedded in repetitions, like the Fibonacci spiral. This quality is latent in familiar shapes (e.g., scrolls, folds, and concentric shapes, as this thesis will investigate in detail), sets (e.g., the natural number set where each item is the previous one plus one), mathematical reasoning (e.g., mathematical induction where an assumption is generalized step-by-step, from the base case to case n , to case $(n+1)$, and on to infinite cases), and automation (e.g., the mechanisms through which large language models, which are at the center of technological and cultural debate nowadays, interpret prompts and generate responses).

The long poem's reference to recursivity in poetics and practice is concomitant with and even interdependent on other international poetic and artistic movements in the second half of the twentieth century, all presenting artistic creation as procedural, compromised, and embedded in material and cultural contexts. These international trends include the Concrete Poetry movements of the 1950s through the 1970s in countries like Brazil, Switzerland, and Taiwan; procedural writing groups including the OuLiPo group in the 1960s based in France, the Stuttgart group in the 1960s based in Germany, the Language poets in the late 1960s and the 1970s in the United States; the rise of media poetry, and the Surrealist and Situationist turn in other artistic forms like René Viénet's film *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* and John Cage's 4'33".

Moreover, recursivity manifests itself as a crucial concept in the philosophy of mind. For instance, neuroscientists have realized that several faculties we once designated as unique to humans, like language, episodic memory, and mental time travel, have rudimentary expressions in other animals. What seems to distinguish human beings is recursive thinking, with which these faculties can evolve more fully.⁵² While this argument destabilizes the binary between the human and the non-human from

⁵² Michael C. Corballis, *The Recursive Mind: The Origins of Human Language, Thought, and Civilization - Updated Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

a materialist perspective, Yuk Hui's philosophical employment of the looping development in *Recursivity and Contingency* presents a narrative of the history of philosophy, in which recursive thinking initiated the turn from mechanism to organism in the late eighteenth century. Besides creating a new philosophical condition to subvert the binary between the machine and the living organism, Hui suggests that recursivity offers the possibility to philosophize the diverse, culturally specific ways that life coexists with technology, so that we may further launch a meta-historical criticism on the imagined binary between mechanism and organism.⁵³

This interdisciplinary overview intends to justify the so-called “weak” comparative approach adopted in this thesis, where American and Chinese long poems without evident historical connections are paired together for analysis based on their employment of three recursive shapes—the scroll, the fold, and the concentric structure. Even though my selection of texts and methods of comparison can sound unconventional, if not arbitrary, my subject matter is an unconsolidated category that orients itself through miscellaneous materials, cultural and temporal specificities, and poets' individual predilections. I believe its interpretive method should be anything but consistent and conclusive.

In *Apples and Oranges*, the classic work on weak comparison, Bruce Lincoln proposes that “comparison is never innocent, but always interested.”⁵⁴ My selection of texts is invested in contingencies as much as explainable patterns. As Lincoln points out, conventional comparative projects foreground generalizable findings, genetic relations, and influence studies, all focusing on similarities.⁵⁵ This phenomenon indicates the associations of similarities with historical verifiability and even replicability in the future, provided that certain historical conditions are fulfilled. Through pairing writers without direct influence on each other, I circumvent the pressure of evident historical

⁵³ Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

⁵⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 25.

⁵⁵ Lincoln, 26.

explanations to advocate for my own belief that determinism and coincidence often imply each other. For instance, the use of the same idiosyncratic shape as the medium by two different poets is a coincidence; but this seemingly whimsical choice not only determines the structural similarities of their poems but also leads them to shared lexica, motifs, tropes, and poetic visions. As soon as we try to establish a more solid correlation between the material and symbolic dimensions of the poems, we realize that the same material form often unfolds in widely different trajectories before arriving at those similar themes, and claims of “sameness” and “similarity” have to remain temporary. Yet we also cannot relegate the comparability in material formats, poetic forms, and content to pure contingency, because such convergence through divergences shows that within the context of globalization, no cultures and no two specific individuals are completely irrelevant to each another. Thus, evaluative descriptions like similarity versus difference, influence versus coincidence, determinism versus contingency, and even weak versus strong comparisons are really a matter of where we begin and conclude our interpretation.

My comparison will proceed recursively: each chapter zigzags between an American and a Chinese poem, demonstrating how the reading of one poem can inform and be informed by the reading of another. Incorporating recursive geometry into literary criticism, this thesis aspires to be more than a descriptive analysis of what I perceive as an emerging aesthetics of the long poem out of shared contemporary experience like industrialization, diaspora, globalization, geopolitical conflicts, and the sense of individual subjectivity as alienated, fragmented, and constrained. More importantly, I explore how this aesthetics has applications beyond the six poems in this thesis, with recursivity inspiring new ways of conducting lives with individual improvisation, interpersonal connections, and social responsibility.

The first chapter considers two poems written on scrolls—*Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) by A. R. Ammons and *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains* (2015) by Zhai

Yongming. It explores how the dynamics of a long strip of paper guide our reading and writing, structure our temporal experience, and secure a sense of continuity that does not rely on a constant supply of poetic muse. Borrowing theories from kinematics, I discuss not only the scroll's imposition of formal and prosodic constraints but also its initiation of an improvisational writing experience, which guides the poets to shared concerns like pathos, promenade, and the problematics of the sublime. This interplay between limitation and creativity leads both poets to reflect on how they may redirect their attention to earthliness against the backdrop of disorienting contemporary culture. The second chapter discusses two elegies that incorporate text chunks of different themes, forms, and origins—*The Midnight* (2003) by Susan Howe and *An Ideal Couple in the Water-Paint Garden: Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan 1642—1651* (2019) by Bai Hua. I argue that these poems' coming into being, their digressive selecting and structuring of materials, and their alternations between verse and prose can be fruitfully interpreted through the figure of the fold, which has a variety of applications in mathematics, including manifolds, catastrophic singularities, bifurcations, converging series, and fractals. Howe and Bai use the figure's connected discontinuities to conceive lyricism as porous, processual, and intertextual, further envisioning a lyric redemption diffused in the quotidian and accessible to limited human beings. The last chapter concerns two autobiographies of concentric structure—Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (first version 1980), which is comparable to a series of enlarging squares, and Yang Lian's *Narrative Poems* (2011), which forms a set of concentric circles shrinking and expanding according to the rhythm of Benjamin Britten's cello suites. Analyzing how concentric shapes embody synchronicity and diachronicity, I regard their relations to time as reflective of two kinds of understanding of how writing models living: providing a holistic and revelatory grasp of life versus threading together a series of trivial and often unconnected events. The poets maintain an equilibrium between these views as they centripetally reinforce poetic subjectivities and centrifugally mobilize the social efficacy of the constructed subjectivities. Recursivity reveals a space where poets,

readers, and even characters in these poems can encounter and recognize each other, despite the assumption that attention, lyricism, and subjectivity are fractured in the contemporary world.

Chapter One: The Unrolling Scroll

Around the end of 1963, A. R. Ammons, an American poet who first established his name by composing lyrics that often did not exceed one page in length, determined to write his first long poem. He purchased an adding-machine tape in a House & Garden store, inserted it into his typewriter, and typed down his daily thoughts. The project started on December 6th and ended on January 10th of the following year when the tape, about three inches wide and a hundred feet long, had been unrolled to its end. Entitled *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and published in 1965, the book version extends over 200 pages. It consists of only one sentence, with colons threading numerous independent clauses together.¹ In 1991, Zhai Yongming, a Chinese woman poet who rose to fame in the post-Mao era through her serial and long poems, visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and viewed Chinese scroll paintings in person for the first time. Describing this experience as “almost a spiritual baptism” (“几乎是一个精神上的洗礼”) that fundamentally changed her writing, Zhai has remained intrigued by Chinese traditional art ever since.² Twenty years later at a friend’s place,³ she came across a reproduction of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, a handscroll painting by Huang Gongwang produced between 1348 and 1350. The gradual unrolling of this replica inspired Zhai to devote her next three years to the writing of a long poem. The poem, *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains* (《随黄公望游富春山》), was published in 2015. Zhai designed her writing project so that it required roughly the same amount of time to be finished as Huang’s scroll. Imagining the long poem and the handscroll as containers, she further decided as she embarked on the project that the “capacity of the poem should correspond to that of the long scroll” (“用长诗容量实际上也是为了对应

¹ More precisely speaking, there are two periods throughout the poem, with both marking the end of direct quotes. The last line of the poem also ends in a colon—“so long.” See A. R. Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 205.

² Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Changshi Xiezu de Kenengxing” 长诗写作的可能性 [The Possibility of Writing the Long Poem], *Today* 128, no. 4 (2020): 123.

³ Zhai dated this experience either in 2010 or 2011 in her essays and interviews.

长卷的容量”)⁴ The limited edition of the long poem appeared in the *Oribon*, or the concertina format, which consists of a long strip of paper and thereby retains the continuity of the scroll. This design reveals the close association between scroll paintings and long poems in Zhai’s mind, for *Oribon* has been a common alternative to the scroll format since the Tang dynasty.

On initial inspection, the adding machine tape and the handscroll painting embody almost opposite connotations: the former reflects mechanization,⁵ and the latter evokes art and nature. Yet the poems converge by treating the scroll as their central motif and procedural constraints which qualify their production: the length and width of Ammons’s poem are defined by the dimension of the tape; as for Zhai’s poem, its required time of composition, its images, as well as the sequence in which the images appear are loosely determined by the scroll.

A kinematic analysis⁶ of the scroll format will clarify the two poems’ structural similarity. The exchange between two motions—the rotational and the translational—characterizes the scroll. Initially assuming the cylindrical shape, the scroll embodies rotational motion. When being unrolled, the rotating cylinder performs a linear displacement perpendicular to its axes, a movement scientifically known as translational motion. In this manner, a piece of flat paper can become a cylinder and vice versa, in the rolling and the unrolling of the scroll respectively. Moreover, because of plastic deformation, the unrolled paper still coils up autonomously. The mechanism of handscroll painting is more complicated than that of the tape. A handscroll has two cylinders—a round roller on the left

⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Sui Huang Gongwang You Fuchunshan* 随黄公望游富春山 [Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountain], (CITIC Press, 2015), 2.

⁵ In 1967, Ammons edited a volume collecting “poems having to do with science and technology” for *Chelsea*. In his discussion of the selection principle, Ammons argues, “Much of what is impersonally, flatly new to us arises from scientific insight and technological innovation. It is part of the result of a poem to personalize and familiarize, to ingest and acquaint—to bring feelings and things into manageable relationships.” See A. R. Ammons, *Set in Motion*, Poets on Poetry (University of Michigan Press, 1996), 11. Indeed, as the analysis of this chapter will show, *Tape* is a project exemplifying this statement. The tape format fundamentally changed Ammons’s experience of reading, writing, and living.

⁶ For a detailed history of science concerning how kinematics established itself as a discipline and how it contributed to the incorporation of the cylinder (a geometric solid we find in the roller of the scroll format) into machines and aesthetics in the eighteenth-century Europe, see Helmut Müller-Sievers’s *The Cylinder: Kinematics of the Nineteenth Century*.

end of the long horizontal painting and a semi-circular stave at the right end. The natural tendency for the paper to coil back is addressed by the traditional way of appreciating the handscroll, where the viewer is expected to unroll the painting from the roller with the left hand while rolling it back around the stave with the right hand, so that only an arm-length section of the scroll is exposed at a time.

Integrating rotational motion and translational displacement, the kinematics of the scroll format emphasizes process and interactivity, creates a moving focalization to relativize its center, and makes boundaries generative. These features challenge the conception of reading and writing which we have come to consider normal through the use of codex books and detached sheets. While treating the scroll as the central motif may seem idiosyncratic, the two motions involved in the unrolling of the scroll—rotational and translational motions—are extensively represented in Western and Eastern literary traditions. In fact, both poets are drawn to the scroll in order to subvert the conventional connotations of these motions in poetry through proposing their combination.

A circle rotating around a fixed center is usually associated with structural integrity, unity, transcendence, and divinity. In *Thinking in Circles*, Mary Douglas shows that the influence of circular structure permeated ancient literary, religious, and divinatory texts; Ezra Pound, who deeply influenced Ammons and Zhai, imagined the circular motion as a symbol for a universal culture and perpetual dynamism, as he indicated in his manifestoes for the Vorticist movement in the 1910s. However, for Ammons, a totalizing circle connotes not a transcendence beyond individual perspectives bounded in space and time but a violent homogenization leading to nihilism: “we can approach/ unity only by the loss/ of things—a loss we’re unwilling/ to take—/ since the gain of unity/ would be a vision/ of something in the/ continuum of nothingness.”⁷ Zhai evokes a series of circular imagery in the eighteenth section of her long poem that reinforces the shape almost obsessively. In this section dedicated to *feng shui*, the ancient Chinese art of harmonizing landscape with its dwellers,

⁷ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 23.

we find the following lines: “low mountains connecting themselves into a circular configuration” (“低矮的丘山环抱为圆圜之势”); “there is a supporting hill in the front and an interlocked river in the back” (“前有案山后有环水”); “mountains and rivers encircle [the place]” (“周围山环水抱”).⁸ Although *feng shui* was derived from Chinese traditional cosmography and guided people’s daily living, these circular images are trivialized in Zhai’s context as unoriginal and commercial, for they are phrases extracted from an advertisement used by the National Palace Museum in Taiwan to promote a limited edition of the replicas of the painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. Despite the fact that the poet describes this cosmological interpretation of the painting in an admiring tone in the footnote, her decision of separating the advertisement from her own interpretation makes the latter sound like her wishful attempt at salvaging some remaining values from the circle that eventually fails to establish itself in the main text. In fact, even within the footnote, the poet adopts a rather apologetic tone for her appreciation, admitting that these “profound *feng shui* connotations” are specified partly in order to enhance “the commercial value of the painting” (“一幅画也有那么多的风水提示，当然是与画的商业价值有关”).⁹

While the transcendental unifying vision conventionally represented by the circle and the circular motion appears either prosaic or threatening, the linear motion provokes even more anxiety. As the shortest path between any two points, the straight line is often associated with men, things, and concepts whose progression cannot be disturbed, e.g., the uniform passage of time, the teleological and heroic narration, and the capitalist pursuit of efficiency. Certainly, these connotations constitute the core of Ammons’s project. Since the completion of the poem is solely judged by getting to the end of the tape, its intimidating length often tempts the poet to assume the shortest path

⁸ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 44.

⁹ Zhai 翟, 45.

possible, as shown by the following section where there is only one word per line: “well/ if/ it/ must/
be/ onward/ to/ the/ end,/ let’s/ get/ there/ in/ a/ hurry: or.”¹⁰

Such a wholehearted pursuit of attaining the final goal is slowed down by the hesitation of “or” in the last line, with the poet wondering whether this rapid advancement is “cheating.”¹¹ The scroll format reorients Ammons’s insistence on efficiency into an effort of attuning the rhythm of his poetic language to that of the tape, whose dynamic leads the poet to create one of the most imaginative moments in the long poem:

everytime the roll turns
it speeds up: as the
diameter decreases, the
revolutions per foot (rpf)
increase, so the poem
should rise to a pitch of
unwinding
at the end: a
spinning of diameter into
nothingness:¹²

The scroll format offers the image and the means to create intense lyrical experience. First, the tape’s accelerating rotation intensifies the poet’s excitement, to which he mobilizes other sensual organs in response. A scientific measuring unit, “revolutions per foot,” becomes the locale where synesthesia occurs—the audible rise in pitch, the visible acceleration of spinning, and the psychological excitement in reading of the very poem. Second, the tension between the flow of language and the narrow width of the tape results in effective line breaks. The line “it speeds up: as the” is constituted by monosyllabic words, most of which belong to parts of speech that carry comparatively incidental meaning; our reading of the line is thus speeded up. In the case of the two shrunken lines (“unwinding” and “nothingness:”), the empty space on the right side of the word enables a sudden drop of the

¹⁰ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 59.

¹¹ Ammons, 59.

¹² Ammons, 59.

excitement accumulated by the previous lines. In fact, as later sections of this chapter will show, the scroll format's rapid rotation and the possibility that the rotation will lead to a futile end form the primary tension of Ammons's and Zhai's long poems.

If, in Ammons's constrained project, the conception of writing as physically getting from one side of the paper to the other is brought forth to be challenged, so is the conception of narration as metaphorically moving from the beginning to a designed end. Ammons contrasts the trajectory of his poem with Odysseus's homecoming.¹³ The elongation of *Tape* is accompanied by so many stirrings, confusions, and delays that the poem "doesn't unwind/ into sequence: it stands/ still/ and stirs/ in itself like/ boiling water/ or hole of maggots: foam/ or crust can rise and/ sweep away [...]."¹⁴ Yet Odysseus's journey exhibits the opposite way of orienting oneself in the world: according to Ammons, the hero is focused on his return to his prior state to the extent of being heartless, and exclusively dependent on the immediate enactment of reciprocal justice to the extent of being ruthless.¹⁵ While Odysseus's insistence on destination and causality invites us to visualize *The Odyssey* as a linear thread connecting all events into direct relationships to each other, Ammons's metaphors for the tape—including "boiling water," "maggots," and rising "crust"—invites us to imagine how its unrolled part curls up after being temporarily flattened by the typewriter. These metaphors further reveal to us the kind of long poem Ammons intends to write. It is a poem that manifests some congruity just enough to be temporarily intelligible yet presents itself as an unoriented self-contradictory mess when readers attempt to generalize its local message to grasp it in its entirety: "unwinding and unwound, it/ coils

¹³ Another epic that is obliquely referred to in the composition of *Tape* is the *Divine Comedy*, for *Tape* consists of thirty-three entries, with each entry marking the writing of a single day. It is likely that the number thirty-three is referring to the number of cantos in each cantica in Dante's epic poem. This implicit reference highlights the importance of the scroll format. In Ernst Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Curtius argues that Dante's mystical vision is figured as a book, whose binding symbolizes the central organizing force of love. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 326–32. The fact that Ammons adopts a medium with a moving center suggests his conscious replacement of a totalizing symbol by multiple recurring, constantly revised themes.

¹⁴ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 9.

¹⁵ Ammons, 9, 29.

again on the floor/ into the unity of its/ conflicts.”¹⁶ In a letter to Harold Bloom written in 1970, Ammons explained how writing on the tape made him aware of the triviality of teleological ways of writing and living: “I made the narrative a matter of getting to the other end—so that the arbitrary cut-off point became absolutely functional, organic to the narrative. I hoped that this narrative of achieving a goal, getting to the other end, would be a criticism of goals in novels and in life, that we kid ourselves that we are reaching goals when, indeed, all we are reaching is the other end of our lives.”¹⁷ In other words, even though linear motion seems to be the primary momentum in *Tape*, it is diminished and even overcome by various associations Ammons attaches to the scroll throughout the course of the poem. The scroll reorients the pursuit of efficiency, progress, and causality toward a willingness to dwell in a confusing, often self-contradictory, and even potentially futile writing project.

In Zhai’s long poem, the linear movement across Huang’s handscroll painting is less absolute: unlike the unidirectionally unfurling tape, one can roll the handscroll in the opposite direction to review sections already seen whenever one wants. Conventionally, after finishing reading through the handscroll, one is expected to rotate the scroll in the opposite direction, so that the paper can be rewound on the roller for the convenience of the next reader. Viewers usually take this opportunity to appreciate the painting again in the reverse order. In fact, the undermining of unidirectional linear movement is one of the major inspirations Zhai obtains by investigating the handscroll format through the lens of her long poem. In the third section of the poem, she associates the temporal progression with “stepping on the textbooks and moving forward gradually” (“踩着教科书缓缓行”), revealing that such a linear conception of history is artificially imposed.¹⁸ She immediately points out that this linearity no longer speaks to the contemporary mindset, for which “everything is fragmented, from

¹⁶ Ammons, 10.

¹⁷ A. R. Ammons, *An Image for Longing: Selected Letters and Journals of A.R. Ammons, 1951-1974*, ed. Kevin McGuirk (Victoria, BC, Canada: ELS Editions, 2013), 328.

¹⁸ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 10.

people to things” (“一切皆为碎片，从人到物”).¹⁹ Despite being unintelligible to our mind, linearity further assumes an absolute control of the body of modern men, thereby contributing to self-alienation—the central tension in many of Zhai’s long poems including *Following Huang Gongwang*. In the eighth section, for instance, linearity characterizes and threatens contemporary life:

老人说：人生如流水线流转
你我只是来一个扔一个的废品
唯有机器不停地运转

年轻人唱：人生如流水线旋转
你我都将抛光锃亮
唯有机器不停地运转²⁰

Old people say: life is like the flowing streamline
You and I are just rejects discarded upon arrival
Only machines revolve perpetually

Young people sing: life is like the flowing streamline
You and I will be polished
Only machines revolve perpetually

Linearity symbolizes both the indifferent movement of time where elimination of senile people is inevitable and the profit-driven industrial society where individuals are depersonalized into standardized products on the streamline. Perpetual rotation, which used to be capable of elevating poets and readers to transcendental vision, can no longer liberate us from the homogenizing capitalist society. Instead, it reinforces the might of machines and the vulnerability of human beings.

The material and formal correspondence between Huang’s handscroll and Zhai’s long poem shifts readers’ attention from capitalist production to artistic production, where linearity is bent into complicated patterns. For instance, taking three years to complete, both the painting and the writing of the handscroll include multiple interruptions, suspensions, recommencements, and revisions, which

¹⁹ Zhai 翟, 10.

²⁰ Zhai 翟, 22.

disturb the insistence on efficiency and continuity in the industrial world. Formally speaking, Huang's painting, like most handscroll paintings, is based on horizontal composition. It assumes a unidirectionally moving point of view, whose continuity invites people to read the scroll linearly. Yet around the end of the first quarter of the painting, an inscription written by the court official Liang Shizheng under the instruction of Emperor Qianlong, which intended to authenticate the painting, interrupts the linear space and time. The scroll also continues beyond the end of the painting itself, to incorporate numerous colophons by the painter himself as well as the paintings' numerous collectors and appreciators. The inclusion of lengthy colophons recording the history, interpretations, and praises of paintings at the end of the handscrolls is a common practice. Neither is it unusual to find inscriptions by artists and eminent collectors within the paintings. According to the renowned scholar of Chinese art Wu Hung, the tradition of inscriptions and colophons creates "textual enclosure": these descriptions, which were originally inspired by the image, affect our current reading of the scroll as they turn around to identify the image.²¹

As Zhai makes her poem follow the handscroll linearly, the effect of textual enclosure finds an expression in self-supplementation and self-referentiality. Specifically, the long poem is divided into thirty sections. The poet imitates the tradition of adding authorial inscriptions on the painting by attaching notes to the end of each section. Meanwhile, in the first part of the long poem, i.e., the first fourteen sections, most poetic images are derived from Huang's painting, and their relative positions reproduce those in the painting. The second part of the long poem, from sections fifteen to thirty, repeats or appropriates many phrases and lines from the first part of the poem, as if the second part is a commentary on the first part, supplementing and reconsidering the latter. Presumably, this second half corresponds to the voluminous colophons at the end of the Fuchun scroll. Constituted by an

²¹ Hung Wu, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 44.

interpretation of the painting and two meta-interpretations of itself, the long poem manifests an embedded structure moderating the poet's linear reading across the scroll.

With general information regarding how the geometry and dynamic of the scroll instill intricacy into the form, plot, and conception of the poems laying the foundation for more in-depth discussion, this chapter will scrutinize how the scroll redirects attention in reading and writing by defying traditional strategies of organizing narratives, ascending to lyrical transcendence and epiphany, and ensuring continuity in the composition of a long poem. I argue that Ammons's and Zhai's engagements with the scroll format are constitutive to the two poets' poetics of the contemporary long poem as a distinct way of navigating contemporary life. Joan Retallack's analysis of John Cage proposes the term "geometries of attention," which will be a helpful notion in interpreting Ammons's and Zhai's experiments on the scroll. According to Retallack, our perception embodies certain structures determining what kind of information may enter our awareness. As for other happenings, we neglect them. To alert ourselves to the biases and limitations intrinsic to our perceiving capacity, it is necessary to shift our current geometries of attention, take previously neglected phenomena into account, and critically reflect on the former geometries.²² Extending this theory beyond visual shapes, Retallack employs "geometries" as a metaphor for what Cage himself would call "rhythmic structure[s]," as exemplified by the measured pauses in "Lecture on Nothing."²³ But since the strategy Ammons and Zhai opt for is confronting readers with an unusual visual format, we may apply Retallack's concept literally, inquiring how the geometric features of the scroll challenge the poets' habits of reading and writing, and how they further redirect their attention in observing their contemporary realities.

Vitality of Poetry

²² Joan Retallack, *The Poetical Wager* (University of California Press, 2003), 175–8.

²³ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 109.

“Attention” is not an unfamiliar word for scholarship on Ammons and Zhai. For instance, Andrew Epstein’s *Attention Equals Life* devotes a chapter to Ammons, arguing that *Tape* exhibits a “poetics of dailiness.”²⁴ According to Epstein, Ammons pays close attention to the quotidian, treats commonplace events as potential materials for poetry, and demonstrates a “salutary way of being in and responding to the world.”²⁵ Epstein also mentions the role played by the scroll format in reinforcing the poet’s attentiveness to the quotidian: the scroll turns poetry writing into a daily practice, requiring the poet to address small events that may seem to have little poetic significance at the first glance; its expansive scope inspires the poet to adopt “a logic of accretion and accumulation rather than teleology or narrative”; the rotating of the scroll and its arbitrary beginning and end register “both the continuity and the breaks, the repetition and the unpredictability, the *longueurs* and the flashes of heightened experience that constitute daily experience.”²⁶

Insightful as these comments are, the shape and dynamic of the scroll do not play a central role in Epstein’s reading: his description of *Tape* as constituted by “diary-like pages” downgrades the poem’s quintessential format to a mere visualization for the passing days, rather than the central symbol directing both Ammons’s writing and living.²⁷ Given the fact that after *Tape*, Ammons remained obsessed with the scroll composition and applied it to his other major works including his most acclaimed work *Garbage*, it seems important to inquire further²⁸: how does the unrolling tape

²⁴ Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 111.

²⁵ Epstein, 111.

²⁶ Epstein, 137, 139–40.

²⁷ Epstein, 139–40.

²⁸ According to Steven Schneider, Ammons’s *The Snow Poem* (1977), “Ridge Farm” (1987), *Garbage* (1993), and *Glare* (1997) were also composed on unrolling tapes. See Steven P. Schneider, ed., *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A.R. Ammons’s Long Poems* (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press, 1999), 10–12. In particular, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, Ammons’s conceptual and philosophical ruminations on form and attention, evokes many geometric features of the scroll format. Similarly, in Zhai’s case, writing *Following Huang Gongwang* enhanced her interest in the scroll format. Beyond the long poem, she employed the scroll format on her individual exhibition in Shanghai, between May 19th, 2020, and January 17th, 2021. Zhai created a photography scroll entitled “Among Intimate People” (《亲密的人中间》). She arranged a series of photos of her friends, which she took during a two-person exhibition she created with the poet Han Dong in 2018 in Nanjing, so that they resonate with a well-known tenth-century handscroll painting “The Night Revels of Han Xizai” by Gu Hongzhong. The photos were printed on a long piece of semi-transparent rice paper.

direct attention differently? Can this specific kind of attention cultivated through a deliberate project have wider applications in, for instance, our situatedness in the world? Before diving into these questions, a detour to the discussion of Ammons's method of "reading" is required, which will reveal itself to be an explanation of the scroll format's efficacy in reorienting attention.

Epstein is interested in the rendering of ordinary people and everyday events in contemporary American poetry, because he diagnoses that a crisis of attention characterizes contemporary life due to "rapid and dislocating cultural, political, and social transformations" and the "unprecedented spread of new media, communication technologies, advertising, and popular culture."²⁹ Shang Wei expresses similar concerns in the essay "A Twenty-First Century Visit to the Fuchun Mountain: Reading Zhai Yongming's *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains*" ("二十一世纪富春山居行：读翟永明《随黄公望游富春山》"), which served as the afterword when the poem was published. According to Shang, Zhai evokes a wide range of genres and forms that can provide visual excitement, e.g., video games, social media, film, experimental theater, and pattern poetry, in order to pose the following questions: "in this Era of Image-reading, why do we need to read Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* and how to do so? Is [the poem] a virtual way of participating in the Image-reading Era, or confronting it?"³⁰ Even though the word "attention" is not explicitly used in the essay, Shang's phrasing implies his belief that contemporary media have fundamentally changed the way we consume information. The public is attracted by rapidity, intensity, and visuality. Yet appreciating Huang's scroll painting requires a different way of looking and reading and compels us

²⁹ Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 3.

³⁰ Original: "在当今这个读图时代，为什么要读黄公望的《富春山居图》，又怎样读？这是以另一种虚拟方式加入读图时代，还是与之对抗？" See Shang Wei 商伟, "Ershiyi Shiji Fuchun Shanju Cing: du Zhai Yongming *Sui Huang Gongwang You Fuchun Shan*" 二十一世纪富春山居行：读翟永明《随黄公望游富春山》 [A Twenty-First Century Visit to the Fuchun Mountain: Reading Zhai Yongming's *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains*] in *Sui Huang Gongwang You Fuchun Shan* 随黄公望游富春山 [Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountain], by Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (CITIC Press, 2015), 105.

to establish a connection with the past, where people possess an unalienated relation to nature and art. Zhai's poem, as Shang aptly says, demonstrates an integration of her present personal reality and what may be generally termed as "tradition."³¹

The phrase "Image-reading Era" has been circulated in Chinese media study since the 1990s. Initially meant to describe the growing use of visual representation in journalism, it now refers to the profusion of images in all means of communication.³² The idiomatic pairing of "image" with "reading" instead of "viewing" sounds natural to Chinese speakers. But when Shang repeats the verb and uses Huang's painting as the object ("why do we need to read Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*"), the term insists on a way of looking at a painting that moves beyond registering its visible features. Circa 1790, Yuan Mei, a painter and poet of the Qing Dynasty, proposed that "painters speak of 'reading paintings.' I say paintings have nothing to be read, one reads their poetry."³³ Liang Shiqiu, a modern scholar of literature and art, wrote an essay "Reading Paintings" ("讀畫") based on this quote, arguing that "poetry" here means "poetic mood": "when we view a painting, we may appreciate the poetic mood hidden within it, but not all paintings embody a mood of poetry [...]. We say we read paintings, but in fact look for poetry in painting."³⁴ Liang further claims,

I think the best kinds of paintings are those that cannot be understood through reading. For as long as one speaks of "reading," one needs to go through the process of reasoning. Yet the beauty of paintings lies in directly addressing people's hearts and souls through the visual sense.

³¹ Shang 商, 107–8.

³² The earliest use of the phrase is found in Wu Changhua 吴昌华, "Xinwen Tupian Bianji Yanjiu" 新闻图片编辑研究 [A Study on the Editing of Journalistic Images] (Disi Jie Quanguo Xinwen Sheying Lilun Nianhu 第四届全国新闻摄影理论年会 [The Fourth Annual Conference of Theories on Chinese Journalistic Photography], Wuhan, Hubei, China, 1990), 26.

³³ Original: "畫家有讀畫之說，余謂畫無可讀者，讀其詩也。" Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Sui Yuan Shi Hua* 随园诗话 [Remarks on Poetry in Sui Garden], vol. a (Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2003), 1362.

³⁴ Original: "我們看一幅畫，可以欣賞其中蘊藏的詩的情趣，但並非所有的畫都有詩的情趣，[...]我們說讀畫，實在是在畫裡尋詩。" Liang Shiqiu 梁实秋, *Liang Shiqiu Ji* 梁实秋集 [Collected Works of Liang Shiqiu] (Flower City Publishing House, 2008), 122.

Paintings provide people's hearts and souls a kind of enjoyment which cannot be explained in words, and explaining in words will not reach [it].³⁵

Liang thus distinguishes two kinds of reading: the usual kind of reading involves a reasoning process that can be sufficiently expressed through language; a higher form of reading, in contrast, establishes a less mediated and more intimate relationship between the object and the viewer, a relationship that defies reasoning.

Even though Ammons and Zhai convey their poetic mood through words, they often think about reading in terms that are strikingly similar to Liang's. Their artistic practice amounts to an extension of Liang's formulation, exploring how such closeness can be achieved. For both Ammons and Zhai, poetry requires a mode of reading that cannot be attained through technical analysis of tropes, rhythms, and historical information. It is not just that analysis cannot exhaust poetry; more importantly, reliance on reasoning is at odds with the kind of response they want to elicit from their readers, which includes faith in the efficacy of language, the willingness to grant poetry the autonomy to perform itself, and the heartfelt impulse to react to poetry's message. All these expectations exceed what can be attained through analytic certainty.

Ammons considers analysis the primary obstacle to the sincere exchange between poetry and readers that he longs for. In almost all his essays concerning reading, he feels obliged to point out the insufficiency of analysis. We find the following passage from his essay "Poetry is Action," which serves as the introduction to *The Best American Poetry* 1994 and intends to be an instruction on reading:

When exposition has allowed the poem to arrive, its sentences, rhythms, figures coming together or one after the other, the poem ends. At that point, the exposition ceases and the poem stands whole, a disposition of parts, of movement laid out finished and still, like an object. Suppose the object now to be a stone you pick up beside the road and bring to class: you place the stone on the seminar table and ask your students to write about it. [...] In other

³⁵ Original: "我想畫的最高境界不是可以讀得懂的，一說到讀便牽涉到文章詞句，便要透過思想的程式，而畫的美妙處在於透過視覺而直訴諸人的心靈。畫給人的一種心靈上的享受，不可言說，說便不著。" Liang 梁, 124.

words, numberless papers, including chemical and atomic notations, can be written, but the stone, apart from its missing specimen, is unaffected. The writings about the stone do not replace the stone. Nothing can replace the stone. It is itself in its own integrity or shambles.³⁶

Even though the exposition can temporarily animate the poem, enabling it “to arrive” and to “come together,” it turns the poem into something else. Once the exposition ends, the poem turns back into an unresponsive object, which is “finished and still.” The shift of rhetoric from “arrive” to “stand whole” and to “lay out finished and still” visualizes the process where exposition kills the poem. In the last two sentences, Ammons suggests a more compatible relation between expository reading and poetry. Namely, readers should accept the unknowability of a poem, in the sense that “its own integrity or shambles” can always perform in ways that are inexplicable and unpredictable by critical analysis. Or, as Ammons says in another essay that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, “[the poem is] an existence that comes about by means other than those of description and exposition and, therefore, to be met by means other than, or in addition to, those of description and exposition.”³⁷ He strives to situate poetry beyond our analytic capacity so that we may respond to it in a more spontaneous and, in Ammons’ mind, adequate way.

In “Poetry is Action,” Ammons continues arguing that the presumption of the unknowability of poetry does not nullify reading but sets it forth. By forgoing the impulse to explain the effect of a poem, readers are encouraged to adopt a more intuitive approach—“feeling”³⁸:

Poetry’s actions are like other actions. They are at once actions themselves and symbolic actions, representative models of behavior: As long as I have the feeling that poems are capable of evidencing matters of such crucial importance, I will not think that much has changed: poems come from where they always come from; they dance in themselves as they always have; they sing to us as they always will, and we will not need to be told what we feel or which way our inclinations lean or what there is new and lean to find in them. We will dance and sing.³⁹

³⁶ A. R. Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 32.

³⁷ Ammons, 16.

³⁸ Ammons, 33.

³⁹ Ammons, 33–4.

Such a “feeling” relies on a deep faith in the perpetual vitality of a poem. For it is attested by readers’ confidence that whenever they encounter the poem, it is performing actions that are specifically meant for them. Established upon this faith, Ammons’s method of reading is an active exchange between the poem and its readers. This view implies high expectations on both poets and readers. Poets need to animate their language to the extent that readers are convinced that images, rhymes, tropes, etc. are not just ornaments but profound designs that fundamentally shape their experience of the poem. Readers, in addition to developing their interpretations and impressions of the poem, are now called upon to respond. They need to treat poetry’s actions as if they were actions of real people around them that require attention and reaction.

While it is evident that the deep “feeling” about the vitality of poetry Ammons wants to follow is too personal and intuitive to be thoroughly explained, this inability itself cannot fully account for his obsession with distinguishing this method of reading from exposition. What is at stake for Ammons, in my opinion, is to encourage readers to develop more spontaneous and heartfelt connections to poetry than rationality and knowledge can afford; or, in his own metaphor, to enable readers to sense the impulse of joining poetry’s singing and dancing to form an imaginative communion. In *Tape*, Ammons heightens his hope, suggesting that in addition to responding sensitively and genuinely to the actions of poetry as they read, readers should consider testing these actions in their own lives after finishing reading:

closing in
without closing:
running through
without filling:
opening out
with walls:

run my poem through
your life & it will
exist in you

like a protein
molecule:⁴⁰

The first stanza acts out its imagery: even though there is no explicit mention of fluidity, readers can detect that the tape poem is metaphorically described as a flowing river. The narrow tape limits the length of each line into two words like the levees, or “walls” as Ammons says, which prevent lines from overflowing. While the straight levees give water a direction, its actual flowing is meandering and dynamic: all the prepositions appended to the verb (“in,” “through,” and “out”) suggest movements, and the widening and shrinking margins on both sides soften the nonnegotiable linear edges of the tape.

The fluid imagery continues into the next stanza. The poet longs for an intimate exchange with readers, where readers leap into the flow of the poem. In fact, this invitation to readers to develop a deep, immersive, and almost existential connection with the poem makes sense only if we agree that the previous fluid imagery as fully meant. Otherwise, “run[ning] my poem through/ your life” could have meant, for instance, giving the poem a cursory look to see whether it has any real-life application, or mechanically moving down the poem as if running a series of functions on an adding machine. But if we share the poet’s commitment to poetry, the second stanza turns into an intriguing intertwining of the utterly materialist with the utterly spiritual. On the one hand, scientific images like “protein” and “molecule” create a digestive system, where the poem physically “exist[s]” in readers. On the other hand, Ammons’s acting out of the fluidity of language through charging the prepositions and the margins evoke a baptismal scene, where the poem becomes life-sustaining and life-changing—a relation outlasting the actual process of reading.

Notably, even though Ammons yearns for an intimate and tacit exchange with readers, he is less persistent on assuming the leading role, especially when this relation expends beyond the end of

⁴⁰ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 63–4.

the poem. For instance, he immediately proposes that the fluidity of the tape format also instructs him “not to grasp, not to/ try to keep.”⁴¹ Thus, the ideal response he wants seems to be a natural separation between the poem and its readers arising upon the end of the tape, so that readers can follow the fluid momentum of the tape and drift back into the flow of their own lives. Ammons’s hesitation has crucial implications: the geometric features of the tape like its rapid unrolling and its plastic deformation inspire the simultaneous outpouring of immediate thoughts and constant self-revisions; since the poem assumes an unusual medium, the poet is also uncertain of how the motion of the tape may affect the actions of his poem. From time to time, he turns himself into a fellow reader just like us, observing the actions of the scroll, constantly adjusting his interpretation, and ensuring that his long poem is an apt response to the scroll’s momentum.

Some of Zhai’s poems demonstrate a similar longing for an exchange through words that ventures beyond what analytic language can justify. In 2010, while writing *Following Huang Gongwang*, Zhai wrote a contrastive poem, “Letter from a Previous Dynasty—Letters by the Unknown Woman Poet Qiu Yanxue” (“前朝来信—无考女诗人邱砚雪信札”). Both poems take the form of conversing with the past. While *Following Huang Gongwang* is a long poem about a painting by a renowned male artist of a bygone time, “Letter from the Previous Dynasty” is a three-page epistolary poem by a forgotten woman of an unspecified past dynasty,⁴² whose household chores hardly leave her the time to write. Considering Zhai’s persisting self-consciousness and scholarly interest⁴³ in dilemmas faced by women artists like herself, this poem invites being interpreted as a veiled presentation of her own view of reading and writing:

在扇子上写字 也在白绢上写

⁴¹ Ammons, 88.

⁴² Zhai makes up the female poet’s identity and the letter. It is thus reasonable to read the poem as Zhai’s masked expression of her own take on writing and reading, as I will do in my analysis of the poem.

⁴³ In 2008, Zhai published an essay collection entitled *Talented as Such: Women Art and Us* (天赋如此：女性艺术与我们) which consists of both her reviews of individual women artists and theoretical reflection upon the role of gender in artistic creation.

在宣纸上写字 也在罗帕上写
写，变得如此贵重
一笔一画的气息 在身体中呼吸⁴⁴

Writing characters on fans and also writing on white silk
Writing characters on rice paper and also writing on gauze handkerchief
Writing, becomes so precious
The breath of each stroke is inhaling and exhaling in the body

The first two lines inform us how words are constructed through the brush moving on different surfaces. The next two lines are more self-referential, describing how the woman poet is engaging her entire body to write down these very words carefully. The connection between writing and breathing gives the written words significant weight, as if they are a condensed expression of the poet's life. These lines perform their actions to direct our attention. While in the first two lines we see written "characters" appearing one after another, as soon as the poet exclaims that "writing, becomes so precious," our gaze is focalized on individual strokes. In other words, the lines are inviting readers to slow down and savor the profundity of each stroke, in order to pay due respect to the poet's effort of integrating her life into the poem. Meanwhile, the repetitions of words like "writing" ("写") assume a variety of grammatical and semantic roles—including appearing in the middle of a verbal phrase as a transitive verb, ending a phrase as an intransitive verb, and starting a line as a noun—to project the actions of these lines phenomenologically onto that of breathing, which also embodies a discernible repetitive rhythm without appearing monotonic or mechanical.

In other words, this poem acts out its commitment to writing and invites readers to feel the weight of words. An additional question emerges: if readers sense the poem's actions and decide to respond, what will count as a satisfying response? Directly addressing the reader, the poet expects them to internalize such a commitment themselves:

⁴⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Zhai Yongming de Shi* 翟永明的诗 [Zhai Yongming's Poems], (People's Literature Publishing House, 2012), 304.

我要你记住无考女诗人的写……
就像要你记住我的死
我要你认识它
就像你认识永恒——
我写 我独自一人
正像你阅读时
也独自一人
这是写和读的力量⁴⁵

I want you to remember the writing of the unknown woman poet
I want you to remember my death
I want you to recognize it
Just like you recognize eternity—
I write when I am alone
Just as when you read
Alone as well
This is the power of writing and reading

The comparison of writing with mortality and eternity elevates writing to the metaphysical realm: it not only delineates the material existence of human beings but also empowers us to transcend material limitations. Rather than our usual learning process which starts with “recognizing” and develops into a complete internalization manifested by “remembering,” this unknown woman poet reverses the order. Remembrance is followed by recognition because the objects of these actions change. The poet is imagining readers transitioning from reading her text to interpreting their own lives, as suggested by the insistence on possessive pronouns in the first two lines (“*the unknown woman poet’s* writing” and “*my* death”) and the removal of such an insistence in the next two lines. What the poet demands from her

⁴⁵ Zhai 翟, 305.

readers is that they apply and test such an attitude toward language themselves, so that they will gradually learn about its “power” in their own worlds.⁴⁶

For Zhai and Ammons, the appropriate way of reading a poem begins with faith in words’ agency, develops out of an attentive observation of the words’ actions, and attains its full efficacy with readers answering the poem’s call by integrating its actions into their own lives. This lengthy discussion about reading is indispensable because Ammons’s and Zhai’s engagement with the scroll format is as much an act of reading as it is of writing. They endeavor to grasp its changing actions, adjust their interpretations, and offer responses through writing in a manner that manifests the characteristics of their medium. *Tape* and *Following Huang Gongwang* record the poets’ gradual digestion of the scroll format: at times, they are frustrated by their poems’ incapacity in answering the dynamics of the scroll—its continuity, accelerating rotation, constantly dispositioned center, etc.; at other times, they are elated by the harmonious resonance between their poems and the scroll. It is upon this assumption that I want to reappraise the issue of attention in these long poems. I propose that the discussions of quotidian life in the former and that of modernization and technology in the latter embody the poets’ various attempts at summoning available resources to offer the responses that they think the scroll is

⁴⁶ In comparison to Ammons, by employing imperative sentences, Zhai seems to be more insistent in asking for readers’ responses. Yet most of the time, Zhai is an insecure poet, especially when she contemplates her identity as a woman. In her early long poem “Women” (《女人》), which is also one of her best-known pieces, she expresses her concerns that her poem, despite attesting to the trauma and suffering of women, may not be capable of evoking any response: “suffering just emerges, again/ inscribed in the sky: it is finished and so what?/ [...] But in the air there is another sound clear unmistakable/ decisive this is just the final question/ which is never answered: it is finished and so what?” (“苦难渐露端倪, 并被重新/写进天空: 完成之后又怎样? / [...] 但空气中有另一种声音明白无误/理所当然这仅仅是最后的问题/却无人回答: 完成之后又怎样?”); see Zhai 翟, 26. In more recent works, she becomes anxious that having grown up during the Cultural Revolution, her poetic language may not be capable of addressing the current commercialized Chinese society: “Born in the fifties what we said/ was this kind of language/ Now these words are turned into jokes/ served course-by-course/ during the dinner party” (“生于五十年代 我们说的/就是这种语言/如今 它们变成段子/在晚宴上 被一道道地/端了上来”); see Zhai 翟, 278. In the poem “A Report about a Young Prostitute”(《关于雏妓的一次报道》), she wonders whether poetry can express the ethical weight of such a subject; see Zhai 翟, 264. These examples suggest not just that the tone in “Letter from a Previous Dynasty” is exceptional. More importantly, this exception reveals that Zhai employs an authoritative tone out of the confidence that the previous actions of the poem have properly prepared readers for these demands. In other words, Zhai’s eagerness to have readers “remember” is not so different from Ammons’s decision to “turn [readers] away,” both inviting readers to respond to the poem by internalizing, applying, and testing its proposals in their own lives.

asking for during different stages of their projects. With the scroll format directing the poets' attention to the world, at the beginning of both poems when the scroll's actions still appear elusive and unidentifiable, the poets project their disorientation from reading the scroll to their observations of their surroundings. As they become increasingly familiar with the scroll, the poets reevaluate its geometry and dynamism. They reconceive the pathos they had identified in the format as its call for them to improvise in reading and writing, so that they may subvert those flexible constraints with creativity, accept those rigid ones with preparation, and learn to orient themselves with relative ease in their chosen form, language, and culture, which can often strike the poets as foreign and alienated. Following the two poets' own metaphor, as the locale where reading, writing, walking, and living happen concurrently, the scroll draws the four acts into mutual allegory and fosters, what I will call, a "promenading attention." This mode of attention further enables the poets to experience the turning scroll format as well as the rapidly shifting and even fragmented contemporary world in a more engaged and continuous manner.

Scroll Reading

Given the cultural status of Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain* as a model of Chinese landscape painting, a frequently duplicated masterpiece, and a symbol of the political tension between China and Taiwan nowadays, it is one of the paintings most often associated with the verb "to read" as a reflection of viewers' high appreciation of it and their desire to develop a deep connection to it. Likewise, in *Following Huang Gongwang*, the poet adopts the phrase "reading the painting" ("读画").⁴⁷ What Zhai determines to read first and foremost, however, is the scroll format:

一三五〇年，手卷即电影
你引首向我展开
墨与景 缓缓移动
镜头推移、转换

⁴⁷ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 54.

在手指和掌肌之间

走过拇指大小的画题

走进瘦骨嶙峋的画心

我变成那个浓淡人儿⁴⁸

In the year 1350, a scroll is a movie
You raise your head and unroll yourself
Ink and scene move slowly
The camera is panning, turning
Between fingers and forearms

Walking through the title label of the size of a thumb
Walking into the bony artwork
I will become that person drawn in dark and light ink

These lines apply Ammons's and Zhai's methods of reading. The scroll is initially compared to a film, a simile meant to capture the gradual revealing of its content. Then, as if unsatisfied with the implied separation between the spectator and the spectacle in cinema, the poet immediately revises the metaphor. Parodying the technical term "title sheet" ("引首") into a verb meaning "raising one's head" and suggesting an inviting posture, she reinterprets the unrolling as the scroll actively approaching its viewers and exposing itself until it can be intimately held between viewers' "fingers" and "forearms."

This personification of the scroll is not empirically objective. When one unrolls the scroll, the scroll maintains a fixed distance from the person, a situation resembling a detached screen more than an approaching person. This rephrasing serves to convey the poet's belief in the scroll's autonomy and efficacy: instead of being passively unrolled by the viewers, it is actively and strategically revealing itself little by little to elicit viewers' curiosity; despite the fact that the scroll was produced more than 600 years ago, it can—and does—still address us. Zhai sees the dynamic of the scroll format as a solicitation of interactive reading, and her revision intends to reject the voyeuristic gaze characterizing

⁴⁸ Zhai 翟, 6.

the cinema, which gives viewers the power of viewing yet not that of participating. Indeed, deciding that the scroll's action is asking for closeness, the poet enthusiastically responds to its demand in the second stanza, where she shortens the distance between herself and the scroll until she becomes part of it.

Scattered throughout the long poem, Ammons's determination to "read" the scroll is less systematically presented than Zhai's. Still, on the very first day of this project, Ammons interacts with the tape as if it embodies some profound wisdom inviting "contemplate[ion]"⁴⁹:

it was natural for
me (in the House &
Garden store one
night a couple weeks
ago) to contemplate
this roll of
adding-machine tape, so
narrow, long,
unbroken, and to penetrate
into some
fool use for it⁵⁰

All elements in Ammons's method of reading surface in these lines: the poet restrains exposition, believes in the vitality and efficacy of the tape, observes its actions, and responds accordingly. Instead of a mere tool at his disposal, he views the tape as an unfamiliar object for which he cannot immediately offer appropriate descriptions or explanations. He resorts to three synonyms and an exclamatory adverb "so" to express his admiration and curiosity. The tape invites his playful engagement—"some/ fool use"—by its idiosyncratic shape and movements, with this seemingly plain description already reflecting the poet's attentiveness to the tape's typical actions and his readiness in offering creative responses. For instance, the letter "o" in "couple," "contemplate," and "roll" forms

⁴⁹ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 3.

⁵⁰ Ammons, 3.

a vertical line, visualizing the tape's translational movement as it is unrolled little by little; similarly, describing the tape as "so/ narrow, long/ unbroken," the poet not only embeds a letter "o" in each word but also changes its relative position in each repetition to imitate the tape's unstable center.

As the long poem continues, Ammons proposes that the tape is not the only thing that needs to be attended to. All other ordinary things surrounding him can be viewed as vital writings:

the sun, screened dim by
clouds, enters the room,
strikes my typewriter,
 throws shadow on
 the wall,
 just touches
the flower-tip of a
crown-of-thorns branch.⁵¹

Everything is generating motions. Striking the typewriter, the ray of the sun becomes a poet and turns Ammons into its reader. Its poem coordinates items that we usually view as belonging to different realms—the immaterial shadow, the two-dimensional wall, and the three-dimensional branch—and arranges them into a vigorous scene. The contrast between the shadow and the wall is intensified by the verb "throw." Subtle details like the shadow's outreach to the flower-tip, besides presenting spatial arrangements, instill temporal ongoingness into the scene. With readers' eyes directed from the flower-tip to the crown-of-thorns, this initially private and meditative scene gestures toward the festive, communal, and spiritual, for the crown is presumably a left-over Christmas decoration given that the writing of these lines occurred on December 27th, 1963. Ammons reads the complex "poem" composed by his surroundings as an interweaving of different objects and energies. Incessantly reaching out for new connections to alter its dominating ambiance, this coalescence, in Ammons's eyes, urges his involvement. Enthusiastically answering the call, the poet, whose presence is

⁵¹ Ammons, 112.

temporarily attenuated to enable the environment to play out its various actions, makes an authoritative return. He becomes the prophet for the scene, who names it, proclaims its existence, and foretells that it will change human experience fundamentally: “*ecology* is my word: tag/ me with that: come/ in there:/ you will find yourself/ in a firmless country.”⁵²

It is worth mentioning that even though this epiphany of ecology is achieved by a unique interplay among objects that are eternal (“sun”) and ephemeral (“shadow”), its foundation has been prepared by the scroll format sixteen days in advance. Noticing how the written part of the tape coils up, Ammons has put it in a wastebasket. When the tape is about to overflow its container, he writes:

in & out: weaving in &
out: a
tapestry, looking for all
the world
as if it were alive.⁵³

Several insights of what Ammons later terms “ecology” have already been predicted by these lines: words play a fundamental role in drawing interrelations, as manifested by the poet’s and the sun’s typing; the repetition of “in & out” confirms that this interrelated world is an ongoing process; the animated tape foreshadows that in this ecological view, everything radiates its vitality.

While Zhai responds to the approaching scroll by stepping into it, Ammons responds by internalizing its dynamic in his prosody and its vision in his emerging poetic identity as a prophet. One may get the impression that these two poets are so intimate with what they are reading, that its call is answered in a prompt, genuine, and adequate way. But enthusiastic as their responses are, the poets are incapable of sustaining them. More specifically, with the scroll initiating the poets into these actions, they soon realize that a persistent commitment to the scroll often leads to a realization that the kind of attention that the scroll demands is at odds with the kind that they can afford.

⁵² Ammons, 112.

⁵³ Ammons, 41.

While Zhai is inspired by the gradual unrolling of the long scroll to imagine herself as part of it, it is only in the second section of the poem that the scroll's continuity contradicts her consciousness nurtured in the contemporary world:

宽衣袖手 步入崇山峻岭
“问道富春山 寻源师造化”
十四世纪的绘画经验
将要变成二十一世纪的广告语
十四世纪散点透视的邻里人家
变身为二十一世纪重叠的城市通衢
十四世纪向上生长的绿色
化为二十一世纪垂直超高的大厦
近处仿真效果 远处景观林立⁵⁴

Loose robe and wide sleeve walking into the lofty mountains
“Questing for the way in the Fuchun Mountains Searching for the origin to study creation”
The virtuosity of paintings in the fourteenth century
Will be turned into advertisements of the twenty-first century
The cottages and villages in the scattered perspective of the fourteenth century
Transform themselves into vertical towering edifices
Artificial scenery nearby skyscraping woods far behind

These consecutive alternations between the past and the present show Zhai's eager response to the painting through searching for similarities in her own time.⁵⁵ However, even though walking in the Fuchun mountains is an experience conducted by both ancient and modern people, its implication switches from a dedication to the hermit life into a profit-driven activity. Zhai's specification of different perspectives reveals the incompatibility between the approaches to the world embodied in the scroll and those that are more familiar to contemporary citizens like Zhai. The former manifests

⁵⁴ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 8.

⁵⁵ The quote in the second line is a rewrite of a famous motto from Zhang Zao who predates Huang by approximately five centuries. According to Zhang, art should be based on artists' external study of natural phenomena and the internal comprehension of their origin. This proposal for patient observations and meditations is turned into an advertisement aiming at immediate arrest of attention.

continuity and flexibility that resonate with the motion of the scroll format, while the latter suggests fragmentation and isolation.

All this contrast informs Zhai that even though the scroll initiates a gradual revelation that offers a narrative of the scene and thus engrosses its viewers, the response she can give will not lead to an erasure of distance. She can imagine herself as an internal observer of the painting, but she remains an intruder who is conscious of the fact that her fragmented perception and expression cannot adequately address the continuity of the painted world:

一切皆为碎片，从人到物
新诗铸就 织成围脖
140 字不能让
我和十四世纪，摩擦生烟
点亮一片密林的废墟⁵⁶

Everything is fragment, from human beings to objects
New poetry (or Modern poetry) is cast woven into a *weibo*⁵⁷ post
140 words cannot provide
The fourteenth century and me with enough friction to start a fire
Which will ignite the ruins of a dense woods

The very feature that solicits an intimate exchange in the first place turns around to indicate alienation. The issue is not so simple that Zhai realizes that she has misinterpreted the scroll's actions. For her other endeavors of observing and responding to the scroll follow similar trajectories.

In section six, noting the subtle change of tints, shadings, and texture of strokes through the painting, Zhai identifies an absorbing plot in the brushwork, which sequentially exhibits an idyllic beginning, tension, some suspense, an anticlimax, a relief accompanied by some sublimation, and a dénouement charged with fervent emotions. Practicing her method of reading, the poet regulates the rhythm of her body according to this development. In the beginning, she holds her breath to empty

⁵⁶ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 10.

⁵⁷ Chinese equivalent for Twitter.

herself, so that she will be as innocent and undefined as the misty patterns—“let me hold my breath for a while/ howl softly/ let the misty air enter my lungs/ grow into a childlike heart” (“让我屏息一小会/长啸半声/让氤氲之气落入肺中/开出儿童之心”);⁵⁸ arriving at the anticlimax, she is temporarily short of breath because of the barren images on the painting—“let me remain short of breath for a while/ stay attentive for some time/ let rocks, slopes, and barren imageries/ enter my body/ sparsity and plentitude find an order” (“让我气馁一小会儿/专注半晌/让岩石、坡地、枯干的意向/进入身体, 疏密有致”);⁵⁹ when she reaches what she deems the relief of the plot, she finds her entire body so weightless that she floats on top of the cloud. In the dénouement, when patterns turn vibrant and sharp lines replace moist patterns, the poet’s body can no longer endure any intense emotional change—“finally coronary arteries resemble/ scarlet blooming flowers/ bones are clanging/ extravasated blood overflows/ probes into an agitated heart” (“最后时刻 冠状动脉像/暗红花朵怒放/瘦骨铮铮作响/排山倒海的淤血/钻进一颗狂狷之心”).⁶⁰ Despite her resolution to risk her life for an ultimate integration into the painting, this fatal scene only sends the poet back to the year 1650. She finds herself on the deathbed of Wu Hongyu, who, like her, attempts in vain to unite with the painting through death⁶¹:

昨晚 我将手指向那个美好
它完全拒绝随风飘逝
拒绝成为我的一部分 拒绝
像生命一样结束 像人
本质上 无法选择生死⁶²

⁵⁸ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 18.

⁵⁹ Zhai 翟, 19.

⁶⁰ Zhai 翟, 20.

⁶¹ Wu was one of the most famous possessors of the scroll in its history. Loving the painting dearly, He threw the scroll into the fire when he was dying so as to possess it permanently. Although Wu's nephew immediately rescued the painting from the fire, irrecoverable damage had occurred. The painting was divided into two parts. This incident greatly contributed to the scroll's fame.

⁶² Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 20.

Yesterday evening I point my finger toward that beauty
It refuses to be blown away by the wind
Refuses to be part of me rejects
To end like lives like humans
Who essentially cannot choose birth or death

Just when the poet regards herself as in perfect accord with the painting, its actions shift from inviting to rejecting, from initiating an exclusive and intimate relation with the poet to demonstrating both its imperishability and its inability to sympathize with a mortal like the poet.

It almost sounds as if the scroll attracts its viewers just to divert them when they are confident that their engagement with it is about to elevate their observations into some epiphany, such as an unfragmented way of being in the world and an ultimate intimacy with art in Zhai's case. In terms of the method of reading proposed by Ammons and Zhai, although Zhai the reader holds a faith in the autonomy and profundity of the scroll's actions, scrutinizes them, and answers them wholeheartedly, the final step, i.e., the possibility to have her own life shaped by them, cannot take place. Ammons's reading of his scroll suffers the same problem. Whenever he believes that his responses are in harmony with the scroll's callings, the scroll varies its message, forcing the poet to qualify or even renounce his initial reading.

On the first day of the tape project, determining that the "narrow, long,/ unbroken" tape awaits a playful response, the poet finds himself approaching a promising interaction.⁶³ The internalization of the tape's actions can transform his writing:

may this song be plain as
day, exact and bright!
no moonlight to loosen
shrubs into
shapes that
never were: no dark
nights to dissolve
woods into one black

⁶³ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 3.

depthless dimension:
may this song leave
darkness alone, deal
with what
light can win into clarity:⁶⁴

These lines, together with several lines the poet would write on the following day—"my story is how/
a man comes home/ from haunted/ lands and transformations:"—inform probably the most popular
reading of *Tape*.⁶⁵ Namely, it marks Ammons's development from a poet of mythical vision, lyrical
enchantment, and extreme experience into a poet of the everyday and the commonplace.⁶⁶ Based on
his goal of observing, answering, and joining the actions of texts, we can further propose that the
shape and motion of the tape account for Ammons's deviations from the themes and voices that used
to characterize his early poems. The metaphors of light, flora, and terrain prompt us to visualize the
word "plain," which the poet uses to describe his intended undecorated style, as a flat space that can
be smoothly traversed. Flatness versus ruggedness is Ammons's habitual description of the difference
between short lines and long lines, which strike him as manifesting a rapid vertical movement and an
obstructed horizontal one respectively. As he explains in an interview, "[i]n 1963 when I did the *Tape*
I had been thinking of having the primary motion of the poem down the page rather than across. The
adding machine tape, less than two inches wide, seemed just right for a kind of breaking and spilling.
Variations of emphasis and meaning which make the long horizontal line beautifully jagged and jerky
became on the tape the left and right margins."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ammons, 4.

⁶⁵ Ammons, 9.

⁶⁶ See for instance "To be Quiet in the Hands of the Marvelous" by Frederick Buell, the chapter on Ammons in *Everyday and Prophetic* by Nick Halpern, and "Homecoming in A. R. Ammons' *Tape for the Turn of the Year*" by Matthew Wilson. Established as this argument is, most scholars approach it through taking the lines quoted above as the poet's declaration of his initiative for change and continuing to evaluate his fulfillment of the goal by comparing lines from *Ommateum* with those from *Tape*, leaving the crucial symbol, i.e., the tape, behind the poet's self-transformation unexamined.

⁶⁷ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 101.

Correspondence between the poet's style and the action of the tape goes farther. Although *Tape* is his first long poem, Ammons had experimented with narrow lines in his shorter works. About half a year before he started *Tape*, he published "A Note on Prosody," a delicate analysis of his own poem "Close-Up" composed of short lines. Imaging poetic lines as horizontal levers, Ammons remarks that in traditional verse, the caesura in the middle of a line is an effort to maintain the balance through "the correction of the center of gravity," and rhymed stressed endings in couplets put extra weight on the right side.⁶⁸ In the short lines as exemplified by "Close-Up," he argues that "the emphasis has shifted from the ends of the lines [...] toward the left-hand margin."⁶⁹ Its single-word lines and its enjambments after feminine endings occur to Ammons as unusually heavy heads and unusually light tails. Together, the poem creates such a radical imbalance that "the movement is not across the page but actually, centrally down the page."⁷⁰

Let us return to the passage in *Tape* where Ammons declares that he wants to write a poem that is "plain," "exact and bright," for it also manifests an unusual center of gravity.⁷¹ Instead of the end of the lines, intricate rhyming patterns highlight their beginning. There are three ring structures in these lines: "may" and "day" are head-rhymed; "no," "shrubs," "shape," "never" are two pairs of alliterations; "nights," "woods," "depthless," "may," "darkness," "with," and "light" form a symmetrical pattern with "may" serving as the center and other corresponding pairs echoing each other in rhyme, alliteration, and meaning. This design gives the beginning of the lines enough weight so that the prosody suggests a tendency of falling along the tape. The three rings, due to their successive incorporation of more elements, imply an incipiently explicit circular tendency, visualizing

⁶⁸ Ammons, 7.

⁶⁹ Ammons, 7.

⁷⁰ Ammons, 7.

⁷¹ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 4.

the shape of the tape at this very moment, where it is unrolled just long enough for plastic deformation to be evident.

Although the poet's perceptive critique of his past works and the delicate imagery and prosody at the beginning of *Tape* make his engagement with the tape seem particularly promising, this harmony is not sustainable. It is only on the second day that Ammons becomes skeptical:

today
I feel a bit different:
my prolog sounds phony &
posed:
 maybe
I betrayed
depth
by oversimplification,
a smugness
unjustified sense of
security:⁷²

The circular resonance within these lines is set forth by words of hesitation—"a bit," "sounds," and "maybe." Either syntactically placed in the middle of their respective lines or directly indented to the middle of the tape, these elements slow the downward momentum and adjust what Ammons describes as "the center of gravity" of lines back to the middle. The turning of the scroll is prioritized over its vertical extension, occurring to the poet as an invitation of returning to and critically reflecting on previous sessions. This process exposes the "depth" of reality, which defies plain and exact depictions.

In our earlier discussion of Ammons's contemplations on the "ecology" of Christmas, we have proposed that the poet imagines the reading of the tape as the reflecting on the depth of the passing of the everyday. There, with reality imagined as a flow, objects including the sun, clouds, and typewriters interact with each other vibrantly to inspire the poet's passionate and even revelatory voice. Even this ecological interpretation cannot sustain the poet through that day, for the scroll soon

⁷² Ammons, 5.

appears incompatible with the vision of interrelatedness. This repudiation comes exactly when the poet's prophetic declaration reaches its climax:

don't establish the
boundaries
first,
the squares, triangles,
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then
pour
life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential:⁷³

Perhaps the unusual length and the rotation of the tape can exonerate it from the accusation of “ending potential,” for those two features encourage constant revisiting, revising, and extending of previous thoughts. Other things the poet warns us against, however, are inevitable results of writing on the tape—a “preconceived” geometric constraint “trimming off” the lines. The violent enjambment between “trimming” and “off” as well as the separation of the two alliterated and thus interrelated words “edges” and “ending” further highlight the incompatibility between the coercive tape and the ecological vision. When the poet's prophetic mood calms down, he confesses:

there comes the exactness
again:
pulsing:

gaits:
short/ quick-stepping Kate:
Silver,
long & languorous
what

⁷³ Ammons, 116.

to do in the case of fall-out:⁷⁴

Kate and Silver were two mules belonging to Ammons's family when he was a child. Kate was lost to a chattel mortgage; Silver died. The poet mourns for them several times in *Tape*. Comparing the "fall-out" of the interrelated vision with these childhood memories, he implies the tape's constant dispersing of the interpretation he wishes to keep intact as a haunting loss.

This loss induced by the tape's elusiveness can even amount to self-alienation and existential crisis. On December 11th, Ammons's various attempts at attuning his writing to the rhythm of the tape fail again. On that day, he first sees the crest-like shape of the tape as suggestion of imminence, which can be an apt mood for poetry writing.⁷⁵ Finding himself unable to crystalize this moment into some epiphany, or into a matching "moment occurring forever" in his own words, Ammons negates his lyrical analogy and resorts to the scroll's common function as a tool of bookkeeping: "2/23: 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ¢ a can: cheap:/ [...] /a chocolate fudge cookie/ maybe 30¢ altogether."⁷⁶ However, the calculation is also interrupted, for this trivial materialist employment of language contradicts Ammons's most up-to-date envisioning of the poem as wildly leaping among different conceptual realms: "that energy/ turned into verse/ will bring/ you/ about/ four condemnations:/ transformations!/ metamorphoses!/ mitochondria!/ hell's bells!"⁷⁷ What follows these continuous self-negations is a series of images of loss, where the poet is alienated from his own body, poetry, and other creatures consecutively: fear of castration, his vain effort of resuscitating a world that is only "as if alive," and wounded and dead flesh.⁷⁸

The long poem's title already connects the motion of the tape with pathos. Ammons initially titled it "Fugue for the Turn of the Year," but he was unsatisfied with the sound of the word "fugue":

⁷⁴ Ammons, 117.

⁷⁵ Ammons, 37.

⁷⁶ Ammons, 40.

⁷⁷ Ammons, 40.

⁷⁸ Ammons, 40–41.

“Fugue doesn’t sound American: the word is squeezed in the mouth and finally swallowed. [...] In talking and writing about the poem, I notice that I’ve called it ‘the tape.’ So what could be more natural than TAPE FOR THE TURN OF THE YEAR? The word is matter-of-fact, alliterates well with TURN—and summons such modern things as ticker tape, scotch tape, tape recorder, etc.”⁷⁹ “Tape” and “turn” interact with each other on multiple dimensions. Acoustically speaking, the alliteration links the two words together, while the contrast between the brief and effortless vowel in “tape” and the lengthier and more twisted vowel in “turn” structures them into a progression that foreshadows the poem’s growing complexity as the tape unrolls. Semantically speaking, “turn” describes not only the rotation movement, but also irreversible change, such as the passage of time, the fluctuation of stock prices, a piece of torn paper, and sound that has been uttered, etc. Even though “modern things” in the shape of the tape bear witness to such change, they cannot recover the past. This connotation is more pronounced when the tape is associated with an almost contradictory theme on the second day of Ammons’s writing—Odysseus’s homebound voyage as well as his own returning in some sense.

Even at the poem’s embryonic stage, the tape already appealed to the poet as an expression of the tension between displacement and homecoming. While both associations sounded arbitrary at first, they would be gradually unpacked throughout the poem.⁸⁰ Serving as the constraint, the tape not only deprives the poet of his habitual way of writing but also qualifies his vision concerning the intimacy one may achieve through reading, responding, and writing. Rooted in the tape’s enigmatic and ephemeral turning, the poet’s suffering of loss further threatens his sense of belonging to his surroundings, language, and chosen forms of self-expression. It is in this context that the theme of

⁷⁹ Ammons, *An Image for Longing*, 236–7.

⁸⁰ This fact suggests that constrained writing is not the only cause of the pathos, and there are other anxieties before the poet devotes himself to the project. Indeed, this poem was written during the time of political and social turmoil. Starting less than one month after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the poem exudes a mood of disorientation although Ammons never refers directly to this public event. Yet the poem does make direct reference to misfortunes like natural disasters and a plane crash. Nor was the poet’s personal life stable. For instance, the poem was written during the winter when he was unemployed. By focusing on the tape, I intend to suggest that constrained writing helps to bring these latent emotions forward, rather than downplaying the significance of other public and personal sufferings.

homecoming develops from a whimsical reference to the epic hero to a sincere longing. As we shall see in the next section of this chapter, after displacing the poet from home, the tape will reveal to him how to reconceive and redeem his loss.

Similarly, the title *Following Huang Gongwang in Touring the Fuchun Mountains* implies that the scroll format removes Zhai from home, especially given the contrast between the poem's title and that of Huang's painting—*Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. As already analyzed, Zhai's judgment of her inability to dwell in the painting is testified by her various failed attempts at reading and responding to the scroll. The world of the scroll considers her an intruder, exhibits features that her modern language cannot address, and refuses to unite with her despite her genuine efforts to approach and enter it. More importantly, when Zhai returns to her world after failing to identify with the painting, her own modern reality also appears foreign:

除了飞机，已没有鸟的腾空感
除了黑白，月亮不再生辉
“我”不再是我
除了快速检索
信息在大脑中布线⁸¹

Despite the airplanes, the birds' sense of soaring is unavailable
Despite black and white, the moon no longer shines with sheen
“I” am no longer I
Despite the accelerated search
Information is wiring in the brain

⁸¹ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 17.

To briefly contextualize these lines, Zhai reaches the part of the scroll painting where an old hermit is shown playing chess.⁸² Viewing his leisurely pose as a manifestation that he accepts his transience, attains a vision of the time and space that transcends his physical place and time, and willingly renounces his selfhood, she, as usual, identifies a selfless way of being in the contemporary digital age to offer a tentative response: teenagers indulge themselves in the virtual world, forgetting time, their reality, and their identities apart from a collection of data stored in servers. Then, the poet temporarily puts the scroll aside, returns to address her own world, and writes the lines quoted above.

Although none of the images in these lines is directly inherited from the scroll, it is evident that the scroll has fundamentally changed the poet's relation to modernity, her native language, and herself. Things as ordinary as airplanes and the succession of days and nights are treated as exceptions that require the conjunction "despite" in order to be absorbed into her poem. She pairs "despite" with negating syntax, making these lines sound more unnatural and perplexing: in the first line, the subject is missing; in the second line, it is unclear whether "black and white" forms a contrast for the subject of the main clause "the moon" or its object "sheen." The meaning is equally counterintuitive. Logically speaking, Zhai seems to suggest that airplanes and the inevitable passage of time are the only hope of instilling lyrical beauty into the modern age. But the asymmetry between the dull words like "airplane" and "black and white" and ornate terms like "soaring" and "shines with sheen" makes the proposal hardly convincing. In addition, the poet's relation to herself seems alienated. Not only is her identity

⁸² Presumably, Zhai is referring to the first of the eight persons depicted in the scroll—a hermit who is sitting in a pavilion looking at the ducks in the water. The hermit is found about one-third into the painting, and the quoted lines in the fourth section of the poem. Given that the first fourteen sections roughly correspond to the painting and the rest sixteen sections of the long poem imitate the colophons, Zhai ensures that the progression of her long poem is analogical to that of the scroll. Although Zhai preserves the rhythm and the theme of the painting, she is not completely faithful to the details. The chess playing, for instance, is the result of her own imagination. She also employs intertextuality, describing the hermit with words borrowed from Ni Zan, a renowned painter contemporary with Huang. This addition highlights the hermit's inner peace that enables him to completely immerse himself in the landscape, forgetting place, time, and his fate, according to Zhai. See Zhai 翟, 14.

reduced to a few digital profiles, but her mind is also encroached on by mechanical ways of thinking and acting.

Distractions, Loss, and Pathos

Both poets, through reading the scroll, find themselves at a loss. They realize that the scroll constantly eludes their grasp as it unrolls, they are haunted by melancholia in their experience of their own lives, and they become skeptical of their ability to inhabit their form and language. Since the shape of the scroll format encourages them to think in a spiraling manner by returning to previous themes for supplementations, revisions, and elaborations, a plot emerges from the multiple moments of loss throughout the long poems: with the poets accepting the fact that the experience of loss is central to their engagement with the scroll, they not only attribute this phenomenon, with growing consciousness, to the dynamism of the scroll format but also change their attitude toward the sense of loss. Instead of seeing it as a disappointing indication that their reading of the tape is inappropriate, they gradually accept loss as a constitutive feature of the scroll that also needs to be observed, felt, and answered.

A few excerpts from *Tape* will reveal such a development. Realizing the tape's elusive nature, Ammons first explains it by the limitation of human conceptual capacity, which, according to him, cannot refer to individual objects without ambiguity. What is trapped in incessant self-contradictions is not so much the tape than our cognitive and linguistic systems:

this is that & that is this
& on and on: why can't
every thing be just itself?
what's the use of the
vast mental burden
of correspondence? Doesn't
contribute to the things
resembled

except in the mind: except

in the mind: there's
the reality that needs to
hold:⁸³

The repetitions and chiasmuses in these lines express the poet's frustration and impotence at the fact that whenever he determines to read the tape in a certain manner, its appearance changes. The first line is particularly vivid, for the pronouns visualize the tape as a constantly moving object that cannot be anchored. This image is further reinforced by the shifting position of "&" and "in the mind" in different lines.

A day later, the poet rephrases this emotional outburst into a qualified acceptance of inevitable loss:

here are "motions"
that play in and out:
unifying
correspondences that
suggest we can approach
unity only by the loss
of things—
a loss we're willing
to take—
since the gain of unity
would be a vision
of something in the
continuum of nothingness:⁸⁴

Realizing that the tape's elusive movement is shared by all objects, the poet resorts to a vague unity of motions—an abstract picture that represses the confusing movements of individual objects by the fundamental functioning of the world. Despite the fact that the poet claims this loss as something he is "willing to take," he adopts a diminished tone: the repetition of "loss," the absence of excitement in depicting this unified vision, the word choice of "only," and the substitution of "loss" with "gain"

⁸³ Ammons, 14–15.

⁸⁴ Ammons, 23.

as well as “nothing” with “something” all suggest Ammons’s hesitation to accept the renouncement of concrete, precise, and referential language as inevitable and desirable.

On the following day, the poet describes motion as “crest” for the first time. Besides evoking the shape of the tape as I briefly mentioned in discussing Ammons’s feeling of being displaced from home, the word’s several reappearances over the course of the entire long poem constitute insistent mourning for the loss of discrete, self-sufficient things, which are often metaphorized as “crusts” in *Tape* to indicate a way of seeing already nullified by the scroll’s endorsement of interrelations. The imagery of the rising and falling “crest” and the fixated flat “crust” strings together several central tensions in *Tape*, including, in the order of their appearance in the poem, the contradiction between poetic expressions and barren facts, the free flow of language and the constraint of the tape, and the formless reality unmediated by human perception and salient conceptual forms. Let us read three passages about crest and crust excerpted from *Tape* that epitomize how these relations between representation and reality model the poet’s understanding of the content of his loss, its extent, and most importantly, its relation to the tape:

so I
don’t feel
strong about
things: I
need plenty of help:
the crusty world
takes no notice:
Muse, what must we
do to hit the top:⁸⁵

here, the obstructions
continue: the flow
lost, the crest gone: the
self not
pulling all together:⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ammons, 39.

⁸⁶ Ammons, 73.

things are related by
opposition & similarity:
but the periphery
vanishes into nothingness,
the stabilizer:
 interior-ward
 is the going in & out
 of shape,
 substance running
through shapes of itself,
itself the running:
the container & the
 contained are
 somewhere
contained by the
universal noncontainer:⁸⁷

The external world is not answering the poet; the Muse leaves him in disorientation; the self becomes too fragmented to endure the flow of poetic inspiration; the universe supplies human minds with paradoxes rather than a transcendental harmonious vision. In these passages, loss is so deeply felt that the comparison between Odysseus and the poet becomes genuinely meant. The urgent invocation to the Muse in the first passage and the voice of a defeated hero in the second passage, for instance, remind us of Odysseus's humbling of himself during the journey. Ammons's initial confidence in taking full responsibility for his insufficient understanding and writing of reality vanishes: the grammatical subject which causes the sense of loss is no longer the poet himself but "the crusty world," "the flow," "the crest," and "the periphery," all of which are beyond his control.

More importantly, the word choice in these passages suggests that writing on the tape is a major cause of the feeling of being displaced from home. In the first passage, the absence of affinities to things is conveyed through the exhaustion of writing. As for the second passage, the line "pulling

⁸⁷ Ammons, 104–5.

all together,” by evoking the tape pulled through the typewriter, visualizes the yearning for an unfragmented self through the tape’s geometric continuity. Meanwhile, since the poet describes inspiration as a tide, “obstructions” for writing find themselves in this scene as rocks, islands, or the like, whose location can be clearly defined when the tide is on the ebb. The enjambments necessitated by the width of the tape create a subtle visual effect, for words with fluid connotations “continue: the flow” are encompassed by words suggesting ruggedness like “obstructions,” “lost,” and “the crest gone.” With their arrangements imitating a thin flow entrapped in the crevice of rocks after the effusing flow ebbs away, these lines further remind us of the experience of writing on the tape. Poetry runs between two edges, whose obtrusive and restraining aspects become particularly evident when the poet’s imagination declines.

The last excerpt gives a complete presentation of Ammons’s mature thoughts on predetermined forms and their roles in mediating our relations to the world. Presumably, the vision of all things connecting by “opposition & similarity” is an extension of what the poet used to call the “mental burden of correspondence,” when he endeavored to account for his loss. His engagement with the tape evolves into a theory on perception. While the unmediated reality is a formless invisible unity of all possible relations, the visible universe is the result of our perceptual capacity, which structures the formless reality into shapes and patterns that strike us as familiar because our capacity is shaped by shared social and cultural conventions. Yet since “the running” of the unmediated reality exceeds “the periphery” of human conceptual structures, many invisible relations “vanish into nothingness.”

As strategies to turn previously invisible things and relations visible, reading the tape is an allegory for perceiving reality; in corollary, writing on the tape is an allegory for orienting ourselves within reality. If the tape is the “stabilizer” or the “container” as Ammons says, its often contradictory geometric and dynamic features cause a fundamental and even existential loss because they expose the

limited nature of human perception as well as the risk that reality may disclose other possibilities destabilizing the current cognitive models that we are comfortable with. Yet this enforced modification of our habitual perception is the opportunity to transform loss into a triumph. In Ammons's own formulation, if the scroll "unwinds you,/ pulls you out/ attenuating you/ into/ nothingness," this sense of belittlement will be relieved when we identify a different paradigm that enables us to "grasp/ around/ at star-straws."⁸⁸ The near-homophony between "star" and "straw" grants a restabilized and broadened understanding of the cosmos. Furthermore, the poet's feelings of failure over the course of the long poem are constitutive to a successful interaction with the scroll, given that these reactions reveal not only his responsiveness to the foregrounded relations among the conceptual forms, the external world, and himself but also opportunities of new knowledge.

In *Following Huang Gongwang*, we can delineate a similar development from the various moments when Zhai finds herself at a loss as the scroll eludes her grasp. She first attributes the loss to her failure which is symptomatic of the failure of her time more precisely speaking, then accepts it as an essential experience in engaging with the scroll, and further realizes it as a manifestation of how our perception of the world is mediated by the medium we adopt, either consciously or inadvertently. Early in the poem, Zhai laments:

有人在一旁说：
“中国望向过去
美国望向未来”
[...]
我在“未来”的时间里
走进“过去”的山水间
过去：山势浑圆，远水如带
现在：钓台依旧，景随人迁
过去：先人留下有机物
现在：三尺之下塑料袋

⁸⁸ Ammons, 32.

黄公望的脚印从常熟一路走到台湾
我的脚步 纸上一走三百六十年⁸⁹

Some people speak beside me:
“China looks into the past
America looks into the future”
[...]
In the “future” time
I walk into the “past” mountains and waters
Past: mountains are round, waters far away are tape-like
Present: the fishing platform remains, the scenery is changing with human beings
Past: the ancestors left behind organic matters
Present: under the altar are plastic bags
The footsteps of Huang Gongwang extend all the way from Changshu to Taiwan
My footsteps wander on paper for three-hundred-and -sixty years

This is the final stanza of section three, with the reductionist remarks on contemporary political tension among China, Taiwan, and the U.S., which the poet overhears as she is reading the painting, striking her as a proper way to express her failure in developing an intimate relation to the painting. The quotation marks around “future” and “past” confuse the words’ grammatical roles, for their adjective endings (i.e., “的”) are excluded. These quotidian words are evoked as if they were obscure proper nouns that may function as adjectives only after special artificial manipulation of adding an adjective ending.⁹⁰ What the poet wants to import from contemporary politics into the traditional painting seems to be a sense of foreignness—the poet’s alienation from one of the most discussed paintings in her culture and from those common words in her native language is expressible only by clumsily borrowing words from contemporary discourse that is hardly meaningful.

In other juxtaposed lines, with the quotation marks removed and the term “future” rephrased into “present,” the poet strives to naturalize the two terms, altering them from empty words floating around into terms capturing her own relation with the painting. She charges “past” and “present” with

⁸⁹ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 12.

⁹⁰ Zhai 翟, 12.

the meaning of unity between traditional artistic landscape and the scroll and the lack of such unity in modern society, respectively. The past first reveals itself as a panorama, where the “round” mountain and the “tape-like” water echo the scroll format by addressing its circular unrolling and linear continuity; then, as a cultural lineage with the scroll as the token “left behind” by ancestors; and finally as an apolitical, intimate unity as if the painter’s movement within the mountains could infinitely extend itself to bridge the geographic, temporal, and political separation between the Fuchun Mountains area in the past and Taiwan in the present.

Zhai strives to create an echo between the past and present by parallelisms, a common rhetorical device in traditional Chinese poetry where the words of two successive lines correspond⁹¹ to each other grammatically, semantically, and even phonetically.⁹² However, these parallelisms fall apart line by line, to expose the poet’s failure both in attuning her present time and place into harmony with the painting’s content and format and in keeping up with the scroll’s constant modification of its significance as its roller turns. In the first pair of lines, the two phrases before the commas have identical grammatical structure and antithetical tones; yet as for the second half of the lines, the phonetic correspondence is retained but the grammatical structures of the two lines are completely different. In the second pair, neither the sentence structures nor the pronunciation of individual phrases show any delicate design; moreover, there is a repetition of the character “下,” which is taboo in parallelism unless the repetition has an essential structural function. Thus, the two lines are only connected by their identical number of characters and the chemical fact that paper, ink, and plastic bags are all organic compounds. As for the third pair of lines, the two lines’ connection reduces to relevant images. The poet’s incapability to respond to the scroll is further reflected by the meaning

⁹¹ Broadly speaking, in parallelism, the grammatical structures of the two lines should be identical, and the tones should be antithetical most of the time. The meaning of an individual word, however, can be either synonymous or antonymous to that of its corresponding word.

⁹² For a typical theorization of this rhetorical device, see *The Literary Mind and the Craving of Dragon*, chapter 36.

she instills into the word “present,” which is characterized by a diminished perception of reality. The scroll’s circular rotation is echoed by the empty circular fishing platform; its linear extension becomes a visualization for the transient scenery and human beings that are passing by. The cultural legacy originally embodied by the scroll can only find its contemporary expression in industrial waste, which is enshrined as the new token. Unlike Huang’s walk instantiating ideals of art and life, Zhai’s walk is merely a self-indulgent fantasy staying “on paper.”

The scroll painting and the lost idyllic world it represents reveal continuity in various senses—its extensive perspective transcending time and space, its power of sustaining cultural and historical imagination, and its unification of natural landscape, human daily activities, as well as artistic creation. The poet, despite being amazed by these grand visions, cannot respond to them because her “present” is characterized by fragmentations—empty words floating around, industrial waste ironically representing the achievement of the modern age, a lack of intimacy with one’s own time and space, and the belief that human lives and landscape are transient. However, this explicit disappointment at contemporary culture fades away as the poet proceeds further into the painting. In the tenth section, which corresponds to the moment that the poet reaches the end of the painted section of the scroll, she provides an alternative explanation for the constant mismatch between the scroll and the contemporary world. Visually speaking, the end of the painting depicts a lofty hill at whose foot one can find woods, cottages, a bridge, and a man walking on the bridge. The poet defines her relation to them as a missed encounter, as if both parties are responsible for the result:

黄昏降下来，小路时隐时现：
一棵树、一身孤、一叶轻，
一窟鱼、一溪绿、一石脆，
一只鸟懂得一种沉默

高士出现了，虚步跨过石桥
我与他一擦肩
行过数千年

秩序出现了 在崇山峻岭中时隐时现
我与美一擦肩
错过几千年⁹³

The dusk is falling, a meandering path sometimes conceals and sometimes reveals itself
A tree, a lonely man, a weightless leaf,
A pond is full of fish, a stream greens, a stone is brittle,
A bird understands a kind of silence

A hermit appears, crossing the stone bridge with light steps
I brush past him by his shoulder
walking past a few thousand years

The order appears within the mountains sometimes conceals and sometimes reveals
itself
“I brush past beauty by its shoulder
Missing several thousand years”

The successive images form a tacit understanding of each other, a harmony establishing itself by excluding the poet. The rolling of the scroll coordinates the changing of the light, the alteration in scenes, as well as the hermit's walking. Since the hermit is walking from the left end of the painting to the right and the poet is reading from the right to the left, passing each other “by the shoulder” is indeed a vivid description of the absence of direct contact.

The breakthrough of these lines lies in the Zhai's emerging realization that the painting's transcendental vision, which simultaneously impresses and belittles her, may not be a faithful rendering of the lost landscape and the relation among men, nature, and art in Huang's time. Instead, it is an effect of the scroll medium. The series of images mentioned above, for instance, can suggest both continuity and fragmentation. On the one hand, conveying a continuous experience, Zhai's listing reproduces her reading experience, where the scroll is slowly unrolled with the images appearing one after another. On the other hand, with the article “a” and the caesura sign, Zhai's emphasis on singularity and interruption proposes that the items on the painting would occur to her as discrete and

⁹³ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 26.

abrupt, if it were not because the scroll's unrolling instills into the sequence a sense of ongoingness that encourages her to connect the images into a smooth plot. Emphasizing how continuity, inclusiveness, and harmony cannot brim over the scroll, Zhai's alienation from the painting turns out to verify her genuine effort, and even in certain aspects, her success in interacting with her medium while respecting its autonomy.

At the end of this section, Zhai attempts to explain why the scroll format inspires Huang to view his surroundings through a continuous lens, while compelling her to examine her world through a fragmented one:

拜丹青之峥嵘
它匍匐在每一张纸的接缝间
大树小树，一偃一仰
古人今人，一前一后
随黄公望，走进走出
一段临场经验⁹⁴

Bowing to the exceptional artistry
It crawls between the seam of the paper
Big tree and small tree, one bends over and one looks up
Ancient men and contemporary men, one before and one after
Follow Huang Gongwang, entering and exiting,
An experience at the scene

Even the unrolling scroll, made from pieces of paper attached to each other, is not necessarily continuous. The continuity relies on Huang's careful arrangement of the landscape to ensure that items beside the seam resonate with each other and thereby conceal the separation in between. The poet adopts the polyseme “峥嵘,” whose meanings include “lofty mountains” and “exceptional artistry” among others, and bestows a crawling posture on it. Since the word's connotation of artistic mastery downplays its meaning of high mountains and resolves the oxymoron between loftiness and

⁹⁴ Zhai 翟, 27.

prostration, the first two lines imply that the painter's capacity is attested by his maneuvering of reality to fulfill his understanding of the predetermined form, like placing low but stretching mountains rather than precipitous ones to conceal the vertical seam of the paper. Likewise, the geometric correspondence between the two trees, with the tall tree bowing down and the small tree looking up as if they were conversing with each other, also serves to turn fragmentation into continuity. In fact, the third line is a quote from Huang's own explication of composition from his book *Tips for Painting Landscape* (《写山水诀》), while the fourth line is Zhai's homage to Huang's delicate design. She not only constructs a well-balanced parallelism following Huang's sentence structure, but also uses parallelism without irony for the first time in the long poem.

If Huang only supplies one possible interpretation of the scroll format, the temporariness, fragmentation, and alienation the poet experiences, while different from Huang's timeless, continuous, and intimate relation to the landscape, can serve as a valid response, too. In the last two lines quoted above, Zhai becomes more comfortable with the fact that she cannot establish a lasting intimacy with the scroll: rather than being expelled by the scroll, she now describes the phenomenon as herself "entering and exiting" the painting, claiming her own agency. The phrase "an experience at the scene" recalls a footnote in the third section. The poet explains that the continuous horizontal composition of the scroll painting is achieved by a voluntary renunciation of the sense of being at the scene:

中国山水画具有一定的抽象性，作画时可以随心所欲，景随心移；不求现场感，不图写实；只是表现物我两忘，直抒胸怀的心境。读万卷书，行万里路。千里江山，自成腹稿。⁹⁵

Chinese landscape painting embodies a certain level of abstraction, so that while they paint, painters can follow their imagination and have the landscape change with their hearts: without the requirement of being present at the scene, or realistic depiction, painters convey a state where they forget the division between the scenery and themselves, expressing their inner thoughts without distortions. One should read ten-thousand books, and one should walk ten

⁹⁵ Zhai 翟, 13.

thousand miles. Rivers and mountains spanning a thousand miles will naturally form a draft in one's mind.

The saying “to read ten-thousand books, one should walk ten-thousand miles” is a well-known aphorism in Chinese, usually intended to emphasize the importance of applying theoretical knowledge in real-life situations nowadays. Less known is the fact that the aphorism was initially proposed by Dong Qichang in *The Substance of Painting* (《画旨》) around early seventeenth century, an explication of techniques and evaluative criteria in landscape painting. Dong argues that to “vividly capture the vitality and charm” of the landscape (“气韵生动”), one needs to not only read widely but also experience nature oneself.⁹⁶ Taking the aphorism back to its original visual art context, Zhai alludes to the fact that Dong, a renowned painter and art critic of the Ming Dynasty, composed one of the colophons on Huang's scroll painting. Even though the numbers in “ten-thousand books,” “ten-thousand miles,” and “a thousand miles” are idiomatic usages rather than objective measurements, these phrases' juxtaposition still implies a comparison between the scope of the painting and Huang's roaming in the mountains: what is included in the painting is not an objective representation of the landscape, but Huang's condensed expression of his experience of dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains.

Zhai's suggestion is consistent with scholarship on Chinese landscape painting: namely, painters' renunciation of “being present at the scene” attests to their unalienated relationship to their subject matter, for they have explored the extensive landscape so thoroughly that they keep its holistic image in mind, so intimately that they can vividly recall the experience of roaming in the landscape whenever they want. This method of painting is usually referred to by art critics as “the roaming view” (“游观”), a phrase whose application in landscape painting can be traced at least to Sheng Kuo's *Dream Pool Essays* (《梦溪笔谈》) published in 1088. Liu Jichao, a contemporary artist and scholar, defines

⁹⁶ Dong Qichang 董其昌, *Hua Zhi* 画旨 [The Substance of Painting], ed. Mao Jianbo 毛建波, (Xiling Yinshe Press, 2008), 83.

the term as follows: “roaming is effortless and unrestrained movements within the continuum of time; viewing is the dynamic, holistic, organic, and continuous paying of attention.”⁹⁷ After defining this approach to landscape through temporal and spatial extension, Liu argues that without imposing foreshortening and thereby transcending the limited scope of perception, the roaming view underscores the scroll’s connotation of continuity, dynamism, and harmony: “the scroll format of traditional Chinese painting is a materialization of the continuous, unrolling, infinite, flowing temporal-spatial conception. This conception is in complete accordance with the holistic, flowing, continuous, and organic quality of the roaming view, as well as with the pure, paradigmatic presentation of things at its origin.”⁹⁸

If the scroll format encourages the painter’s physical absence from the scene to facilitate a mode of creation that regards the universe as an intuitive and intimate whole, it asks for physical presence from its readers, or, as Zhai puts it, “an experience at the scene.”⁹⁹ Thereby, readers’ engagement with the scroll is inevitably limited in time and space. Zhai elaborates on this contrast in Section Twenty-six of the long poem:

画师正在画：一切消失后
还会站在那儿的东西
无价的 无形的
用你们看清楚了
也依然暧昧的方式

观者正在看：一切还原后
还会消散的东西
奢侈的、稀有的

⁹⁷ Original: “游是在时间延绵中轻松自由的挪移，观是动态整体有机连续的关照。” Liu Jichao 刘继潮, *Yonguan: Zhongguo Gudian Huibua Kongjian Benti Quanshi* 游观：中国古典绘画空间本体诠释 [Wandering-Observing: Ontology and Interpretation of Space in Traditional Chinese Painting] (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2011), 119.

⁹⁸ Original: “中国传统绘画的长卷形式，一种延续的、展开的、无限的、流动的时空观念的物化形式，与“游观”的整体性、流动性、连续性、有机性完全契合，与物象之原的常形常象天人合一。” Liu 刘, 119.

⁹⁹ This argument from Zhai is further appropriated by Ouyang Jianghe, a renowned poet and a friend of Zhai, in his long poem “Notes from the Mars: a Scroll of the Long Poem” (《火星人手记：关于长诗手卷》) which is an aphorismic prose long poem published in 2016.

在另一个维度 放平了
也还是会卷曲的未来¹⁰⁰

The painter is painting that which after everything disappears
Will still stand there
Invaluable Immaterial
In ways that you have seen clearly
Yet still remain ambiguous

Viewers are viewing that which after everything is restored
Will still dissipate
Luxurious, rare
Being flattened on another dimension
Yet still curls up in the future

The scroll confronts readers with an alienated past and reveals that this past is recovered just to disappear again, as the “flattened” scroll will still “curl up,” because of the natural phenomenon of plastic deformation or the viewers’ artificial rolling up of the part already read. Lines in the second stanza preserve the endings of the lines in the first stanza, except the last line. This formal discrepancy performs the idea of these two stanzas. Even though what the painter is painting and what the viewers are viewing is the same landscape, the scroll medium reminds viewers that their access to the idyllic world is indirect, partial, and transitory.

“The pursuit of being present at the scene” is an apt synopsis of Zhai’s view of the common way of living in the modern world, which she is struggling against in order to write poems of an extensive scope. She writes—“The new scenery of the twenty-first century/ is gradually unrolling itself in front of my eyes” (“二十一世纪的新风景/正次第在眼前展开”)—as if her time is a scroll that appeals to its observer by creating a sense of transience.¹⁰¹ In contrast to Huang’s painting which enhances the scroll’s unrolling by presenting a unity among life, art, and nature, the scroll of the

¹⁰⁰ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 62.

¹⁰¹ Zhai 翟, 60.

modern world exhibits its unrolling through successive, rapid, and unexpected changes, with its own fragmentation and transience compelling the viewers to pay close attention and constantly adjust their understanding to stay present at the newest change. According to Zhai, the contemporary world tries to absorb people's total attention and leads us to a sense of loss that is analogical to the effect of Huang's scroll, only on a more intense scale. Section Twenty-eight, for instance, is a found poem, where famous quotes are revised and juxtaposed into contrastive pairs, to present how reality constantly eludes the poet's grasp. "This is April the cruelest month/ this is the tender weather of April in the human world/ dusk will travel across the plaza that is even darker than my heart/ old age should burn and rave at close of day" ("这是四月最残忍的季节/这是人间四月天/傍晚将穿过比内心更黑暗的广场/老年应当在日暮时燃烧、咆哮"), as the fourth stanza reads.¹⁰² Even though the poet's addition of the phrase "this is" and her careful arrangement of temporal details into an increasingly specific order seem to suggest that she becomes more capable of addressing her world by focusing on here and now, those shifting themes and moods from degradation to liveliness to befuddlement and to heroic struggles again underscore the erratic feature of contemporary experience.

The unrolling of the contemporary world is more coercive, for it creates an immersive experience filled with overflowing information, rapid actions, and sensual stimuli. Even though the accelerating turning of the scroll can potentially address a world that provides immediate information and momentary excitements, this rotation also distracts us from the present moment by compulsively incorporating new changes. If reading the scroll provides Zhai with the opportunity to examine her relations to both her culture and her contemporary world, her writing of a long poem about the scroll becomes an effort of imagining a fruitful engagement with contemporary reality—an engagement that

¹⁰² These lines are adapted from *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, "You are the tender weather of April in the human world" (《你是人间四月天》) by Lin Huiyin, "Crossing the Plaza at Dusk" by Ouyang Jianghe (《傍晚穿过广场》), and "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas, respectively. Zhai 翟, 68.

differs from both Huang's reclusive mindset that stays aloof from social changes and her contemporaries' effort of remaining on the scene to catch up with every shocking happenings.

Poetic Walking

As a temporary summary, Ammons's and Zhai's similar assumptions and practices of reading are fundamental to their findings about the scroll format. Their faith in the autonomy and vitality of words inspires them to observe the scroll as the embodiment of a subtle dynamism that often exceeds their expectation, rather than a mere tool mechanically recording their thoughts. Elevating feeling above intellectual exposition, Ammons's and Zhai's emphasis on sensitive and heartfelt reactions in reading enables them to experience the scroll's partiality, instability, and elusiveness with such depth that they can establish a sound analogy between reading the scroll and perceiving the world. Most importantly, their belief in the fruitfulness of such a reading practice sustains them through the exhausting and frustrating process of composition, where they constantly suffer a sense of loss until they realize it is a constitutive part of their experience with the scroll in particular and the world in general, a recognition motivating them to address and negotiate with loss in growing philosophical depth and poetic elegance. Their conclusions from reading and responding to the scroll format converge in three aspects. First, the scroll renders *partial* representations of reality, for its formal features underscore certain aspects of reality while understating others. Second, it encapsulates *various and often contradictory* images of reality, with those views that stand out to us in our reading of the scroll reflecting and shaping our relations to form, language, and the world. Third, the sense of loss that both poets suffer constitutes their *success in observing and responding* to the scroll, rather than failure: for the poets not only convincingly attribute their reading experience to the scroll's innate features but also follow its lead to address their alienation from their language, surroundings, and themselves, or in their own metaphor, to realize their status of being away from home.

The discussion so far focuses on the first half of both poems. In order to answer the question of how the scroll format has shaped the two long poems, one more crucial aspect awaits analysis. Since the two poets' reading practice eventually aims at joining the momentum of their materials and even internalizing it in their own lives (ideally speaking), how do their attentive observations and sincere responses to the scroll as readers shape their consciousness as writers? As we have shown, the poets propose the analogy between reading the scroll and perceiving reality, which means the quotidian life for Ammons and the contemporary culture for Zhai. Will this analogy extend further, so that writing on or about the scroll becomes the two poets' means of orienting themselves within the reality they perceive through the scroll format? While Ammons and Zhai attribute their displacement from home to the scroll, can the scroll also bring about their return, so that the poets may reestablish their intimacy with form, language, and surroundings? Moreover, in terms of Retallack's "geometries of attention," a phrase I employed to launch the discussion of reading in the very first place, the scroll's special geometry instructs the poets to contemplate the perception of reality, to accept its limitedness and instability, and to unravel its complexities through a lengthy exploratory process involving constant self-adjustments rather than a sudden revelation. Then, what kind of writing will this particular kind of attention generate, and can the two long poems themselves serve as telling examples? To answer these questions, the rest of the chapter will turn to the second half of both long poems, where the poets' envisioning of new perceptions of the contemporary world is brought to bear. Indeed, in the second half of the poems, Ammons's and Zhai's primary concern shifts from reading to writing. Not only are the speakers increasingly conscious of their identities as writers by often discussing their intentions, designs, success, and failure, but they also reduce direct references to the scroll to indicate the growingly organic integration between the form and the content of the long poems.

In Section Fourteen of *Following Huang Gongwang*, with the Zhai's gaze just reaching the end of the painting and her thoughts turning mainly self-referential in correspondence with the colophons following the painting, she writes, "Penetrating from 'fullness' into 'vacancy' / From 'imitation' to 'apprehension'" ("从'有'向'空'透去 / 从'临'向'悟'").¹⁰³ Even though these lines embody evident Daoist references in their original context, their special position in Zhai's poem invites us to read them as marking a change of emphasis in the poem, from passively following the scroll and absorbing its complicated format and content to developing an innovative way of writing that incorporates the features of the scroll format but does not rely on having or imagining a scroll unrolling itself at the scene. Intriguingly, in internalizing the scroll's momentum, both Zhai and Ammons imagine writing as walking in words, imageries, and themes, with the poets tracing out a path that resembles the formal characteristics of the scroll: it is a path that manifests an exploratory process through its movement within constraints, incorporates turns in its continuous extension, and reveals overlooked aspects of reality while remaining conscious of its limitedness as a perceptual and epistemic framework.

The long passages below exemplify Ammons's and Zhai's envisioning of a mode of writing that can embody the scroll's momentum. Both poets believe that it will lead to extensive, exploratory, and improvisational poems offering an alternative to short metrical verses, which, in the style of the "well wrought urn," are expected to be self-sufficient, carefully balanced, and thoroughly polished artifacts. Ammons and Zhai argue that this novel conception of writing can provide more suitable ways for the comprehension of contemporary quotidian life:

after this,
this long poem, I hope I
can do short rich hard
 lyrics: lines
 that can incubate
slowly

¹⁰³ Zhai 翟, 37.

then fall into
symmetrical tangles:
 lines that can be
gone over (and over)
till they sing with
pre-established rightness:

 here, I plug on:
 whatever the Muse
 gives, I release
for
this is one possible kind
of song
& has one kind of veracity:

 I've been
 looking for a level
 of language
 that could take in all
 kinds of matter
& move easily with
 light or heavy burden:
 a level
that could,
without fracturing, rise
 & fall
 with conception &
 intensity:
 not be completely
outfaced
by the prosaic
& not be inadequate
 to the surges

 I've hated at times the
self-conscious POEM:
 I've wanted to bend
 more, burrowing
with flexible path
into the common life

& commonplace:¹⁰⁴

And in Zhai's case,

写一首古诗犹如建筑
谋篇布局 如丈量空间
设计房屋 进入诗歌的内部
犹如进入殿堂
台基高大 营造庄严
读者与作者一同居此
自然养其浩然
写一首新诗犹如谱曲
一个动机存在 生长
动机推动我如同
风推动翅膀 水推动河流
动机推动我在新诗中前进
遇山开道 遇难呈祥
动机推动诗句忽短忽长

写一首古诗犹如建筑
以词句造景 以字
对峙空间 以衡定的秩序
迎向读者 迎向
扑面而来的目光
建筑藏风纳气 古诗亦然

写一首新诗犹如谱曲
曲式纷繁或简单
旋律留在琴谱或被乐队演奏
情绪引领作者和听者
穿行于不同空间
音乐无处不在 新诗亦然¹⁰⁵

Writing an ancient poem resembles making a building

Arranging the passages and organizing the structure, just like measuring the space

¹⁰⁴ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 143–4.

¹⁰⁵ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 42.

Designing rooms; Enter the interior of poetry
Resembles entering a hall
The stylobates are huge creating a solemn ambience
Readers and writers dwell here together
Naturally fostering their noble spirit

Writing a new poem (or a modern poem) resembles composing a song
A motivation exists, grows
The motivation carries me forward like
The wind carries wings forward, the water carries rivers forward
The motivation carries me forward within the new poem
Leading the way when I encounter mountains Bringing prosperity when I encounter
difficulties
The motivation carries lines that suddenly extend and suddenly shrink.

Writing an ancient poem resembles making a building
Making a scenery with words and sentences, using characters
To define a space, using a balanced order
To confront readers, confronting
Their intense direct gazes
Architectures hold the wind and contain the air, just like the ancient poems

Writing a new poem resembles composing a song
The song can be variegated or simple
The rhythm stays on the score or played by a band
An emotion guides the composer and listeners
Traversing among different spaces
The music is everywhere, just like the new poems

Both poets draw on the image of walking, with Ammons desiring to engage with the common life as if moving continuously and smoothly without a defined trajectory, and Zhai aspiring to write poetry in the same way that she roams in mountains. The intended results of their walks— “a level of language” and “the new poems” in their own words—are depicted with the same phrases and images that have been applied to the scroll, including “without fracturing,” “rise & fall,” “bend,” “grows,” and “guiding readers to traverse different spaces.” As the poets relocate the driving force of the poems from the scroll format to their own visions of writing, promenading indeed offers an effective transition. It has

been a fruitful setting for writing and thinking throughout history. A few famous examples include “Xijiangyue” (“西江月”) by Xin Qiji and “Prothalamion” by Edmund Spenser; some more recent ones include Gary Snyder’s “A Walk” and Dai Wangshu’s “Promenading I & II” (“款步(一)、(二)”). Meanwhile, walking is an effective way to claim agency within a relatively unfamiliar environment—this movement, with walkers proceeding forward, pausing, talking detours, and returning according to their personal interests and concerns, reveals their ability to design their own course even when the landscape may impose certain restrictions. Ammons’s insistent emphasis on his intention in the passage above, through phrases like “I hope,” “I plug on,” and “I’ve wanted,” confirms this connotation. Similarly, Zhai defines walks as guided by walkers’ impulses. Since Huang’s walking in the mountain is elevated into the source of his ultimate intimacy with the scroll and the landscape, Zhai’s application of the trope of walking to herself expresses her aspiration to develop a matching contemporary relation to the form of the long poem.

Besides the fact that walking is a familiar trope for writing and a common activity that helps to ground two poets in their intended subject matter, i.e., quotidian life, their shared interest in the act as recorded in their other essays and poems shows that it is not merely a temporary expedient facilitating the transition from reading to writing the scroll in the two long poems.¹⁰⁶ Rather, the poets find it a useful approach to extend what they have learned from the idiosyncratic medium into a poetics with broader applications. For both poets, activities like walking, writing on the scroll, and imagining experimental forms of writing are all non-teleological, dynamic, exploratory, and on some level improvisational acts that temporarily remove the participants from their familiar space, renew their perceptions of the world, and thus invite them to observe attentively and respond actively. In

¹⁰⁶ For instance, in *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry*, Roger Gilbert not only devotes half a chapter to Ammons’s short and medium-length poems on walking but also employs Ammons’s essay “A Poem is a Walk” as the theoretical framework to investigate the “formal resemblances between poem and walk.” See Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 25. For Zhai, one of her most famous serial long poems “Jing’an Village” (《静安庄》) adopts walking as a central motif.

adapting Ammons's words, through interweaving these various activities and shaping them into analogies for each other, the poets are intrigued by "clarification or intensification by distraction, seeing one thing better by looking at something else."¹⁰⁷

In 1967, four years after writing *Tape*, Ammons presented an essay entitled "A Poem is a Walk" at the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, proposing four ways in which a poem and a walk are analogical to each other. With poets as his targeted audience, this essay is a reflection on writing. The four aspects of writing that Ammons endeavors to advocate through the analogy between a poem and a walk are at least predicted by, if not directly stemming from, his engagement with the tape. According to him, the first convergence between a poem and a walk is phenomenological:

How does a poem resemble a walk? First, each makes use of the whole body, involvement is total, both mind and body. [...] This observation is important not only for what it includes but for what it rules out: as with a walk, a poem is not simply a mental activity: it has body, rhythm, feeling, sound, and mind, conscious and subconscious. The pace at which a poet walks (and thinks), his natural breath-length, the line he pursues, whether forthright and straight or weaving and meditative, his whole "air," whether of aimlessness or purpose—all these things and many more figure into the "physiology" of the poem he writes.¹⁰⁸

As crucial metaphorical and materialist vehicles for Ammons's poetry throughout his writing life, the walk and the tape have a shared function: both emphasize the process and agency of poems. The difference between the two tropes is also obvious. Since the tape unrolls itself through the typewriter, the poet's lack of direct control over its motion situates him in a comparatively passive position, such as its observer, follower, and reader. In this excerpt, Ammons switches smoothly from the analogy between a poem and a walk to that between poets' walking (both internally and externally) and writing. As a direct expression of the walker's body and mind, the trope of walking better prepares Ammons to view himself as the source of the poem's motion. It motivates him to inquire not only what kind

¹⁰⁷ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Ammons, 16.

of creative process is reflected by vital exploratory poetry, but also in the reverse logic, what attitude he should adopt to produce such kind of poetry.

Compared to poems like “Corsons Inlet” structured by specific walks, *Tape* alludes to walking sporadically. But we can still identify the theme’s fundamental role in shaping the poet’s consciousness as he negotiates with constraints in writing and living. For instance, early in the poem, the poet is disturbed by the concern that the scroll format is such a private obsession without applications in real life. Yet the trope of walking encourages the poet to adopt a more optimistic attitude, where unconventional form expresses a voluntary departure from one’s habitual ways of thinking that tend to accept society as it is given:

what it means to
drive away from the
 house: take a walk
 down the street:
 join the daylight
 world’s clean going:

are we as innocent of our
 joy
as they are of their
 despair?

must do what we can,
 accept the rest:
 God, help us: help us:

we praise Your light:
Give us light to do what
We can with darkness:¹⁰⁹

Here, the third person collectives refer to social outcasts. The word “drive” in the second line is coded with both the meaning of “us” who enjoy mobility within the society and “them” who are driven away.

¹⁰⁹ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 60.

Walking, as an act that is more tangible, conscious, and self-reflective than both driving along and being driven away by “the daylight/ world’s clean going,” alerts the poet that his freedom to expose himself under the daylight is a privilege established upon ignoring and repressing those who are underprivileged. As walking makes them visible, he feels the urge to challenge the existing unjust social order with righteousness, to replace the “daylight” with God’s light. When the poet explores the various senses of the word “light,” the trope of walking does not vanish. The last three lines quoted above, where light suggests both an ultimate ideal and the practical guidance for approaching the ideal, could be an allusion to the famous scriptural verse that also evokes the trope of walking—“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”—where the imagery of light is used in the same way.¹¹⁰ Walking, besides alerting the walker to the current social forms around him and enabling him to question their legitimacy, further reveals to him his agency to effect changes despite obstacles. Or, in Ammons’s own qualified but determined statement, “do what we can.” In fact, this will to change eventually serves as the propulsive force of the long poem.¹¹¹

Zhai’s *Following Huang Gongwang* employs the trope of walking more extensively. Conscious of the centrality of walking in the tradition of scroll paintings, Zhai applies the trope to herself in order to rewrite it. For if walking can be rendered possible in the fragmented and dazzling modern world, the scroll format will serve as an appropriate container for contemporary long poetry:

我写诗 或者读画

¹¹⁰ Ps. 119:105, KJV.

¹¹¹ Evidence can be found in the following lines, which we have already discussed in our earlier discussion of Ammons’s metaphysics of forms:

since there are feelings
(& thoughts) I can’t
express
through the forms of
society,
here I make other forms,
play-forms,
to express them through:

See Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 105.

埋头走进一条小路
什么东西接近我？
它来了 带着辐射半公里的热气
压平了周围的草地
七种原色被阳光冲刷
再也看不到任何纯色
我读诗 或者读画
该怎么躲避那些词语的僭越？
当思维如兔子
当词语繁殖如鱼类
当我起身拉弓或弹指一放
它是否朝兔子飞去？
兔子也漫无目的地逃跑
词语也为某个人起身躬立¹¹²

I write a poem or read a painting
Walking into a meandering path and immersing myself in it
What is approaching me?
It is coming, with the heat radiating half a mile
Lowering the grass around me
Seven pure colors are washed by the sunlight
So that I can no longer see any pure color

I read a poem or read a painting
How to avoid the arrogation of words?
When thoughts run like rabbits
When words breed like fish
When I straighten my body and draw the bow, releasing my finger
Will the arrow fly toward the rabbit?
The rabbits are also escaping aimlessly
Words are also respectfully standing there waiting for someone

Found in Section Twenty-two, these stanzas feature many empirical details that walkers in the woods would find vivid: sunlight creating a suspension over the grass because of what is scientifically known as the Tyndall effect; warm mist arising around the feet; the familiar scenery of trees and grass appears

¹¹² Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 54.

different under the sunlight; the sense that something unexpected is approaching; and rabbits startled by footsteps. Zhai compares her looking for appropriate expressions among the proliferating words to her searching for a path to orient herself among thriving trees and bushes. Like colors in the woods that are fused to alter the look of the woods, words interpenetrate each other, make ordinary things and events uncanny, and alert people to the necessity of redeliberating the relative position between their thoughts and words, as if they were hunting for rabbits between mottled shadows of the trees. In contrast to Huang's roaming in the mountains which emphasizes an ultimate harmony among the walker, the landscape, and art, Zhai's walking is not effortlessly: finding herself in an unfamiliar situation, the walker needs to "avoid the arrogation of words" just like skirting around overreaching branches. The last two lines are particularly intriguing. The mind, something we usually view as having intentions, runs around aimlessly; while words, which we tend to imagine as passive repositories waiting to be used, actively approve of the occasions where they are aptly employed. This series of comparisons liberates words from being mere vehicles for thoughts and turns them into lively beings which the poet needs to make acquaintance with and develop a relationship with. Neither boasting a comprehensive command of her means of expression nor assuming a transcendental relation to her world, Zhai walks mindfully through the complexity of language and contemporary culture, searching for meaning within the rapid generation of new concepts, acknowledging the possibility that thoughts and words can fail to reflect each other, and rejoicing in the serendipitous resonance between them when they succeed in doing so.

Since forms are indispensable for employing language and perceiving the world, "walking" in unfamiliar forms heightens the poets' awareness of their agency as well as their limitations, enabling them to proceed sensitively, patiently, and exploratorily. With a more active and self-reflective subjectivity emerging, the poets' sense of being displaced from home becomes a temporary departure necessary for reconfiguring their current projects as well as the contemporary long poem as a fruitful

genre. But notably, there is still a lingering sense of loss even after both poets have shifted their focus from reading the scroll to writing on it. For instance, despite Ammons's use of invocation, he refuses to deposit his faith in some transcendental vision where he can rearrange forms and reestablish orders. He insists that the room for change is limited, and certain constraints need to be accepted. As for Zhai, by comparing writing with hunting, she already suggests the possibility that her effort of matching thoughts with words may turn out to be futile: "When I stand up drawing the bow or releasing what I hold between my fingers/ will it fly towards the rabbit?"¹¹³

The poets' persisting interest in constrained writing proposes a starting point for investigating why they want to extend their sense of being limited not just from reading to writing but also into their poetics. For we may interpret it as a further enhancement of their conclusion from engaging with the scroll: namely, the loss and failure a poet experiences in the process of comprehending his or her formal, linguistic, and conceptual constraints attest to the poet's responsiveness to subject matter, media, and language. Previously a lesson derived from numerous frustrating occasions where the scroll eluded their control, potential unfulfillment now becomes a condition of original writing. As Ammons explains in "A Poem is a Walk,"

A second resemblance is that every walk is unreproducible, as is every poem. Even if you walk exactly the same route each time—as with a sonnet—the events along the route cannot be imagined to be the same from day to day, as the poet's health, sight, his anticipations, moods, fears, thoughts cannot be the same. There are no two identical sonnets or villanelles. If there were, we would not know how to keep the extra one: it would have no separate existence. If a poem is each time new, then it is necessarily an act of discovery, a chance taken, a chance that may lead to fulfillment or disaster. The poet exposes himself to the risk. All that has been said about poetry, all that he has learned about poetry, is only a partial assurance.¹¹⁴

The examples Ammons gives—sonnets and villanelles—are shorter forms with specific restrictions on meter, rhyme, and repetition. While prescribing some trajectories for the development of the

¹¹³ "What I hold between my fingers" can also be an idiomatic metaphor meaning "in an instant of time." Zhai 翟, 54.

¹¹⁴ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 17.

poems, the constraints underscore individual poets' maneuverings of them, which, as Ammons believes, sensitively reflect the poets' physical, intellectual, and psychological conditions at the moment of writing. Since these conditions are irreproducible, each experience of writing becomes a unique, improvisational "discovery," whose outcomes cannot be known beforehand. Long poems adopting material constraints like *Tape* are even more vulnerable to such indeterminacy. On the one hand, given the scope of the long poems and the time they require to be composed, poets will encounter more difficulties in predicting their content, rhythm, and design. On the other hand, material constraints, acting more arbitrarily than conventional literary constraints, require poets' heightened sensitivity and originality to be turned into evocative, organic formal designs.

Indeed, in *Tape*, this modest and inquisitive attitude of walking and writing often culminates into moments where the poet's imagination flows in harmony with the unrolling tape. For instance, the poet once recalls a physical walk from his childhood, which is internalized as a promenade in memories and further visualized as a geometry resembling that of the tape:

in the South
cedar grows deep
 in the damp swampwoods
and then it's sparse, so
sparse, where I come from:
& walk & walk, roaming and
nearly lost:
there's one! already
 topped: and found
another, shaggy, topped
years ago: & finally
finally finding one
 bushy, full, &
 pointed:
climbing and with that
awkward, ungrounded swing,
hacking away at the
 trunk:
dragging it home, the limbs

obliging, flowing with
the motion:

we had no electricity but
we had pinecones &
 colored paper &
 some tinsel: it
was beautiful enough:
it was very lovely:
& it's lost:

though there's no
 returning (and
shd be little desire
to return) still we shd
keep the threads looped
tightly with past years,
the fabric
taut
& continuous, past growing
into present so present
can point to future:¹¹⁵

Three different walks take place in these lines: the physical walk the poet took as a child, the mental walk across his childhood memories, and the metaphorical walk of his words across the tape. All of them attest to Ammons's reflections in prose. Namely, it is only by exposing oneself to the risk of loss that one may enjoy a unique indeterminable journey with serendipitous discoveries: the tree is found after the child risks the possibility of losing his direction; the domestic joy symbolized by the tree becomes particularly memorable when it is contrasted with multiple missed opportunities that arose during the search for it; the childhood walk evokes the poet's present reflections on form, because he explores his memories as if he were experiencing the incident anew without knowing its outcome, employing either the present tense or the present continuous tense and saturating his diction with

¹¹⁵ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 80–81.

strong emotions such as disappointment, suspense, and excitement; as for the last few lines quoted above, where the poet proposes how his nostalgic writing may secure some continuity across time, he adopts nondeterministic descriptions like “grow” and “point to” that offer only “partial assurance” in Ammons’s own words.

These stanzas invite readers to view poetic walking as a mental roaming, for symbolic, visual, and vocal patterns arise with spontaneous elegance. On the one hand, they seem to suggest an organic experience. For instance, with the line “nearly lost” responded by “& it’s lost,” the expected yet unfulfilled loss of the direction towards the poet’s childhood home is actualized in the present moment, for irreversible time renders a return to his childhood impossible. There are a few occasions that suggest a resonance in sound, like “sparse,/ so sparse” and “present so present,” as well as “& walk & walk” and “& finally/ finally.” The last few lines seem to be a veiled closure, as the content of the reminiscence converges into a geometric shape that justifies the formal choice of the poem. Specifically, when the tape is pulled through the typewriter, the unrolled part is “looped tightly” and the section in the typewriter is “taut.” When incidents that have already happened are viewed locally, time appears determined and irreversible. Yet with writing unwinding the tape, linearity coils up and generates new patterns. Likewise, time manifests more flexible patterns when it is processed by writing. The mental promenade not only inspires the poet to relate past events into a new continuous experience in the present moment, but also reveals to him the possibility that lost objects can appear in transformed forms across the years.

On the other hand, these verbal and structural patterns resemble Ammons’s understanding of walking. Both the content and the prosody of these lines tend to be tentative, and improvisational, rather than coercive or teleological. Specifically, the symbol of home, despite the fact that it attains various significances, neither suggests a clear logical progression in its transformations nor overshadows other possible connections among the stanzas like the narrow shape and the flowing

motion shared by the limbs of the tree, the tinsels on the tree, and the tape. Vocal repetitions and structural identities are scattered around implying a lack of extensive forethought. Similarly, the distribution of emotion and imagery seems uneven, a phenomenon further suggesting that these lines are guided more by the poet's physiological condition at the moment of writing rather than by his calculations beforehand. In contrast to the first stanza which presents vivid visual details as well as instant intense reactions, the second stanza switches to factual statements casted in a nostalgic mood, as if the poet is exhausted by the previous active recollections accompanied by emotional ups and downs. While it is possible to see the last few lines as a meta-reflection of the use of writing thus bringing closure to this thread of reflection, by ending with “growing,” “present,” and “future” respectively, they provide an open-ended temporary conclusion at best. Nurturing patterns, fostering a sense of continuity, and inspiring the poet to proceed on his task of continuing writing, this passage can be closely described with Ammons’s own words for characterizing walking in “A Poem is a Walk”:

With the first step, the number of shapes the walk might take is infinite, but then the walk begins to “define” itself as it goes along, though freedom remains total with each step: any tempting side road can be turned into on impulse, or any wild patch of woods can be explored. The pattern of the walk is to come true, is to be recognized, discovered. The pattern, when discovered, may be found to apply to the whole walk, or only a segment of the walk may prove to have contour and therefore suggestion and shape.¹¹⁶

Besides providing the trope and the method for poetic inspiration to evolve within the constrained form, the analogy between walking and writing reinforces the poet’s commitment toward preconceived constraints, especially in moments where his writing lacks sufficient impetus. The strategies Ammons adopts to tackle his uneasiness with the scroll format includes many of the themes that the poet will absorb into his characterization of walking in the future. These themes deepen our understanding of why quintessential forms are likely to result in discovery:

if we looked only by

¹¹⁶ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 17.

what we know,
 we couldn't turn our
 heads
 if we were at the
 mercy of what
we understand,
our eyes couldn't see:

 discovery is
 praise &
understanding is
celebration:
but understanding
 is to see itself
 fallen short:¹¹⁷

Ammons's roaming attention in writing is manifested by his preparedness for unfamiliar surroundings and unfulfilled intent as well as his delight in divergence and discovery. The first stanza equates knowing with immobility. In discussing those who dwell only in the forms they "know" well, the poet employs typography carefully, so that usual symbols of understanding such as vision and knowledge form layers of fetters and enclose the stagnant mind in the middle. Discovery, by contrast, means not only the subjugation of oneself to unfamiliar forms but also the ability to regard the insufficiency of human intelligibility as a reason to praise.

The poet then explains that praising means forgoing the insistence on obtaining rational thorough explication, accepting the novel form as it is despite its unintelligibility and possible futility, and continuing "functioning," i.e., writing within the constraints:

where did everything that
 is
come from?

while we can't
understand, we can

¹¹⁷ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 140–1.

feel
and
that's a fine essence,
astonishing as the
mitochondrion—
 if
 not
 more
 so:

leave structure
to the Maker
& praise
by functioning:¹¹⁸

The argument of writing as discovery here does not differ much from that of walking as discovery in “A Poem is a Walk,” for both rely on proceeding with what Ammons calls “a partial assurance.” If patterns are to be discovered during the process of a walk, there need to be many footsteps that are merely walking until a tentative account for the trajectory may emerge. In fact, these passages, as a rather didactic resistance to excessive inquiry, also practice what they preach. As shown by the eager outpouring of words, the absence of his usual delicate designs in structure and sound, and the abstract diction conveying more confusion than suggestive ambiguity (e.g., the existential “is” and “a fine essence”), the poet’s mind is wearied. Or, to take on a metaphor concerning motion, this passage seems to proceed with inertia, rather than to be propelled by new impetus. Yet thanks to the arbitrariness of the constrained form that resists thorough explication and compels the poet to assume a diminished subjectivity, the poet can naturally suspend his doubt and continue writing, adjusting his current unfruitful theorization of form into an exploration of his quotidian life and his personal relations to the material tape.¹¹⁹ Thereby, the poet not only rescues the poem from the nihilistic abyss but also instills flexibility into its development. Just as the final line quoted above predicts, sometimes,

¹¹⁸ Ammons, 142–3.

¹¹⁹ Ammons, 143–5.

mere functioning will reveal the answer that the poet's previous insistent quest has failed to find. Indeed, a while later, the poet finds another angle to justify the scroll format—its veracity in manifesting unfulfilled moments like this during the process of writing.

To write through poetic walking means to proceed with a sensitive understanding toward the limitation of form and language; to tackle or circumvent the constraints with improvisational elegance; to reconfigure and possibly redeem the sense of loss through departing from their familiar perspectives; to search for patterns during the process of writing; moreover, to candidly confess the possibilities of unsuccessful transformations, unsustainable poetic quest, and unfulfilled patterns. Zhai would agree with all these conclusions. As with Ammons, walking and its required attention are her trope and method to achieve those gleeful moments, where constraints and loss are integrated into the writing project both thematically and formally and thus turned into a source of inspiration. Section Twenty-three, quoted in its entirety below, presents a walk flexibly traversing various dimensions. It starts with the poet immersing herself in the painting, reaches its climax as she roams in classic texts spanning several centuries, and ends as she perceives the digital world through a poetic perspective:

首先：山被推远
前景是村屋
脚下有小径
目光摇过三分之二的位罝
时空重叠出夹岸奇山

履步 踏至山脚：
一副从未见过的画卷
像一个不能抵达的昨天 像“用典”
保持我内心无需回答的“问题”

时序流转 气也在全身循环
朝代兴亡 士不在山水中徜徉
走至山峰：游离的观点
推送我到无涯天堑

天堑：三船同行一船独

多元：半是真山半假山

山前至山后 意推：

“远水似无痕 远人亦无目”

站在一隅宋元之地

听“君臣一梦 古今虚名”

东坡遗言

仰观天象 俯看蚂蚁

能握在手中的只是一缕过往清气

下山：脚下之路变平直

我看到：江南曾独自繁华

“昨夜西风凋碧树”

今天世界和宇宙都将 4D

诗无穷流动

手持终端的信息推送我至

来时之路 那里的船叫做“舟”

那人叫“渔父” 当然

它绝不是诺亚方舟

它是天地古今之间的一根弧线¹²⁰

First: mountains are pushed away

Cottages are in the foreground

A meandering path is under my feet

Eyes swiftly skim through two-thirds

Different space-times overlap into majestic mountains

Walking to the mountain feet:

A scroll painting that has never been viewed

like a yesterday that cannot be reached, like “allusions”

retaining in my heart “the questions” that do not need answers.

Time and seasons are turning, my breath is also circulating in my body

The prosperity and death of a dynasty, literati no longer roam in waters and mountains

Walking toward the peak, a mobile perspective

A propulsive force sending me to the boundless natural chasm

¹²⁰ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 56-57.

On the natural chasm: three boats sailing together one should move alone¹²¹
Diversity: half are real mountains and half are fake

From the front of the mountain to its back, driven along by my thoughts
“The water far away seems seamless, the people far away seems having no eyes”
Standing in the corner of the Song and Yuan dynasty,
I hear “[the trust between] the emperor and his subjects is a dream, an illusion from the ancient
age to nowadays”
Words left behind by Su Shi
Raising my head to observe celestial movements, lowering my head to see that of the ants
What can be held in hand is merely some air suggesting the passage of time

Walking downhill: the path under my feet is straightened
I see: Jiangnan¹²² was beautiful alone
“Last night, the west wind withered the virid tree”
Today, both the world and the universe turn four-dimensional
Poetry is flowing endlessly
The popped-up information sent me toward
The road where I come The boat there is called “zhou”
The man is called “fisherman” Of course
It is in no way Noah’s ark
It is a curve between heaven and earth, the ancient and the present

Demonstrating its correspondence to the colophons on Huang’s scroll, this section meditates on the first half of the long poem by recycling lines like “mountains are pushed away” and “eyes swiftly skim through two-thirds [of the painting]” from Section Three and Two respectively. Upon their initial appearance, these phrases emerge in the context of a panoramic timeless landscape, revealing the painter’s unrestricted roaming view. Here, however, they offer qualifications for the poet’s relation to the landscape, so that she may execute a walk according to her understanding. Rejecting Huang’s consistently unifying vision, Zhai remains a walker bounded in her current time and space. The pushed-away mountain and the swift overlook register perspectival limits in these lines, specifying that faraway scenery fades gradually and the stretching hills appear to overlap each other due to the illusion

¹²¹ A slight rewrite of a line from Gong Xian’s treatise on the landscape painting—*Techniques of Painting* (《畫訣》).

¹²² The area where the Fuchun mountains are located.

of depth. These visual phenomena illuminate the contrast between the clear sight of cottages and the path “in the foreground” and the blurred “majestic mountains” in the background, eliciting the poet’s exploratory mood through the tension between a domestic space and the mysteriousness of the mountains.

Zhai’s subjugation to perspectival and epistemic limits prompts her to circumvent them creatively, as she turns to explore the symbolic potential of the landscape with the hope of discovering an unbounded vision in the lyrical mood. She succeeds. The flowing water becomes a figure for the successive dynasties throughout history, and summits suspended above the clouds for the poet’s floating thoughts. In this space, the poet finds pervasive poetic potential, for each changing view reminds her of some well-known lines in Chinese art theory and poetry. Her mind leaps wildly across genres and time, with references that extend over 1600 years converging on their shared theme—unrestricted views of mountains and waters. Intriguingly, most of these responses to landscape quoted by Zhai did not take place in the Fuchun Mountains, and Zhai deliberately effaces the empirical descriptions in those original texts which might enable readers to anchor those views geographically. This choice can imply that all intellectual responses and lyrical exclamations could have been evoked by the scenery in the Fuchun Mountains, elevating the place into a unification of the entire universe of all time. Yet in greater consistency with the development of the long poem, it is more likely that Zhai is depriving this tour through literary canons of its materiality, so that the mental wandering defying temporal and spatial restrictions reveals itself as a temporary and transitional phase intending to enhance rather than disturb her self-identification as a walker subjugated to material restrictions.

The latter conjecture proposes an interpretation for the two obscure lines dividing the section of the walk in the painting from that in literary canons: “like a yesterday that cannot be reached, like ‘allusions’/ retaining in my heart ‘the questions’ that do not need answers.” In other words, the landscape perceived by ancient literati is not a revelatory vision in which the contemporary poet ridden

with sustainable imagination can dwell. But the reinterpretation and recontextualization of ancient poets' and painters' perceptions serve to preserve the contemporary poet's "questions," with the most significant one being, presumably, the viability of writing a contemporary long poem suitable for the scroll format. Zhai's judgment that this question "do[es] not need answers" relies less on the problematics of prescribing fixed answers to the creative process than on the almost paradoxical situation that the sustenance of the question, or the curious mind and the exploratory attention elicited by the question more precisely speaking, is the solution. Here, Zhai is proceeding exactly with what Ammons describes as "functioning."

The sustenance of the question entails the reimmersion of oneself in contemporary reality despite its infertility for artistic creation. Once again through the trope of walking, the poet instills a sense of continuity into her descent from her intense and triumphant sojourn in the lyrical landscape back to her tangible surroundings, which is not a dramatic fall but a walk "downhill"—an expected and leisure move. Indeed, themes and patterns that arise during her walk in artistic and literary spaces are smoothly extended into current reality, casting familiar scenes in the digital world in a new light. The contemporary reality appears walkable in the poet's eyes.¹²³

Acoustically speaking, the rhyming patterns established by earlier stanzas also drift into the final one. When the poet imagines herself walking uphill in art and poetry, the dominating rhyme is the vowel "-an," both in its simple form like "shan" and in its more subtle and versatile compound forms including "-uan" and "-ian." Reinforcing the association of mountains with other themes like the scroll, the recontextualization of old parables, and dynamic visual and bodily experience, these

¹²³ While those quoted poetic lines consolidate the progression from admiring the sublime landscape into lamenting the ephemeral human lives and activities, Zhai detects the same connection in her observation of the contemporary culture, but in the reversed direction. The endless rolling of momentary information on digital screens reflects the motion of surging flows. Likewise, after the poet experiences in her imagination how disconnected partial views entice her to reach the summit in searching for an unrestrained view, she interprets the fragmented sensual stimuli on digital devices as more than evidence for cultural degeneration. Through the polysemy "推送," which means both "propulsive force" and "the abbreviated information on mobile phones," she entertains the possibility that information popped up on mobile phones may constitute an invitation of walkers to dive into an expanded comprehension of cultural inheritance.

rhymes reflect the recurring rhythms of mind and body in walking. The movement downhill, in contrast, is mainly organized by the end rhyme “i” which connects words like “straightened,” “four-dimensional,” and “toward”—all emphasizing efficient, teleological progress like the scroll’s linear extension. The two momentums converge in the final line to form a “curve,” with the vowels of “-ian” and “i” interweaved into internal rhymes.¹²⁴ Visualizing the connection between the past and the present as a curve, the dominating shape in the scroll format as well as promenades, the poet applies her version of allusion not just as a rhetorical device but as a mode of writing, which recontextualizes the past in searching not for potential redemption but for pertinent questions about the contemporary reality.¹²⁵ As exemplified by the appropriations of Yan Shu’s and Qu Yuan’s poems in the final stanza, while these borrowed words originally pose existentialist questions about intimacy and fidelity in a transitory world, Zhai’s rewriting bends them into a more nuanced version of her previous question concerning the possibility of contemporary long poems. Namely, if walking and writing on the scroll can secure unruffled and culturally informed engagements with the external world, so that we can heighten our consciousness beyond the transitoriness of lyrical elation, the digital culture, and our limited individual existence to attain some sense of psychological and intellectual continuity, how will this continuity be materialized into real art?¹²⁶

Notably, in addition to extending the scroll’s continuous composition, aesthetic inspirations, and leisurely sentiment into rich but not overwhelming lines on the contemporary culture, the trope of walking further assumes the responsibility of sustaining the poet through the moments when even

¹²⁴ Specifically, the third, eighth, and thirteenth characters have “-ian” as their vowel, while the second, fourth, seventh, and tenth characters have “i” as their vowel.

¹²⁵ Notably, after *Tape*, the curve becomes the geometric shape through which Ammons conceptualizes his writing. For Ammons, a curve, as an open circle without a center, suggests relative salience rather than absolute totalization. For details, see Susan Stewart, “Salience and Correspondences: *Tape for the Turn of the Year*,” *Chicago Review* 57, no. 1/2 (2012): 12–26.

¹²⁶ In addition to the obvious fact that *Following Huang Gongwang* is an exemplification, Zhai treats the question as the prompt for her later investigation of various genres of art, including traditional painting, contemporary art criticism, avant-garde architecture, and multimedia experimental theater. See Sections Twenty-four to Twenty-seven.

the scroll rejects to grant poetic perceptions. For instance, when the poet attempts to read Huang's painting from a feminine perspective, she realizes that it depicts a world from which women are completely absent. Despite the fact that this world does not offer the themes which the poet is looking for, the poet's imagination of herself walking in this painted world attains enough inertia to continue until more promising ideas occur: "I say to the painting that 'I will wait' / the landscape does not respond, I still proceed further-- / With light steps Walking slowly Roaming leisurely" ("我对一幅画说'我等待' / 山水不回应 我依然迈进— / 轻步 慢踱 悠行").¹²⁷

Promenading Attention

Ammons's and Zhai's promenading attention is as much about flexibility as about durability. Flexibility aligns with the turning momentum of the scroll, as the poets move with agility among different themes, voices, and to some extent, forms¹²⁸. Endurability resonates with the scroll's linear extension that secures the poems' thematic cohesion and their physical lengths. The trope of walking leads the poets not only to attain but also to qualify those triumphant moments of the long poems, so that the occasional sublime visions¹²⁹ will not uproot the poets from their investment in contemporary reality, and neither will the harmony among form, theme, and the material characteristics of the format beguiles the poets into closing the poems with some naive epiphany. Conversely, walking guides the poets to expect and endure those disheartening moments during the writing process, turning their obstacles—like the unpoetic reality, the pathos elicited by the evasive scroll format, and their

¹²⁷ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 52.

¹²⁸ As already mentioned, Zhai's long poem includes free verses, found poems, archaistic poems, prose (in the footnotes), etc. As for Ammons, readers occasionally find rhymed lines with regular meters buried in free verse.

¹²⁹ Even though this point should be evident from the examples quoted throughout this chapter, it is still worth emphasizing that a major difference between Ammons and Zhai lies in their attitudes toward the sublime. While Ammons is keen on exploring how to elevate the ordinary into the sublime, Zhai is usually skeptical of the sublime voice and the transcendental visions, deeming them as archaic perspectives incapable of addressing modernity. Their treatments of the sublime in *Tape* and *Following Huang Gongwang* converge in the sense that both poets see it as an unsustainable state where some overwhelming visions and sentiments temporarily conceal or dismiss their dilemma in actual writing and living. Although the sublime does not constitute a sufficient solution itself, the poets acknowledge its effectiveness in instilling new momentum into the poems.

intellectual and physical exhaustion—into new impetus for the continuation of the poem. Ammons incorporates some of these insights into the essay “A Poem Is a Walk,” in particular into the third analogical possibility he identifies between them. Alluding to the etymological connection between “verse” and “turning,” he argues, “The third resemblance between a poem and a walk is that each turns, one or more times, and eventually returns.”¹³⁰ While in the essay, Ammons mainly uses short poems organized around a single walk to exemplify this point, it has even more profound connotations in the case of long poems. Although *Tape* and *Following Huang Gongwang* incorporate numerous imaginative and physical walks, the poems further invite readers to experience them as a single holistic walk, a walk that starts as the scroll format terminates the poets’ familiarity with writing and meanders as the poets gradually reclaim control over their language, form, and world.

As they approach the end of the scrolls, both Ammons (explicitly) and Zhai (implicitly) evoke a return to afford their long poems some tentative conclusion. In slight complication of Ammons’s broad formulation of turning and returning, the return of *Tape* and *Following Huang Gongwang* is facilitated by the poets’ seeking for new definitions of home, with the understanding that the old ones (i.e., the once graspable surroundings before Ammons’s engagement with the elusive tape, and the premodern rapport to the world represented by Huang) are irrecoverable.¹³¹ Since both poets ascertain that with promenading attention, they may navigate themselves in language and form with relative ease, it is hardly surprising that they take another tacit move and declare this very attention as their new definition for returning and dwelling. The implications are twofold. First, by allowing two of the metaphorical tenors of walking—as a manner of writing and as a desirable trajectory of a poem—to intertwine, we notice that walking serves as both the means and the result in these long poems. This

¹³⁰ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 17.

¹³¹ The trope of walking is so integrated into Ammons’s poetics that in addition to seeing the course of *Tape* as a walk, there are additional interpretations. For instance, in “Homecoming in A.R. Ammons’ *Tape for the Turn of the Year*,” Matthew Wilson reads Ammons’s poetic practice so far as a walk, with *Ommateum* as the departure and *Tape* as the returning.

rhetorical phenomenon confirms our analysis of walking as the key to transforming the scroll format from a given constraint that needs to be observed into an art that needs to be actively envisioned and created. Second, regarding a process rather than a fixed destination as the new home, the poets argue that to dwell is to allow this flexible and sustainable attention to unfold.¹³²

Or, as Ammons puts it on his last day of writing *Tape*:

coming home:

how does one come

home:

self-acceptance:

reconciliation,

a way of

going along with this

world as it is

nothing ideal: not as

you'd have it:

testing, feeling the way:

ready to

readjust, to make

amends:

self, not as you would

have it:

nevertheless, take

it:

do the best you

can with it.¹³³

¹³² This consensus between Ammons and Zhai is strikingly similar to Martin Heidegger's argument in "Building Dwelling Thinking." Heidegger argues that to build, meaning unaggressive participation in the construction of space so that the fourfolds of the universe (the earth, the sky, the divinities, and the mortals) are gathered into a unity, is already to dwell. Thus, dwelling precedes the actual establishment of the building. While Heidegger's emphases of process, the respect of human limitations, and the preservation of the potential of the world's ongoingness are resonated by Ammons and Zhai in their poetics, Ammons and Zhai are less invested in the philosopher's vision that such a manner of dwelling will enlighten human beings to the primal oneness of the fourfold universe, with each participant reflecting and defined by the others.

¹³³ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 203.

Since what follows is an afterword-like reflection on the process of writing the poem delivered in a confessional tone, this passage, by explicating the way to dwell, is endowed with the responsibility of bringing the entire *Tape* to some closure. Most of the qualities that Ammons has attributed to walking are manifested in this versified expression of coming home: immersive experiences, continual functioning, acceptance of limitations, self-adjustments, risks of unfulfillment, and the observation of forming patterns. Yet this is a deliberately loose closure. By naming this way home as “nothing ideal” that may be delineated in conceptual terms or be possessed as a set of prescriptive rules, the poet refuses to assimilate his poem into an explicatory enterprise. Rather, he shifts the pronoun from “one” to “you” and invites readers who have followed him through the long poem to test this particular attention themselves by conceiving their conditions as a series of constraints that inspire improvisations. Since the walk extends itself from the poet’s practice to that of his readers, he preserves the indeterminable quality of the walk till its end. This implication leads Ammons to formulate the fourth, also the last, analogy in “A Poem Is a Walk”:

The fourth resemblance has to do with the motion common to poems and walks. The motion may be lumbering, clipped, wavering, tripping, mechanical, dance-like, awkward, staggering, slow, etc. But the motion occurs only in the body of the walker or in the body of the words. It can’t be extracted and contemplated. It is nonreproducible and nonlogical. It can’t be translated into another body. There is only one way to know it and that is to enter into it.¹³⁴

Tape, in comparison, not only asks us to enter it but also urges us to emerge out of it, so that we can dive into a new walk of ourselves. As envisioned by the poet’s inchoate rumination on displacement and homecoming still early in the project, “maybe this song/ will be about getting/ home/ and figuring out some/ excuse to leave again.”¹³⁵

Even though Ammons’s poem does not end triumphantly, the plot of returning provides certain relief for both the poet and the readers. In Zhai’s case, in contrast, not only is the definition

¹³⁴ Ammons, *Set in Motion*, 18.

¹³⁵ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 29–30.

of dwelling an ambiguous one, but the closure it suggests can equally be understood as an anti-closure. More precisely speaking, the ending sections of the long poem alternates between these contradictory implications. Zhai's most explicit description of re-finding home after her lengthy walk takes place in Section Twenty-six:

时间总是会被变化所累
在一段飞逝而去的山水中
有一些脚迹 变成题跋和印鉴

没有地图 何来地理?
唯有山水 不问古今¹³⁶

Time is always burdened by changes
Within an episode of the transient mountains and waters
There are some footsteps that become inscriptions, colophons, and seals

Without maps how come there is geography?
Only the landscape does not consult history

These stanzas can provide a reassuring image, exhibiting the poet's complete reconciliation with her language and form. Since inscriptions, colophons, and seals are both allusions to constitutive parts of the scroll, the poet identifies an indispensable space for her individual expression to dwell in—the collective artistic imagination of landscape, a concept transcending our institutional scientific understanding of place and time offered by “maps,” “geography,” and “history.” Juxtaposing the inevitably transient physical landscape with ceaseless human artistic creation that is figured as a perpetually unwinding scroll, these stanzas assert the value of the long poem. They supply the poem with a promising temporary closure before it delves into its ending sections consisting of the poet's epilogue-like reflection, which concerns readers' possible reactions to the poem (Sections Twenty-

¹³⁶ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 63.

seven and Twenty-eight), the poet's own relations to it (Section Twenty-nine), and a homage to the source of the long poem, i.e., Huang's painting (Section Thirty).¹³⁷

Yet the poem seems to prevent us from maintaining this optimistic view to the poem's official end. As the imagined scroll conveys a sense of continuity throughout history, we are disturbed by the poet's implication that the loss of physical scenery is what makes landscape art valuable. It is probable that these stanzas are not exalting the transcending power of art but treating it as a mere solace for unendurable material reality. We find the relation between art and reality increasingly ambivalent, as we proceed into the next two sections of the poem, where the poet discusses possible futures of her poem in specific and of art in general after their completion. Thanks to Zhai's protracted revision process that intends to equate her input of time with that of Huang, she obtains a glimpse of her poem's potential fate after its publication. As recorded in Section Twenty-seven, a *mise-en-abyme* section about a theater adaptation of an earlier draft of *Following Huang Gongwang*, the poet was astounded by the fact that actors performed her poem by mechanically remembering the script. Refusing to read the long poem in its original form, they claimed, "I don't read poetry" ("我们不读诗").¹³⁸

In Section Twenty-eight, a found section, poetry turns to consolation once again. Zhai becomes a reader and creates a collage by juxtaposing well-known lines from literary works, films, and even scientific theories throughout history, most of which express writers' struggle to grasp changes

¹³⁷ The poem's official ending is evidently divided from the rest of the long poem in content, form, and tone. It exclusively focuses on the visual and technical details of Huang's painting, without any mention of Zhai's writing. Unlike other sections that are rendered in free verse with an interplay of archaic and vernacular Chinese, this homage assumes archaic diction and grammar throughout and is delivered in seven-syllable regulated verse, a condensed metrical form for short poems in Chinese classical poetry. It adopts a uniformly praising tone and juxtaposes ornate dictions, forming the most self-contained yet perhaps the most insipid section in the entire long poem. According to Zhai's footnote, she evokes the "stylized" ("程式化的") classical form through a "parody" ("戏作") to suggest that appending colophons is a common practice in appreciating scroll paintings. Given Zhai's earlier metaphor of her rewrite of the Fuchun scroll as a colophon, this final section constitutes a subtle self-mockery. Moreover, the fact that this section can be read as an independent poem itself invites us to regard it not so much as a conclusion of previous sections but as an alternative to them. Their different approaches in writing about a painting reveal the tension not only between the compact crystalized poem and the long promenade-like poem, but also between tradition and its contemporary adaptations in general.

¹³⁸ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 64.

and disasters on both the personal and the social scale. She specifies all her sources in the footnotes. As the poet carefully orders the quotes into contrastive pairs, the collage does not enforce a unified answer but relentlessly interrogates our relations to the seemingly alienated world. For instance, juxtaposing social atomism with the cosmos, the lines “Minuscule balls, a ball of millions of trillion/ This is a theory of observing the world” raise questions about the scope of observation (“微小圆球，亿兆圆球/ 这是观看世界的一种理论”); juxtaposing Odysseus Elytis’s “The Mad Pomegranate Tree” with a half-factual-and-half-lyricized description of the crash of an aircraft midway from Malaysia to China, the lines “That is the mad pomegranate tree/ Which hastily unfastens the silk apparel of day/ This is the missing black box/ That falls into the navel of the black hole” (“那是疯狂的石榴树/ 迅速地把白昼的绸衫揭开了/ 这是失联的黑匣子/ 沉入黑洞的脐窝里”) lead both the poet and the readers to wonder whether transgression is an expression of life or destruction.¹³⁹ Revealing to Zhai that her feeling of being displaced from home is shared by writers across cultures and times, these often-anguished implications not only exemplify her use of allusion as a conceptual tool to sustain her inquisitive mind but also enact her vision of the self-generating scroll encompassing all artistic creation. According to the ending lines of this section, “This is the scenery in which we find ourselves/ This is the scenery where we will not know the real look of Mount Lu” (“这是我们身临其中的风景/ 这是不见庐山真面目的风景”),¹⁴⁰ she is able to imagine a collective “we” immersed “inside” a shared “scenery” and struck by the view differently.¹⁴¹ In other

¹³⁹ Zhai 翟, 70.

¹⁴⁰ As Zhai’s footnote indicates, this is an adaptation of Su Shi’s poem “Writing on the Wall of Xilin Temple” (《题西林壁》). The poem contemplates the phenomenon that Mount Lu appears drastically different depending on the viewers’ location in the mountain. Su proposes that it is because they are immersed within the scenery without an external panoramic view. Rewriting this scientific conclusion into a reflection on the relation between individuals and the world, Zhai, like Su, assumes a joyful tone, taking pleasure in the flexible sceneries of their worlds rather than insisting on obtaining the single true view.

¹⁴¹ Zhai 翟, 随黄公望游富春山, 70.

words, Zhai finds herself part of this imagined scroll where all artistic minds converge, rather than an external intruder as in the case of her relation to Huang's painting.

Drastically different as the actors' and the poet's attitudes toward reading are, they converge to imply that Zhai's vision of home is empowering: the imagined scroll inspires the continual composition of the current poem; the vital intertextuality of the current poem attests to its continuity with the tradition and suggests future growth of the imagined scroll. However, once the poem is completed, this dwelling in collective human wisdom becomes dubious, with the danger of resorting to a mere utopian dream that stays detached from the public. Zhai's struggle between the elating and the disheartening possibilities demonstrates the tension between artistic and materialist ways of receiving landscape and art, which continues until the penultimate section, where she reaches the end of Huang's scroll and exhausts the volume of her long poem:

一幅长卷如此说：
胸中丘壑如此说：
江山并不多娇，人心多娇
一个问题 让我身重如山
另一个问题 让我神轻若羽
朝谁说“好”
哦，谁在说“如此作结”：¹⁴²

A handscroll says so:
Landscape in my mind says so:
Waters and Mountains are not charming, human hearts are charming
A question imposes a mountainous weight on me
Another question lifts me floating like a feather
To tell whom “Fine”
Oh, who is saying “Ending like this”

According to the context, the question which suffocates the poet is the materialists' sneer—“Infinity? Who needs whose infinity?” (“无限？谁要谁的无限？”); the question that enlivens the poet comes

¹⁴² Zhai 翟, 73.

from those people who, out of their belief in art's resistance to time, inquire how the scroll, as an emblem for unification of all artistic visions, will perpetuate itself—"Time no longer matters, to where is infinity rushing?" ("时间不再要紧，永恒向哪里奔去?").¹⁴³ These two possibilities are as much a prediction of the reception of Zhai's long poem as a retrospection on her own maneuverings of Huang's scroll, which bridge these two views. Although the continuity asserted by the format and the composition of the painting initially appear irrelevant to the fragmented, materialistic contemporary reality, it becomes a synecdoche of cultural inheritance consisting of people's ceaseless effort to turn both sublime landscape and pressure of the elusive and often unpoetic reality into art. Following these implications, we can certainly read the last two lines quoted above as the poet's pact with Huang's scroll, which gradually transforms from the stringent restrictions interrogating the poet's command over her subject matter, form, and language into the poem's indispensable structural organizer and vision. At the same time, the poet's choice of leaving her interlocutor in question suggests that these lines can also be read as an imagined exchange between the long poem and its unidentifiable future readers that expresses her veiled anxiety about the poem's reception: Will readers think that the poem lives up to the poet's ambition of writing a long work addressing fundamental issues of contemporary experience? Will they find the dull moments in the poem bearable, so that they can persist in reading till its end? If so, is this inconclusive end satisfying?

In the confessional reflection which officially ends *Tape*, similar predictions on readers' response were expressed. But Ammons treats those dull moments of the poem and readers' probable disappointment with less anxiety:

I've given
you my
emptiness: it may
not be unlike
your emptiness:

¹⁴³ Zhai 翟, 72.

[...]

I've given
you long
uninteresting walks
so you could experience
vacancy.¹⁴⁴

Since plain moments are as inevitable as the vital parts, potential disappointment initiates a special connection between the poet and readers—a candid exchange of vulnerability between the two parties. This proposal sheds light on a line that has been mentioned in passing earlier in the chapter, which proposes that the long poem generated by the scroll format “has one kind of veracity.”¹⁴⁵ If we extrapolate our analysis of the scroll format, we may argue that this veracity indeed depends on the kind of interaction the scroll demands from its readers and writers. Specifically, the veracity is manifested when Ammons and Zhai are frustrated by the geometry of the scroll format as its readers; when they strive to develop a sense of belonging to their language and world in order to turn themselves from sojourners to dwellers; when they confess their physical, intellectual, and psychological weariness as writers committed to long constrained writing; when we, as their readers, reapply their method of reading to engage with their long poems; when we pay attention to our limitations through reading those of the poets; and when we are inspired to transform those limitations into an integrated part of our experience of life and thus become poets of our own realities. Even though Ammons and Zhai envision this veracity with different level of confidence, their practices of writing on the scroll testify to the efficacy of medium and form, which can shape experience of reading, writing, and living to the extent that converging insights emerge between unrelated writers, and to the extent that artistic intimacy, or even an artistic unity, arises between writers and readers.

¹⁴⁴ Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 204–5.

¹⁴⁵ Ammons, 143.

As the scroll's linear continuity and its rotation become embodiments for an entire range of issues fundamental to contemporary experience and artistic creation, reading, writing, walking, and living reveal themselves as allegories for each other. These motifs motivate and organize each other, enabling poets and readers to be more prepared and involved in savoring their serendipities and investigating their loss and vulnerability, despite uncertainty regarding the further development of the scroll, the poems, and the world. Although the scroll writing started as an intuition or even merely a playful whim, it proves to be an adequate medium for approaching contemporary common life, for it unveils the restrictions imposed by modernity while suggesting how to endure and at times to maneuver them. Equally evident is the fact that the two long poems are often asymmetrical to each other, even in treatment of these four central motifs. For instance, though both poets take walking as an avenue to moderate their sense of foreignness to their languages and forms, most of the walks in *Tape* take place in a pastoral setting, and those in *Following Huang Gongwang* in an urban space. Both assume the scroll format, but writing on a trivial paper tape and writing in honor of a prominent scroll painting are acts with extremely different cultural connotations. Moreover, *Tape* features spontaneous writing, and *Following Huang Gongwang* emphasizes intense revisions. Yet the phenomenon that these two drastically distinct poets elect the same constraint for their long poems and read many converging implications into the scroll format attests to the fruitfulness of comparing them with each other. The poets' effort of reading, responding, and creating despite potential vanity demonstrates their earnest engagement with objects, art, other human beings, and common life in general. For both poets, this pursuit justifies the scope and scale of contemporary long poems.

What is at stake within this comparison is the poets' shared insights regarding the practicability of contemporary long poems. Since modern reality incubates dilemmas such as the coexistence of repetitions and distractions and the contradictory implications of restraint and vision, long poems nurtured by this era cannot rely solely on captivating narratives, sublime imagery, transcendental

subjectivity, and intense lyricism that characterize epics, Romantic long poems, and traditional landscape paintings. Given Ammons's and Zhai's longing for felt connections with their world through reading and writing, the inclination toward the impersonal in modernist long poems where poets become ventriloquists for several characters (as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and more recently in Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*) or external observers of cultural phenomena (as in Pound's *Cantos*) is at odds with their intent. Instead, through structural and thematic constraints, their uncertainty about their mental explorations, and their acknowledgment of their fallibility, Ammons's and Zhai's poems manifest a deep commitment to earthliness. Like all ordinary people, the poets are born into languages and cultures that are not always intimate and intelligible. Like those who bitterly realize that they can neither fit themselves into existing social and cultural forms nor subvert them entirely, the poets are also compelled to improvise, compromise, and adjust themselves constantly, in order to negotiate between their ideals and the given reality.

Chapter Two: Folds Upon Folds

Folding, in the contemporary printing industry, means the process of gathering and folding printed sheets in a predetermined order. Once stacks of nested paper—also known as signatures—are prepared, machines bind them together by the edge of the outmost folds. Folding aligns the paper, reduces air between sheets, and results in a stable and tidy codex format that can be conveniently turned to a particular page.¹ Published in 2003, American poet Susan Howe's long poem *The Midnight* initiates a reading experience that foregrounds such a book-making process. As an elegy for Howe's mother the Irish authoress Mary Manning and a self-conscious long poem with congruous subtitles, recurrent motifs, and progression in emotion and cognition, its composition largely depends on Howe's disassembling, cutting, reordering, and refolding of previous shorter works.² Meanwhile, since the long poem curates miscellaneous materials including dictionary entries, textile history, cultural memories, and personal anecdotes together, it is replete with thematic, tonal, and formal interruptions. These gaps compel readers to flip its pages forward and backward, combining content from non-

¹ In "Folding the Narrative: The Dimensionality of Writing in French Structuralism (1966-1972)," Karin Krauthausen argues that the spike of interest in an invisible fourth dimension and the growing awareness of dimensionality in the early twentieth century prepared the ground for development in narratology. Krauthausen organizes this literary history by the successive elevation in dimensionality and proposes some reading and writing practices that can ground each dimension materially. The one-dimensional conception of a narrative is exemplified by the structuralist emphasis on the linearity of words, as if words proceed irreversibly on scrolls. Two- and three-dimensional writings—implying a heightened awareness of non-linear narration—are analogous to the codex format, whose folding disrupts and transforms the cohesiveness of texts. Multi-dimensional writing is also discussed in Jacques Derrida and André Leroi-Gourhan's advocate of diffusive thinking. See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, vol. 2, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965), 261–262.

² The first and the third sections were initially published as independent poetry sequences, as *Bed Hangings* by Granny Books in 2001 and *Bedhangings II* by Coracle in 2002 respectively. When they were incorporated into *The Midnight*, only slight changes were made. The rest of the book was based on another verse-prose-mixture long poem *Kidnapped*, which Howe published with the Coracle Press in 2002. In comparison to *The Midnight*, the initial version is more consistent in imagery and more straightforward in its elegiac sentiments. Its first two prose sections were significantly changed, reordered, and supplemented, before being incorporated into *The Midnight*. *Kidnapped*'s eponymous section, which includes two pages of prose and a series of rectangular stanzas, did not undergo any changes except the removal of illustrations, when it was transformed into the ending section in *The Midnight*. Moreover, in an interview with Jon Thompson published on *Free Verse*, Howe appreciatively mentioned a review of *The Midnight* by Marta Werner, a textual scholar. Entitled "The Third Way," the review suggests that *Kidnapped* and *The Midnight* allude to different publishing conventions. The former aligns with the colonized Irish printing tradition. It dramatizes exilic motifs through the lack of pagination and copyright notice and emphasizes personal testimonies with visceral design and tipped-in illustrations. *The Midnight*, printed on uniform acid-free paper and appended with copyright information and a list of illustrations, tames the unconventional designs and subjects the poem to the Anglo-American editorial practice.

subsequent leaves to balance cognitive relevance with material proximity: the five sections of the book alternate between prose and lineated poems; the section titles in the table of contents seem to suggest that while the first and the third sections—“Bed Hangings I” and “Bed Hangings II”—are more closely connected in content, the second, fourth, and fifth sections—“Scare Quotes I,” “Scare Quotes II,” and “Kidnapped”—have greater emotional affinity. Narratives in the prose section are digressive and fragmentary. Verse sections and prose sections supplement each other, as revealed by constant elaborations of imagery like “nominalism” and “itinerate” throughout the long poem. Illustrations further complicate the issue. Oftentimes, they are only obliquely related to the texts surrounding them.

This frequent flipping of the pages also characterizes readers’ engagement with a book-length Chinese elegy *An Ideal Couple in the Water-Paint Garden: Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan 1642—1651* (《水绘仙侣：冒辟疆与董小宛 1642—1651》) by Bai Hua. Published first in 2008 and reissued in 2019, this poem marked the acclaimed poet’s relaunching of poetic writing after a more-than-ten-year intermission. Bai’s major works in the 80s and 90s are short, eruptive lyric poems and dramatic autobiographical essays. For his first attempt at the form of the long poem, he rewrote two classical Chinese prose pieces by Mao Pijiang, a late Ming scholar. Composed in 1651, the first source text “Memories from the Shade Apricots Temple” (“影梅庵忆语”) is Mao’s elegy for his concubine Dong Xiaowan. It chronologically recollects the well-known beauty Dong Xiaowan’s persistent courtship of Mao, her unhesitating renunciation of her earlier luxurious lifestyle as a courtesan to marry him, their brief but happy time spent in the Water-Paint Garden, her care for the family as they were fleeing from riots and warfare, and her meticulous devotion to Mao when he was sick—an onerous task that eventually wore her down. The second source text is Mao’s “Notes on Dream” (“梦记”), an essay on his religious commitment first written in 1638.

An Ideal Couple is an experiment in form. Its table of contents already forecasts the disturbance

of linear reading in the rest of the book. The table of contents, imitating the typeset of pre-modern China, is arranged vertically from right to left³; its content, however, follows the current typesetting conventions, printed horizontally from left to right. The first portion of the poem includes 150 lines of verse and a few direct quotations of the original text in prose, with the poet mainly speaking behind the mask of Mao. This part, or the main text, roughly follows the narrative of Mao's "Memories," starting with Mao and Dong's marriage. The verse section also incorporates an "Appendix" loosely derived from "Notes on Dream," where the poet, still through Mao's voice, reflects on death paradoxically: excitement for dangers bursts out from time to time within his fatalist and defeated view of life. Written mainly in prose and in an extradiegetic voice, the second section of *An Ideal Couple*, which is named "Explications" ("详解"), consists of ninety-nine endnotes to the verse section. Each endnote is titled by what it annotates, sometimes a number, a noun, a phrase, and other times an entire line. Most of these entries are short essays with carefully crafted narrative and emotional structures. Extending over 300 pages, they cover themes like scholarly research on Mao, Dong, and other late Ming literati, the poet's personal anecdotes, and discussions of international literary works whose topics and sentiments echo Mao and Dong's experience. As they peruse the verse section, readers are constantly interrupted by superscripts suggesting they flip the long poem to its second part, thus experiencing rapid shifts in forms and voices. The cross-referencing within the text is further complicated by Bai's extensive revision in the long poem's reissuing: while in the earlier version, the explications usually supplement contextual and cultural information to the interpretation of the verse section, the poet foregrounds thematic relations among the explications in the second issue, so that even if readers decide to read the verse and the prose separately, they need to leaf through the book

³ Unlike traditional books where pages are bounded on the right-hand side and are turned from right to left, the second edition of *An Ideal Couple* is still bounded on the left-hand side. For the first edition of the book, the table of contents follows the current standard arrangement, i.e., horizontally arranged and read from left to right. Yet its cover rotates the book by 90 degrees, also embodying a change in the orientation of the book.

frequently, referring to an earlier or later entry to obtain necessary context for the interpretation of a specific explication.⁴

Highlighting its book format, *An Ideal Couple* further displays folding through its adjustment to fit Chinese editorial conventions. According to Bai, he originally intended to write a medium-length verse and published it as a stand-alone work. Since a poem only twenty pages long is too short to be published as an independent volume under the Chinese publication convention, he appended to it ninety-nine pieces of short prose, a number with rich symbolic meaning for both Mao and Bai. The verse part serves as a heuristic base full of creases that can be unfolded into additional semantic and formal potential. Initially a strategic move, Bai soon became fully committed to this project, proposing that it realized his long-time vision serendipitously: "Since I was young, I already have a poetic vision of interweaving poetry and prose, or unifying the miscellaneous, or fusing all kinds of genres into poetry" ("我年轻时，就有这个‘诗文交织’，即‘杂于一’，即在诗歌中混杂各种语体于一炉的诗歌理想").⁵

Beyond the printing industry, we may define the fold more conceptually to encapsulate its geometric features and metaphorical potential: the fold is the creation of a division (a point, a crease, etc.) in a continuum with which the differentiated portions can be organized into a more structured state⁶, e.g., curves of opposite concavity in geometry and layered meanings in poetry. This definition

⁴ Given that revisions by both Howe and Bai demand new hermeneutic methods, the comparison in the rest of the chapter takes place between *The Midnight* published in 2003 and *An Ideal Couple* published in 2019, unless specified otherwise.

⁵ The revision results in a gigantic volume of almost 400 pages, indirectly leading to some editorial mistakes. Most tellingly, part of Entry Fifty-two was printed again in Entry Forty-one, an error that unintentionally establishes another relational space within the text. For Bai's quote about his vision of fusing verse and prose, see Bai Hua 柏桦, *Women de Rensheng: Bai Hua Shiven Zixuanji 1981–2001 我们的人生：柏桦诗文自选集 1981–2021* [Our Lives: Bai Hua's Self-selected Poems and Essays] (Southwest Jiaotong University Press, 2021), 467.

⁶ Unlike usual geometric entities like a line and a polygon, the fold is usually understood intuitively without a consensual definition. Even in the recently growing field of geometric folding algorithms, mathematicians define the process of folding rather than its product. The intuitive and loose nature of its definition partly explains the fact that while the fold has been extensively applied in different problem-solving strategies throughout history, it is still not axiomatized enough to become an indispensable epistemic construct. In the twentieth century, there was some endeavor to extend folding from a material practice and a strategic operation into a fundamental geometric symbol. For details, see Michael Friedman, *A History of Folding in Mathematics: Mathematizing the Margins*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), chapter 5.

entails a series of conceptual consequences. Grounded in division, it emphasizes folding's dual functions: first, it partitions the continuum to make the latter comparable and describable; second, it bestows a different texture upon the connector, so that a turning point, a vertex, a new edge, and the like emerge. The various portions circumscribed by the connectors need to be described in relation to one another, with characteristics like the order of stacking, the inside and outside of a fold, the upper layer and lower layer of a fold, the assignment of mountain or valley creases all relativized.⁷ Folding further disturbs our intuitive understanding of space: as a continuum attains a more compact form, points that used to be widely separated can appear close to each other.⁸

In "Talisman Interview" with Edward Foster, Howe ruminates on her understanding of discontinuity in time, space, sound, and narrative in relation to the mathematician René Thom's catastrophe theory. What we call "fold" in everyday language is referred to as "singularity" in Thom's theory, a professional analytic term denoting the place where an object or a system ceases to behave consistently and continuously, when small perturbations are made to the parameters. In answering Foster's question "Is time just chronology," Howe says,

No, I wouldn't say so. I would say space-time. It's the thing that isn't chaos. Again, I've been trying to understand some of René Thom's writing [*Mathematical Models of Morphogenesis, Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*]. This isn't easy if you never were able to pass algebra! But he writes beautifully, and his diagrams are like poems. Algebraic formulas are also articulations of sound forms in time. Thom says mathematics is a universal language; numbers have sounds. So there are these forms in space and time and in apparent chaos—formulas, patterns—but at the end of *Mathematical Models*, he seems to be saying maybe it's all a game. All you can do is move the chips around pretending that there is some kind of order.

It was because of Thom that I named my Wesleyan book *Singularities*. I was having a terrible time trying to come up with a title for that group of works together (*Articulation, Thorow*, and *Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk*), and Thom came to Buffalo and gave a lecture called "Singularities." In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if

⁷ In mathematics, this issue is addressed by introducing the partial function, which is a value without geometric meaning. Roughly speaking, this value signifies the relative orientations (i.e., in the same or opposite direction) of every two parts.

⁸ I emphasize this phenomenon as an intuition because, in rigorous geometric analysis, we define distance not by the length of the direct line between two points, but by the intrinsic geodesic distance, i.e., the shortest path between two points through the continuum. In that sense, folding functions are distance-preserving. Nevertheless, the preservation of distance will not be a crucial issue, as we get to topics like the application of folding in topology.

you start at x point, there is +1, +2, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1, -2, etc. The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. Predation and capture are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen—a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and emigrants, and to the land as well. And it seemed to be a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language; they are charged. “Singularity” was a word dear to the Puritans for other reasons.⁹

Instead of the change of signs in any functions, Thom presumably meant the change of signs in their differentiation. But Howe grasps the mathematician's main argument: for a system with a dimension of four or less, what happens in singularities is not ineffable chaos but universally unfoldable bifurcations. Even though the behavior of the system becomes discontinuous and inconsistent at points of singularity, it can still be modeled by one of the seven catastrophe sets.

According to Howe, singularities suggest epiphanic moments when shape (“the point where plus becomes minus”), sound (“articulations of sound forms in time”), and metaphors converge into an “instant articulation,” whose comprehension requires a “leap.” The rupture in language gathers the momentum for a conceptual change. But what sources does a poet have to create singularities? Howe introduces another concept in Thom's work—“bifurcation,” which describes the sudden change at singularities. For if we plot the differential equations of the perturbations around the singular points on a diagram, a visualization which can be broadly conceived as containing the performance of the system of all time, the graph indeed presents bifurcating vectors. The poet is evidently fascinated by the term's viscosity and timelessness. She appropriates the image to address versification several times—“I think that when you write a poem you use sounds and words outside time. You use timeless articulations”; “When you see [*The Bibliography of the King's Book; or, Eikon Basilike*] in a book, you'll see that it's a catastrophe of bifurcation”; “[Poets] balance on the edge of poetry”; “I wanted to write

⁹ Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (New York: New Directions, 2015), 173.

something filled with gaps and words tossed”; and “all sharp vertical sounds, all came together and then split open”—and attributes the potential for formal, semantic, and vocal gaps to the accruing history of words, especially non-standard usages and personal predilection.¹⁰

In an interview with Omar Berrada, Howe explains the varied ways of expressions in *The Midnight*, (including images, photos of carefully arranged objects, verse, and prose), as follows: “What has always fascinated me is the space in the fold between two pages in a book, or the space between one poem and the next in a series. I see an area between poems; even if I cannot control what the reader sees, there is an area.”¹¹ This comment applies to the poet’s entire oeuvre. In her intervention on history, including critical works like *The Birth-Mark* and poetry like *The Liberties*, she delves into smudged letters in manuscripts, socially unaccepted emotions in personal epistles, and contributions of women and outcasts that tend to be diminished and even stigmatized in authoritative narratives, thereby salvaging words, people, and events that are enfolded and hidden in disciplinary mechanisms. The delineation of an indefinite space is an imperative persisting in Howe’s more personal writings, especially her elegies. For Howe, people, objects, and events actively interact with each other to form relational space, which “is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else.”¹² Yet with death transforming a loved one from a center of agency into a node of relations without a stable material form, the original structure of experience is disturbed. This phenomenon drives Howe to explore new patterns among the free-floating relations by examining them in quotidian objects, philosophy, arts, history, and even other people’s memories, so that these relations may converge into a newly folded state of exemplification, citation, curation, and display, where the poet can mourn and meditate on mourning.

¹⁰ Howe, *The Birth-Mark*, 172; 174; 177; 175; 175.

¹¹ Berrada Omar, “The Space Between: Entretien avec Susan Howe. Poésie, cinéma, histoire,” *Vacarme*, n.32 (2005.3), 80.

¹² Howe, *The Midnight*, 58.

Emily Dickinson writes, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—.”¹³ By “formal,” one wonders, did Dickinson want to suggest the adoption of pre-existing forms (like ritual conventions for mourning the dead), or the fashioning of new forms as an outlet for feeling? Howe, it seems, could answer “yes” to both alternatives. She has often written in the mode of elegy, but experimentally. See for example *Pierce-Arrow* (1999). The poem offers a discreet elegy for her father and her second husband David von Schlegell through the philosophy and life of Charles S. Peirce, sketching, as Elizabeth Joyce puts it, multiple reflective axes so that “the lost person will come back to her through the memory spark created by the refracted light.”¹⁴ “Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker” roams among film criticism on Chris Marker, grief for the death of von Schlegell, Howe’s childhood memory of the Second World War, and reflections on collective trauma and guilt. According to Howe, von Schlegell’s absence creates an experience of “meeting nowhere,” which urges her to reimagine relations among major themes in her intellectual and personal life, so that she may recover the sense of being grounded.¹⁵ *That This* (2010), an elegy for her third husband Peter Hare, suggests in its very title a need to recalibrate her cognition of time and space in response to bereavement.

Although it is not until fifty pages into *The Midnight* that Howe finally reveals Manning’s passing as one of the central themes, its two-page-long prelude is already saturated with loss, carving out a digressive space where particulars flow around in vague melancholia. The first page reads:

There was a time when bookbinders placed a tissue interleaf between the frontispiece and the title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together. Although a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals. The transitional space between image and scripture is often a zone of contention. Here we must separate. Even printers and binders drift apart. Tissue paper for

¹³ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), Poem 372.

¹⁴ Elisabeth W. Joyce, “*The Small Space of a Pause*”: *Susan Howe’s Poetry and the Spaces Between* (Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell University Press, 2010), 57.

¹⁵ Howe, “Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53, no. 2 (2012): 396.

wrapping or folding can also be used for tracing. Mist-like transience. Listen, quick rustling. If a piece of sentence left unfinished can act as witness to a question proposed by a suspected ending, the other side is what will happen. Stage snow. Pantomime.

“Give me a sheet.”¹⁶

Howe’s whimsical language drifts among interleaves, linguistic suspense, theatricality, and pantomime. While nothing is explicit, the passage is filled with anxiety for separation: the first sentence employs the past tense to imply alienation in time; statements like “Here we must separate” and “Even printers and binders drift apart” hint at some irresistible power; the mysterious description of “the other side” of ending insinuates unknowability. Those translucent materials are hardly promising in securing connections between separated spheres. Though supposedly “traceable,” they and their interrelationships are “mist-like transience,” confusing and evasive.

This passage already reveals several recurring motifs in the long poem. Vague and disconnected as they initially appear, the poet will extend and organize these translucent materials into the nodes of newly configured differentiations and patterns. During the course of the long poem, “interleaf” between words and texts and the paper “sheet” the poet asks for will be metamorphosized into bed hangings and bed sheets, both marking the liminal space between the private room and the public social world, between dreaming and awakening, restfulness and restlessness, and even death and life. These fabrics further develop into curtains in theater separating reality from virtuality, which allude to Howe’s mother’s career as a playwright. Manning’s occupation extends the meaning of the word “sheet” into a metonymy for writing. Following the thread of theater arts, theatrical techniques like stage snow and pantomime, which appear like abrupt digressions at the end of the prelude, are constitutive elements of the “silent talk” toward the end of this elegy, as the poet communicates with her dead mother through woods, flowing tides, and the sky.¹⁷ In other words, with Howe’s writing of

¹⁶ Howe, *The Midnight*, xi.

¹⁷ Howe, 152.

the long poem, these relations gather and layer upon each other to form a whole where liminality between life and death appear less absolute.

Besides providing a panorama of this long poem that resists summary, my cursory tracking of how the prelude sinuously unwind intends to capture Howe's intricate relational structure. Each of the above-mentioned threads exhibits the poet's exploration of the metaphorical potential and literary history of particular objects. But moreover, these threads intertwine. For instance, Howe depicts her mother's verbal wit as the ability to "correlat[e]" disparate facets of words or facts.¹⁸ Correlation obliquely resonates with images constituting other symbolic clusters, such as the double-sidedness of lacework,¹⁹ the two coexisting perspectives in logical dialetheism, and the crest and trough in long-period tides. For visualization, we may imagine a continuum, or a fabric, as we may say to better align with the textile images in *The Midnight*, that is folded, unfolded, and refolded multiple times. When presented to readers, its intersecting crease pattern welcomes other combinations and permutations. Images become protean, altering their significance as we situate them in different relations; traces of thinking turn processual, developed in the course of the entire poem through metamorphosis and resonance.

Bai is also keen on relations, situating his poems and poetics in the crisscross of multiple oppositional concepts to mobilize the entire symbolic realm: left and right, morning and afternoon, father and mother, quick and slow, the lyric and the narrative, summer and autumn, Chongqing²⁰ and

¹⁸ Howe, 63.

¹⁹ Howe explains this fascination in her reading of *The Midnight* at Kelly Writers House on February 15th, 2017.

²⁰ Chongqing is the city where Bai was born and raised. He also started his professional career there, working for the Institute of Scientific and Technical Intelligence (known as the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China, or ISTIC nowadays) while writing poems. According to Bai's autobiography, "in that year [1982], I only wrote two poems 'Trembling' and 'A Lyric Poem.' One is on the left, the other on the right. The former is incandescent, the latter breezy. The former faces forward, imitating surrealist techniques; the latter turns backward, imitating techniques in classical poetics. Even though some people like them, I was not satisfied." ("这一年轻写出两首诗《震颤》、《抒情诗一首》,又是一左一右之诗,前者白热,后者凉爽;前者向前,对超现实主义技艺的模仿,后者向后,对传统诗法的模仿。虽有几人喜欢,但我并不如意。"). See Bai Hua 柏桦, "Bai Hua Zizhuan Wenxue Nianpu" 柏桦自撰文学年谱 [Literary Autobiography of Bai Hua], *Qingnian Zuoji*, no. 11 (January 1, 2008): 95.

Jiangnan²¹, the traditional and the modern, the leisurely joy envisioned in writings by late Ming literati, and the ethical weight characterizing literature of the New Cultural Movement, etc. Drawn from ideological, cultural, geographical, and temporal rhetoric to envision dynamics internal to poetry, these symbols, while interrelated, are not on the same plane. For Bai, their intersection, partial overlapping, and divergence are constitutive to the initiation and organization of his poetic impulse and identity. His memoir *The Left: A Lyric Poet of the Mao Zedong's Era* starts with parental and social factors during childhood that made him a poet: the "ultra-leftist," "narcissist and masochist" personality incubated by his authoritarian mother and the general political fervor during the Cultural Revolution accumulate into an urge to express, which resists and simultaneously craves for a "father's form."²² This father's form, in Bai's lexicon, suggests a calmer expression with a tint traditional aesthetics often characterizing Chinese classical poetry. In Bai's own words, the father's form "temporarily turns me into a courteous rightist," so that "while my song marches toward the left, it gradually, yet abnormally, becomes sentimental, soft, and constructive, tending toward conservatism and reservation."²³

As Bai's narrative proceeds from his childhood into adulthood, from the collective rage and confusion during and immediately after the Cultural Revolution into the capitalist and materialist Zeitgeist of the 90s, he reconceives the dynamics of his own poetry through the entanglement of some less politicized dualisms: "The bronze mirror of history (poetry or Nanjing) reflects this early-autumn evening covertly [...] Language diffuses the authority of lyricism, and poetry returns itself to language,

²¹ Jiangnan is the area bordering the south bank of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Bai taught and wrote in Nanjing between 1988 and 1992 and visited Suzhou in 2005. Jiangnan, both as a specific geographical area and a frequent symbol for exquisite tastes, lyricism, and idyllic carefree lifestyles, serves as one of the major themes in Bai's poems.

²² Original: "同时一股近似于自我牺牲的极端热情把我推向'极左' (自恋狂或虐待狂) 的尖端。" See Bai Hua 柏桦, "Zuobian — Mao Zedong Shidai de Shuqing Shiren (Diyi Juan Yi Shaonian)" 左边——毛泽东时代的抒情诗人 (第一卷 忆少年) [The Left: A Lyric Poet of the Mao Zedong's Era], *Tibetan Literature*, no. 1 (1996):79.

²³ Original: "[父亲]使我成为一个临时的彬彬有礼的'右派'。我的歌在向左的同时, 逐渐变得一反常态的缠绵、温柔, 具有建设性, 趋于保守和矜持。" See Bai 柏, 79.

distinguishing itself from politics, society, ethics, and values.”²⁴ Here, we find axes of geography, seasons, poetic content (“the authority of lyricism”),²⁵ and literary politics (a depoliticized aestheticism): the more temperate words in these differentiation pairs are emphasized repetitively, while the more aggressive ones are “diffused.” As Bai folds his poetics along these axes, his impulsive side is enveloped in a restrained structure; yet the fact that this folded state is only imaginable through these charged polarities foregrounds the fact that the repressed sides are equally constitutive to his poems.

Bai’s poems offer some more subtle illustrations. One of his best-known poems, “Summer is Still Far Away” (“夏天还很远”) sets the scene in an “October evening,” when “all kindness enters” (“所有的善在十月的夜晚进来”); the poem depicts a gentle, “disheartened” (“灰心”) fatherly figure whose “left hand is tired” (“左手也疲倦”) and who nevertheless “covertly moves to the left” (“暗地里一直往左边”). Fusing three relational pairs in Bai’s poetics, the seasonal, the parental, and the directional, these symbols not only describe how the character learns to repress his enthusiastic and even aggressive side (“no more, sudden loss of temper, sudden ardent love” (“再不了, 动辄发脾气, 动辄热爱”) but also suggest that the current tenderness is temporary, with the repetition of the titular refrain “Summer is still far away” foreshadows a slowly approaching yet inevitable eruption.²⁶

²⁴ Original: “历史的铜镜（诗歌或南京）悄悄地朗照着这个初秋之夜。[...] 语言消解了抒情的权势，语言回到了语言。诗从政治、社会、道德、价值中脱颖而出。” The context of this specific paragraph reveals that it addresses the poet’s subjective consciousness in a highly lyrical voice. The geographical mark Nanjing, a city in Jiangnan, is both a realistic detail and a symbol for a relaxed, quotidian, and slightly archaic poetic style. The seasonal mark, in comparison, leans more toward creating a contemplative, dreamy environment than providing accurate empirical evidence. See Bai Hua 柏桦, “Zuobian — Mao Zedong Shidai de Shuqing Shiren (Diwu Juan Yi Nanjing)” 左边——毛泽东时代的抒情诗人（第五卷 南京）, *Tibetan Literature*, no. 5 (1996): 58.

²⁵ For Chinese poets writing in and immediately after the Maoist era, lyricism is usually associated with enthusiastic, determined, and even slogan-like expression of one’s emotions and will of action. During the Maoist period, this style mainly aimed to mobilize the revolutionary sentiment among the masses; in the post-Mao period, it became an emotional form to express trauma and the yearning for individual subjectivity.

²⁶ My textual evidence mainly comes from the last two stanzas of the poem, which read:

In half lament and half self-examination, a more recent poem “Our Life” (“我们的人生”) starts with a line resembling the couplet structure in classical poetry, transits into contemporary oral speech, and merges into quotes from Mao Zedong, channeling the revolutionary urge into a lyric parallelism, which amounts not to the political sublime, but to the quotidian. This short poem is quoted in full:

大地一直辽阔，盘餐丰俭由人
人老了，就爱吃点、喝点、看点……
看红星照耀中国——毛主席的青年时代
那时的年轻人一说买肉就俗了
“我生气了，以后再也不跟那个家伙见面了”

恋爱——从天而降的东西。

偶然遇见，可能想不起
外面有一点冷
左手也疲倦
暗地里一直往左边
偏僻又深入
那唯一痴痴的挂念
夏天还很远

再不了，动辄发脾气，动辄热爱
拾起从前的坏习惯
灰心年复一年
小竹楼、白衬衫
你是不是正当年？
难得下一次决心
夏天还很远

In coincidental encounter, I may fail to recall
It was a little cold outside
Your left hand is tired
Covertly moves to the left
To the remote and the profound
That only inexplicable yearning
Summer is still far away

No more, sudden loss of temper, sudden ardent love
Resume old bad habits
Be disheartened year after year
The little bamboo chamber, the clean white shirt
Were you just in your prime time?
It is hard to make up the mind
Summer is still far away

See Bai Hua 柏桦, *Shanshui Shouji* 山水手记 [Notes on Landscape], (Chongqing University Press, 2011), 27–8.

这是柏拉图曾经说过的吗？
我们年轻时同样拒绝谈论它
“我和我的朋友只愿意谈论大事——
人的天性、人类社会、中国、世界、宇宙！”

后来是什么东西走到头了？
是什么东西让我们害怕说出来？
灵命的成长由独一无二的情感塑造——
一户人家，万户人家，亿户人家
三十年后相逢，不外都是来世人家……²⁷

The land is always vast, and meals can be either lavish or simple
Aged, one just wants to eat something, drink something, see something...
See red star over China—Chairman Mao's youth
Young people at that time wouldn't speak the vulgar language of buying meat
“I am angry, will never meet that guy anymore”

Love—something descended from above.
Is it Plato who said that once?
When we were young we likewise refused to talk about it
“I am only willing to talk about important matters with my friends—
Human nature, human society, China, the World, the Universe!”

Later what has reached its end?
What makes us fear to speak?
The spiritual growth is molded by a unique feeling—
One house, ten thousand houses, ten million houses
Reencounter each other after thirty years, all become houses of the worldly²⁸...

Bai's insistence on “house” in the parallelism also means “households,” “family,” and “domesticity.”
In *An Ideal Couple* written ten years before this poem, he already unearths the rich connotations of tranquility, comfort, and joy in this word to embellish Dong's domestic devotion in the endnote entry
“To Establish a Family.” There, the various facets of this concept are again construed through

²⁷ Bai 柏, 我们的人生, 393–4.

²⁸ A wordplay that can mean either “the other-worldly” to emphasize the rapid and almost surreal political change in China in the past thirty years, or “the worldly” to suggest that fervent revolutionary passion has been subdued by the quotidian life.

situating symbols at the intersection of different axes, so that these axes can be folded into a delicate structure where polarities implicate each other: for instance, Jiangnan, which often serves as the intersected expression of Bai's ultimate imaginations of both the vertical connections about cultural inheritance across history and the interpersonal horizontal connections within his personal life,²⁹ becomes a place filled with ostentation, amorousness, and vanity, where literati and courtesans entertain one another in this endnote entry. In contrast, Chongqing, which usually signifies youthful impulsion in Bai's writings, bears witness to a childhood memory about intimacy and domesticity—"when I was young, what I saw in the Xian Mansion in Chongqing is how lavish and tender, restful and tranquil" ("幼时，我在重庆鲜宅所见，那可是何等的富贵温柔，闲雅宁静")—even though Bai deliberately conceals all specificities.³⁰ In fact, this sentence is an oblique reference to a disturbing incident in his memoir *The Left*, where Bai recollects the abrupt fall of a childhood friend's noble family during the Cultural Revolution. The serenity the poet remembers at the Xians was a presentiment for their brutal suffering, whose destructiveness and unpredictability used to manifest "the left" end of Bai's political poetics in his autobiography. In *An Ideal Couple*, the image not only drifts to the oppositional end but also absorbs additional emotional and temporal configurations later in the entry, like leisurely joy and traditional aesthetics.

Figuratively speaking, many of Bai's works are cast in elegy. *The Left*, besides a reflection of his individual development into a poet along three decades of rapid social and political changes, is a lament

²⁹ Jiangnan is the setting for many of Bai's poems about intense feelings: for instance, "A Past Incident" ("往事") presents his sudden recognition of eroticism through aging prostitutes; "A Conversation" ("一则对话"), a witty dialogue about love and regrets between two former lovers, is partially masked by the discussion of a book about Chinese gardens in Jiangnan; and, more pertinent to the concern of this chapter, one of his elegies for Zhang Zao is titled "Remembering Jiangnan" ("忆江南"). Interestingly, the initial geographical locale for "A Conversation" is specified as Nanjing; yet when Bai excerpted part of the poem to merge it into *An Ideal Couple*, its geographical background switches to Yangzhou, another city in the Jiangnan area. Insignificant it is for the interpretation of the poem, this change suggests that in Bai's imagination, Jiangnan signifies a culture rather than a series of specific places.

³⁰ Bai Hua 柏桦, *Shuibui Xianlu: Mao Pijiang yu Dong Xiaowan* 水绘仙侣：冒辟疆与董小宛 1642—1651 [An Ideal Couple in the Water-Paint Garden] (Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing Ltd., 2019), 73.

and criticism for the impulsive, destructive poetic expression, which lost its force and legitimacy as the legacy of the Maoist era dwindled. According to Zhang Zao, Bai's close friend and a distinguished poet himself, "Summer is Still Far Away" is an elegy for Bai's poetic mentor Liang Zongdai.³¹ By rewriting Mao Pijiang's grief over the death of Dong Xiaowan, *An Ideal Couple*, as I will discuss in the chapter, envisions elegy not just as a choice of subject matters but as a lyric mode entailed by a particular ontological commitment to the relations between words and reality. Unlike Howe's poems, whose elegiac quality is immediately recognizable by stemming from concrete deaths, the mourning tone in Bai's works is usually gradually consolidated through our incessant unfolding of connotations. To give a brief example, the mentioning of the Xian family's wealthy and tranquil life in *An Ideal Couple* appears to be a modern parallel for Mao and Dong's joyful domestic life in the first few years of their marriage. As we unfold the tragedy of the Xian Mansion and the Xian family during the Cultural Revolution by looking into Bai's other works, further similarities occur to us: social unrest and incessant warfare during the late Ming era not only forced Mao and Dong to leave their affluent garden just like the Xian family three hundred years later, but also permanently separated the couple, for the frequent dislocation, the poor living conditions, and the arduous work of taking care of the ailing Mao eventually cause Dong's death. The tragic end of the Xian Mansion and the Water-Paint Garden reveals the melancholy ring of the title of the endnote "To Establish a Family" ("做一份人家"): despite these characters' will and efforts, their modest wish is still too demanding at their times.

³¹ In a revision and republication of this poem, Bai added a subtitle to the poem that literally says "To Father," and presumably, Bai's own father. However, even though Bai obviously knows Zhang's interpretation, he never contradicts it directly. Instead, in his book for Zhang, which includes essays and poems written in remembrance of Zhang, Bai says, "[Zhang] witnessed everything during my writing of 'Summer is Still Far Away'" ("你见证了我写《夏天还很远》这首诗的前前后后"). See Bai Hua 柏桦, *Ju Song: Zhi Zhang Zao 橘颂：致张枣 [Odes to Oranges: To Zhang Zao]* (Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing Ltd., 2022), 95. Significantly, Zhang presented a moving analysis of the poem's elegiac sentiment in his dissertation *Auf die Suche nach poetischer Modernität: Die Neue Lyrik Chinas nach 1919*. See Zao Zhang, "Auf der Suche nach poetischer Modernität: Die Neue Lyrik Chinas nach 1919" (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, 2004), 114–7, <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/handle/10900/46239>. Zhang describes the rhythm of the poem as an imitation of the Song lyrics. A much-quoted opinion in criticisms of Bai's poetry, this comment introduces another oppositional pair Bai often uses—the traditional and the modern—into our reading experience.

According to our analysis of the structural features of Howe's and Bai's long poems, they align with each other in several ways: both poets process loss through reconceiving relations stemming out and flowing into the lost object; they see relations—including the sensual, the psychological, the conceptual ones—as dynamic and intersectional, with poetry structuring them mutual comparisons and contrasts to launch an inquiry about mortality, poetic forms, and the lyric genre; given that any such folded state can be easily unfolded and refolded by creating new creases, changing the order of folding, or switching the direction of the crease, particular images or reading experience initiated by the intersecting relations can appear, disappear, and shift around. Both poets recurrently engage with their major motifs by contextualizing them in disparate relations, expanding their associations through external references, and alternating their forms of delivery between verse and prose, to traverse folds of feeling and meaning.

Employing the mathematical, philosophical, and literary discourse of the fold, this chapter argues that in Howe's and Bai's long poems, discontinuities disseminate and convene simultaneously. This momentum, registered in sharp bifurcations of meaning in the verse sections and in fractalized associations among objects and symbols in the prose sections, inspires both poets to express their genuine psychological response to profound loss while conducting formal experiments, instigates ontological and existential crisis while reinforcing an epistemic structure, and diminishes their subjectivity while enabling lyric expression. I further propose that with their extensive scope of these enabling miscellaneous creases to be folded, unfolded, and refolded, *The Midnight* and *An Ideal Couple* elect the folded structure as a qualified redemption can be envisioned and fulfilled by limited human beings.

Cutting and Collaging

The poets' predilection for imagining poetry multi-dimensionally verifies our visualization of these two elegies as collections of folds delineated by dynamic relations and versatile themes. Before

becoming a poet, Howe worked on visual arts, especially on installations and was associated with American minimalism.³² A serendipitous spatial composition initiated her into writing poetry, as she recalls in an interview:

Before we moved out of New York [i.e., 1972] I had started making environments—rooms that you could walk into and be surrounded by walls, and on those walls would be collage, using found photographs (again a kind of quotation). Then I started using words with that work. I was at the point where I was only putting words on the walls and I had surrounded myself with words that were really composed lines when a friend, the poet Ted Greenwald, came by to look at what I was doing and said to me: “Actually you have a book on the wall. Why don't you just put it into a book?”³³

It seems that the experience of entering a space and surrounding herself by words continues to play critical role in Howe's poetry. Many of her experimental works involve cutting words and lines (both from others and herself) and pasting them in intersecting manners; moving rather freely on the page, words create a visual tendency of brimming over the dull, rectangular confinement of the two-dimensional paper. Meanwhile, her frequent employment of intertextuality converges with her interest in found images, for both practices presume an immersion in copious potential materials.

Certainly, the deliberate arrangement of words to establish semantic, rhythmic, and visual impacts is integral to all versification. But Howe's description of this process is strikingly multi-dimensional:

First I would type some lines. Then cut them apart. Paste one on top of another, move them around until they look right. Then I'd xerox that version, getting several copies, and then cut and paste again until I had it right. The getting it right has to do with how it's structured on the page as well as how it sounds—this is the meaning.³⁴

Howe's insistence on cutting and pasting twice to exponentialize the effect of the collage confirms the insufficiency of the flat page for her composition. Ordering, intersecting, and arranging elevate her

³² Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*, 1st ed, Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xi.

³³ Lynn Keller and Susan Howe, “An Interview with Susan Howe,” *Contemporary Literature* 36, no. 1 (1995): 6.

³⁴ Keller and Howe, 8.

work from visual appropriateness (“look right”) to a layered experience including sound and meaning (“had it right”). Compared to such kind of visual experiments, the typesetting of *The Midnight* appears quite traditional: words are aligned horizontally; figures are centered carefully, despite Marjorie Perloff’s sensitive observation that the text and the illustrations often do not correspond to each other.³⁵ According to Howe, this temporary³⁶ taming of her poetic practices is not just limited to *The Midnight*. Taking place in the middle of her writing life, it intends to accommodate two concerns—a change in writing tools and an effort to fuse prose and verse:

For many years I worked on an electric Smith Corona typewriter, and while it was easy to change over to a computer with prose, shifting from the typewriter to the computer in poetry was hard and I am sure changed my voice. The medium you use has to become your way of thinking. By now it would be impossible to return to the typewriter especially for prose. I seldom spill words across and over the way I did with my electric Smith Corona because I haven’t the patience (or brains) to learn complicated programs like Photoshop or Quark. On a typewriter it was easier to think of a page as a field because you could physically grasp each one and shift and pull it around the platen. You could scumble lines together and turn the paper sideways or upside down.³⁷

If writing through a typewriter is manipulating a “field” filled with mobile and interrelated vectors, *The Midnight* will show that the resort to a plane, i.e., the screen and the conventional printed page, still enables the poet to create additional dimensions in her writing by folding syntax, rhythm, and meaning.

While “cut and paste” is an exhilarating procedure in Howe’s writing, it indicates ten years of drastic depletion in poetic inspiration in Bai’s life before he wrote *An Ideal Couple*. The rapid capitalization in all industries in 1990s offered opportunities for accumulating personal wealth, which were extremely gratifying after decades of poverty under the command economic system. The Chinese literary world adapted itself to this trend immediately. Catering to the market interest in self-help

³⁵ Marjorie Perloff, “‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic’: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*,” *Boundary 2* 36, no. 3 (August 1, 2009): 214–7.

³⁶ In *That This*, Howe’s elegy for Peter H. Hare published in 2010, she resumes cutting and rearranging lines spatially.

³⁷ Jon Thompson and Susan Howe, “Susan Howe by Jon Thompson (Interview),” *Free Verse: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry & Poetics*, no. 9 (Winter 2005), <https://freeversethejournal.org/issue-9-winter-2005-susan-howe-by-jon-thompson-interview/>.

books and the half-curiosity about and half-admiration of Western culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, many intellectuals including Bai were invited by book merchants, (many of whom used to be acclaimed writers, too), to compile books on profitable topics, such as business management, investment, and marital advice.³⁸ Exploiting the porous copyright law at that time, these books were a literal manifestation of the Chinese idiom ironizing unoriginal writing—"scissors plus paste." As Chen Dongdong reports in his reflection on Bai's poetry and their friendship "Bai Hua's Reconstructive Surgery" ("柏桦的整容"),

During those years [circa 1994], merchants operating through "the two-level channel" suddenly became active in the book market, with many of them transformed from young leaders of various poetic movements during the 80s. Chengdu, Changsha, and Shijiazhuang were the most popular gathering places for book merchants; after Bai Hua settled down in Chengdu and while writing his cultural memoir, he also joined the business by providing manuscripts. I heard from Zhong Ming that in the beginning, he and Bai just cut and pasted. Bai often collected the remains after Zhong finished cutting, pieced them together, and pasted them into another book. When they received money by selling manuscripts for the first time, they immediately went to the shopping mall, and each of them bought a pair of Nike shoes which they had coveted for a long time.³⁹

Uncannily analogical to Howe's compositional process, Bai first browsed through plentiful materials, then turned them into visual and semantic fragments. He rearranged them physically, rewrote some sentences, and pasted them in order. Finally, the publishers reprinted all materials on two-dimensional papers. Often listed as the "compiler" on the covers,⁴⁰ Bai selected his source materials ranging from

³⁸ Statistically speaking, around 2003, 60 to 70 percent of the titles on bestselling lists were planned, produced, and marketed by private book merchants, and many of them were in the grey areas of imitation, plagiarism, and duplicate publication (*Best Selling Books of the Past 30 Years in China* 18-19).

³⁹ Original: "那几年, 书刊市场突然活跃起'二渠道'书商的身影, 其中许多正是由八十年代青年诗歌运动中的著名人物变身而来。成都跟长沙、石家庄属于最热闹的书刊集散地, 安家成都的柏桦, 大概在回忆录前后, 也涉入了书商的生意, 提供书稿。我听钟鸣说过, 一开始他和柏桦做书稿就是剪刀加浆糊, 而柏桦往往会将钟鸣做书稿剪裁下来的材料再拼凑粘贴一次, 做成另一本书稿。当他们第一次拿到卖书稿的现钱, 就立即直扑商场, 各买了一双早已看好多时的耐克鞋。" Chen Dongdong 陈东东, "Bai Hua zhi Zhengrong" 柏桦之整容 [Bai Hua's Plastic Surgery], *Harvest*, no. 1 (2019): 110.

⁴⁰ Since many intellectuals preferred to publish in pseudonyms, it is usually difficult to track down the participants of such works. Bai is an exception in this respect. According to Chen, Bai viewed this task as "work" in the sense of the Marxist relation to production, declaring that "I am working, earning my bread through working as a member of the working class!" Original: "我就是劳动! 做劳动人民! 靠劳动吃饭!" See Chen, 陈, 110.

tabloids to translations of scholarly works of other languages. Between 1994 and 2003, he hardly wrote any poems. According to Chen and Bai himself, he and his wife have made over forty books collaboratively, spending about three to five days on each. After the market responded to some of them very positively,⁴¹ Bai became a favored author among book merchants and was granted the privilege of selecting topics before other compilers.

The cultural memoir Chen mentioned in the passage quoted above is *The Left: A Lyric Poet of the Maoist Era* (《左边：毛泽东时代的抒情诗人》). Serialized in *Tibetan Literature*, this biography ended with Bai's growing involvement in the business both in narrative and in reality. Unlike Chen's breezy tone presumably because both Bai and Zhong resumed their literary creation later, the final paragraphs of *The Left* strike readers with an entanglement of disheartenment and self-reconciliation, due to the lack of retrospective comfort:

钟鸣和我也在这一年制作迎合大众口味的文化快餐，一位书商戴着平光金丝眼镜，边剔牙、边缓缓审读我们的书稿，是先付一半的钱还是全付，这个问题一直争论到黄昏……我在烦躁中想起马松的一句诗观：“诗是肉体与灵魂的金秤砣！”但同时我们也需要人民币这个大秤砣，奇怪之极……

而最终某种必然性征服了我们反复无常的冲动，冲动暂时服从了金钱的流通规律。如果文学不能天天革命，那么我们可以试一试生活，我们已来到生活的路上，毛泽东时代的最后一批抒情诗人以长期习惯了的左边形象从右边出发了。⁴²

This year, Zhong Ming and I are also making books that cater to the public preference for snackable information. A bookseller wearing metal-frame plain glasses slowly reviewed our manuscripts while he was picking his teeth. We argued till sunset about whether to pay half of the remuneration first or all of it together... Impatiently, I recalled a sentence in Ma Song's poetics: "Poetry is the golden weights on the scale balancing our bodies and souls." But at the same time, we also need this big weight of money. How strange it is...

And eventually, some sort of inevitability conquers our wobbly passions, which are temporarily tamed by the rule of monetary circulation. If literature cannot initiate revolutions

⁴¹ For instance, *Leadership EQ* (《领导EQ》), a vernacular translation of *The Complete Poems of Mao Zedong* (《毛泽东诗词全集》), and *The Success of Rich Dad* (《富爸爸成功学》), which is an imitation of *Rich Dad Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki and Sharon Lechter that sold 5,000,000 copies after it was translated and introduced into China by Beijing Readers Book Company (北京读书人) in 2000.

⁴² Bai 柏, “左边——毛泽东时代的抒情诗人 (第五卷 南京),” 73.

all the time, perhaps we can try to live our lives. We are already on our way to concrete lives. While still assuming the leftist self-identity that they are long used to, the last group of lyric poets of the Maoist era now start [their new quest] from the right.

However, these ten years of working with utmost banality honed Bai's skill in organizing materials and identifying poetic potentials in the barren reality (as exemplified by his recall of Ma Song's meta-poetic statement in this disrespectful economic negotiation). In 2008, Bai "resumed poetry writing, made lengthy notes, and gathered them into a little book [i.e., *An Ideal Couple*]" ("再度写诗,并做长注,集成小书一本"), as he himself says in his literary autobiography.⁴³ In this restrained statement, practical skills of cutting and pasting initially developed to cope with the onerous workload in the book industry infiltrated into his poetics. Verbs like "made" and "gathered" lean toward editing and assembling rather than original writing; in particular, the phrase "make notes" ("做注") has a more commonly used homophone meaning "compose notes" ("作注"), which could have acknowledged the poet's creative agency overtly. Indeed, some features characterizing the second phase of Bai's writing include the incorporation of miscellaneous and often unpoetic materials and voices, the predilection for appending epitaphs, footnotes, and endnotes to poems, and a lyric subjectivity that is usually veiled behind anecdotes and quotes from others. All of them are manifested in both short lyrics like "I am Still a Poet" ("我依然是一个诗人") and extensive poems like *An Ideal Couple* and *Records of the Grand Historian: From 1950 to 1976* (《史记: 一九五零至一九七零》).

Creases and Bifurcations in Verse

Given the extensive intertextual practices in *The Midnight* and *An Ideal Couple* and as suggested by the title of the previous section, "collage" could have replaced "fold" to serve as the central symbol of this chapter. Especially in criticism on Howe, the former term appears frequently.⁴⁴ Besides

⁴³ Bai 柏, "柏桦自撰文学年谱," 96.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, "Intimate Editing: The Textual Poetics of Susan Howe's Collage Poems" by Anne Marie Thompson and "Drawing the Curtain on *The Midnight*" by Stephen Collis.

intending to reserve “collage” to the two poets’ more radical practices just discussed, I opt for “fold” because “collage” suggests difference as a given rather than a construct. While collages combine materials from disparate sources into a new entity to manifest intrusion from the external, folds imply differentiation as an internal momentum. Perhaps the best justification for “collage” in the context of *The Midnight* is a short prose episode titled “Cutwork” in the section “Scare Quotes I.” Since it addresses a legendary seamstress Thorgunna, Queen Elizabeth’s attire, and two excerpts “cut” from Michael Drayton’s eclogue *The Muses Elizium*,⁴⁵ the metaphor of a collage image certainly depicts the scattered origins of the passage’s content.

However, even in “Cutwork,” the connections among Howe’s references are often declared on the surface. The poet’s summary of the Thorgunna legend is connected to her first quote of *The Muses Elizium* by the shared word “tapisstry [sic],” which is Thorgunna’s ominous textile work that brings a storm in the former case and a metaphor for spring’s thriving plantation in the latter.⁴⁶ Drayton’s rhetorical use of tapestry is then extended to the floral patterns, especially lilies, on Queen Elizabeth’s favorite kind of lace—cutwork. After that, Howe quotes a few more lines from *The Muses Elizium*, where various flowers, including lilies, are spread over a bed. Despite the fact that these references are condensed within a section of less than two pages, their shared word-choices and motifs ensure relatively smooth transitions, where the tapestry alternates between attesting to the delicacy of some artifacts and that of nature. Thanks to Howe’s careful weighing of her paraphrases and quotes materials, readers will not find the passage inaccessible because of a lack of familiarity with their origins.

Ruptures, however, emerge in rather unexpected places, as the poet uses subtle wordplay to establish ambiguities clustering around the theme of the textile. It is also at these moments that the unfolding of a rupture will reveal further relations that extend beyond this particular passage. In the

⁴⁵ Howe, *The Midnight*, 45.

⁴⁶ Howe, 45.

poet's retelling of the Thorgunna legend, we find a sentence shifting radically in its level of register: "Trouble followed trouble until [Thorgunna] warned that ownership of her hangings could mean curtains."⁴⁷ The poet starts with a colloquial expression that is rhythmic but verbose; she marks the grammatical connector of the main sentence and the object clause by "ownership," a word carrying a legal ring and thus elevating the register suddenly; at the end of the sentence, the seemingly tedious equating of two synonyms evokes the informal idiomatic usage of "curtains" meaning death. The theme of "ownership" occurs to readers again in the discussion of Queen Elizabeth. Her taste for cutwork is confirmed by her "Keeper of the Great Wardrobe," in whose work the tension between legit owning and temporary overseeing emerges.⁴⁸ Similarly, the fatal curtains build up a contrast with the curtains surrounding the bed in *The Muses Elizium*, which suggests joy and intimacy. These ruptures open the passage up to some of the key inquiries in the long poem: Do we own our inheritance, or are we just temporary overseers? How should we understand the various liminal moments marked by curtains, such as bed hangings drawing apart dream and life, interleaf dividing texts and images, stage curtains separating fiction and reality, and the occasionally translucent split between the dead and the living?

Likewise, in *An Ideal Couple*, usual interpretative obstacles in intertextuality, such as insufficient context, incompatible perspectives, and incoherent voices in incorporating various external materials, do not seem too conspicuous. Let us take the fifth endnote as an example. The book's verse section begins as follows, "This spring comes too fast [2]----/ even the ominous lottery poem [3] cannot hinder its speed [4]:/ time hastens vigorously, refusing to be retained [5],/ something remarkable is expecting the winter [6]" ("这一年春天太快了[2]——/ 不详的签诗[3]也抵不住它的速度[4]: /

⁴⁷ Howe, 45.

⁴⁸ Howe, 45.

光阴饱满地催促，一刻都不愿挽留 [5]，/ 一件大事正期待着冬天 [6]。’⁴⁹ Speaking as an external omniscient storyteller, the poet laments the passing from spring to winter with half expectation and half regret. Accelerated in time, this prelude displays the two narrative arches of the long poem: winter marks Dong’s union with Mao after her relentless pursuit since the spring of the year; while amorous development cannot be halted, neither can the tragic denouement, for the romantic union symbolized by spring will lead toward Dong’s death that separates the couple. The second half of the third line refers readers to endnote five, which cites one of Tao Yuanming’s serial poems “Miscellany” (《杂诗八首》之七) in its entirety. Tao’s poem, also employing the symbol of the seasonal cycle and conveying a fatalist pessimism, rejects to suggest any hope or vitality by depicting the poet as an aging loner, whose only remaining purpose in life is waiting for death. The connections between Bai’s and Tao’s lines are apparent, given their shared imageries, themes, and attitudes.

However, the short paragraph introducing Tao’s poem sounds obscure: “time and scenery hasten, and in accordance with the rapidity of the spring, only sprint forward without hesitation, steadfastly run toward its destination, this story is like this, as already revealed by its beginning. And how is the story of life different from this, time flies like an arrow, traveling a hundred years within a glimpse”(“光景催促，又迎合春天之快，只是一味朝前，决绝地奔向目的，本诗故事如此，开篇已露出端倪。人生的故事又何尝不是如此，光阴似箭，转眼就是百年。”)。⁵⁰ These sentences stand out syntactically and rhythmically, even in a language like Chinese with loose rules regarding sentence. The first full sentence is dissected into short phrases by a series of commas, existing in the liminal space between verse and prose: while the commas agree with natural pauses in

⁴⁹ Since superscripts and their respective annotations are fundamental not only to the interpretation of Bai’s long poem but also to its visual effect, I retain all the superscripts in my citation. In order to distinguish Bai’s interlinear superscripts from my own footnotes, I add a parenthesis to the former and present the numbers as normal texts. Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 3.

⁵⁰ Bai 柏, 49.

oral reading and almost establish an end-rhyme, they violate the standard prose grammar by condensing three complete sentences into one. So hurried as if to match the speed of its corresponding lines,⁵¹ the sentence is almost a rearrangement of the first three lines of the verse portion, except for removing the detail of “the ominous lottery poetry.”⁵² The first line of the verse is remolded into the second semantic unit of the sentence, the second line in verse into the third semantic unit, and the third into the first. Through paraphrase and rearrangement, the same information is now rendered as a series of logically progressive statements, linked by a list of inconspicuous words ascending the scale of exclusivity—“and,” “only,” “and how is ... different.” Securing logical connections and marking the syntactical structures (two coordinate clauses and a double negative), these phrases explore how prose and verse deliver the sense of urgency differently. In verse, the poet dramatizes speed by forceful word choices and restless oscillation between affirmation and negation; in prose, the poet is keener on conveying acceleration and inevitability through reasoning than affect. The crease between these two renderings leads to further significant inquiries on forms that will recur in the long poem: for instance, as already discussed, Bai intertwines two contradictory interpretations in verse but limits readers to only one of them in prose. Is verse more capable of handling ambiguity, then?

Since Howe’s and Bai’s extensive intertextual practices often attenuate obvious gaps among the referred materials derived from different contexts and underscore discontinuities in the poets’ own organizations of them, the suggestion of depth and constructiveness in folds better captures their artistic ingenuity. Meanwhile, the unpacking of identifying discrepancy in connectivity and vice versa attests to the indispensability of readers’ input. From readers’ perspective, folds offer a heuristic model. Geometrically speaking, a division caused by folding allows the two divided portions to rotate around

⁵¹ As explained in endnote four, in Bai’s poetics, speed is a “prominent and sometimes even decisive” constituent of style in poetry (Original: “速度对于一首诗的风格是至关重要的，有时候甚至也是致命的。”) Bai 柏, 43.

⁵² A Chinese divination practice where people interpret answers to their concerns through poems inscribed on flat sticks.

the connector relatively independently,⁵³ raising the degrees of freedom of the system in mechanical terms. For a simple example, suppose there is a segment, with one end fixed on the origin and the other end movable. All locations that the free end may reach form a circle with the radius of the segment. If we fold the segment in half, the endpoint can move anywhere on and within the circle, as its degree of freedom grows from one to two. This property renews our understanding of connectivity. For problems like whether any curve can be drawn by a rod of rigid length with a certain times of foldings, whether a piece of paper can be folded into a pre-designated shape, whether a piece of paper can be scissored into a polygon with a certain number of folding and a single cut,⁵⁴ we reconfigure the questions by thinking about how each part separated by connectors moves in space and whether these spaces covered by their movements are interconnected.⁵⁵ By analogy, in reading poetry, the symbol of folds urges us to contemplate on potentials not yet visible by investigating how verbal and cognitive creases in these poems reimagine connectivity.

As already mentioned in my brief discussion of Thom's catastrophe theory, mathematicians approach the fold by identifying all possible ways that such perturbation will impact the system, relating those with similar behavior to each other to attain the most efficient expression—a process technically known as “unfolding.” When Thom unfolds various singularities, he realizes that where codimension equals or is less than four, the irregularity will be transformed into one of the seven elementary catastrophes, whose geometric structures can be vividly described as fold, cusp, swallowtails, etc. Broadly speaking, Thom's work enumerates how a fold may bifurcate, reorganizes its neighboring formulas, and inspires a refolding to absorb abrupt discontinuities into novel, more

⁵³ There will be limitations depending on specific contexts. For instance, if we are considering a one-dimensional paper, the parts separated by the crease cannot intersect.

⁵⁴ All these tasks have been proved mathematically feasible.

⁵⁵ Erik D. Demaine and Joseph O'Rourke, *Geometric Folding Algorithms: Linkages, Origami, Polyhedra* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20.

predictable configurations mathematically known as “catastrophe manifolds.”⁵⁶

While catastrophe theory treats catastrophe as analyzable and predictable in its structure, in *The Midnight*, discontinuities are not mere chaos but a systematic quest of how marginalized meaning, ignorable materials, unorthodox history, and personal feelings can enter the fabric of poetry through constant folding and unfolding as much by the poet as by readers:

For here we are here
B E D H A N G I N G S
daylight does not reach
Vast depth on the wall
Neophyte

Alapeen Paper Patch Muslin
Calico Camlet Dimity Fustian
Serge linsey-woolsey say

A wainscot bedstead & Curtans
& vallains & iron Rodds
Many bedsteads were roped
“Bedstead....& bed Rope

Revisionist work in
historic interiors spread
from House to Museum

Other documentary evidence
Friends who wish to
remain anonymous⁵⁷

The beginning of “Bed Hangings I,” as quoted here, exemplifies the puzzling, usually rectilinear stanzas throughout the verse sections of *The Midnight*, which Kate Lilley vividly characterizes as

⁵⁶ René Thom, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis: An Outline of a General Theory of Models* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 29-34. Obviously, the folds at the beginning and the one at the end of the unfolding process are of different mathematical significance. But the fact that this program of processing disorder appeals to our intuitive experience with folding, unfolding, and refolding confirms the earlier observations that folding, as a conceptual tool, inclines toward duplication.

⁵⁷ Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions Book, 2003), 3-5.

“enigmatic minimalist distillation[s] framed by white space.”⁵⁸ The first line inherited the unoriented relational space presented by the prelude, repeating the deictic adverb “here,” which would be meaningful only if it were situated in some context. This urgent need is answered by the unusual typography of the second line. Such defamiliarization imitates the half veiling effect of bed hangings, through which we approach the wall’s surface and its illusory “depth” by light and shadow—two pairs of terms whose significance depends on their contrastive relation to each other. In the second stanza, the poet lists various fabrics selected from *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850*, as we will learn forty pages later at the beginning of the prose section “Scare Quotes I.”⁵⁹ For most readers, the precise meaning of these highly technical terms is more alienated than their differences in sound and appearances, which can be directly observed by comparing them to one another. We soon realize the pattern of parataxis shifts constantly: the first line either employs internal rhymes (i.e., the end rhyme between “Alapeen” and “Muslin” and the alliteration between “paper” and “patch”) or constructs a chiasmus with two proper nouns outside and two familiar words inside; the second line recalls the alphabetical order in a dictionary; and the third line looks like a tongue twister exhausting all combinations of the “s” consonant with closer vowels.

While the interstices among signs and objects lead to a series of layered folds manifesting how spatial, visual, and vocal relations intersect each other, the next three stanzas reveal this theme of bed hangings as a singularity that bifurcates. The poet’s gaze on the bed hangings wanders around, incorporating their environment into the vision. Specifically, the third stanza creates a casual domestic space filled with misspellings and ampersands that suggest a few quick and relaxed looks. Readers are guided to imagine an old-fashioned bed with wooden bedstead, tall iron canopy, valance, and extravagant tassels. The fourth stanza, in contrast, transports us from the private room into a public

⁵⁸ Kate Lilley, “Blackwork: On Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*,” in *HEAT* 21 (January 1, 2009): 13. “Bed Hangings I” in *The Midnight* is particularly minimalist, if we compare the section to its first publication along with Susan Bee’s illustration.

⁵⁹ Howe, *The Midnight*, 43.

exhibition, where many of our earlier interpretations require reconsideration: perhaps the iron rods and ropes are rope barriers, and the listing of fabrics may imitate a museum catalog. In the last stanza, the clashes between public versus private turn more prominent, for the pursuit of thoroughness and indifference in documentary evidence fails to do justice to individuals and their emotional connections. Given this tension, the poet traces relations stemming therefrom, identifying more contexts where textiles are employed: in literature, they establish religious symbolism; in scholarly discourse, they serve as historical material evidence;⁶⁰ in nature, transformed into morning mist and cobweb, they suggest mystery and latent danger; in philosophical metaphors, they reveal the fuzziness of concepts; and as historical evidence, they indicate social status.⁶¹

The Midnight proceeds in an intertwined and metonymic way, as if a specific relation cannot be completely revealed unless other relations are simultaneously unraveled.⁶² As the unfolding of bifurcating pleats implies more and more flimsy associations, the poem often evolves into passages strikingly different from its own beginning in theme, voice, and style. Midway through the first verse section “Bed Hangings I,” for instance, Howe writes:

To the Compiler of Memories

Frequent exposure to night air
An inattention to the necessity
of changing damp clothes

Sweet affliction sweet affliction

⁶⁰ Through these circumstances, Howe reveals her mistrust of discrete material objects (either as exhibits or symbols), for how objects come into being is a question left unexamined. Purporting to be accurate, sacred, and objective, these processes adopt narratives that disregard our empirical experience with things and overgeneralize conclusions drawn from “a small swatch.” See Howe, *The Midnight*, 11.

⁶¹ Howe, *The Midnight*, 6; 7–9; 12–13; 15–16.

⁶² This intertwined and sinuous organization of *The Midnight* has an intriguing mathematical analogy in map folding problems. Specifically, with a pattern of mountain and valley creases on a non-rectangular two-dimensional shape, it is intractable (or NP-hard in technical language) to determine whether it can be folded flat. For details, see Erik D. Demaine, and Joseph O'Rourke, *Geometric Folding Algorithms: Linkages, Origami, Polyhedra*, (New York: Cambridge university press, 2007), 224-230. In other words, the narrative order is innate to our experience of how materials are folded, unfolded, and refolded, a process hardly traceable or analyzable independent of the folding motions.

Singing as I wade to heaven⁶³

This is the only passage the poet added when she incorporated the 2001 version of *Bed Hangings* into *The Midnight*. Observing these highly lyrical stanzas, we realize that bifurcations not only undo concrete objects into digressive relations but also convene scattered relations into an inquiry fundamental to the genre of elegy. In this case, even though Howe mentions “damp clothes,” she attends less to their materiality than their symbolic meaning, namely the hardship of earthly life. Taken from a well-known hymn, the third stanza reminds readers of the importance of metaphoric thinking in biblical hermeneutics and the opposition between heaven and earth in religious cosmology. This division is then remolded into three corollaries in the following pages, for the poet experiments with three different ways of reproducing it in the earthly context. First, describing the memory compiler and the unidentified missionary as “Soon swerved from what/ people of his charge took him/ to be,” the poet subdivides earthly life into the social and the spiritual, providing the wade to heaven a practical parallel, i.e., self-exile from the crowd.⁶⁴ Second, since the compiler and the missionary persist “As if two weathercocks refer/ to another class of settlement,” the structure of heaven versus earth is mirrored by the nearby versus the faraway.⁶⁵ Abstract transcendence becomes visions concretely pointed out by the weathercocks. After a few pages of ambiguous exploration of the fear and attachment to material bodies through references to both prominent religious figures like King James and unknown ones like a Mr. Sprout, the religious cosmology appears again in a testimony: “still believed he was conversing/ with an invisible spirit however/ the sharp weather his wet jacket/ Finding himself alive went home.”⁶⁶ This time, the authority of the division is questioned: instead of offering guidance for earthly practices, the spiritual realm appears to be a strategic imagination, through which the compiler and the missionary

⁶³ Howe, *The Midnight*, 20.

⁶⁴ Howe, *The Midnight*, 21.

⁶⁵ Howe, *The Midnight*, 23.

⁶⁶ Howe, *The Midnight*, 25; 29; 33.

can reconcile with worldly reality.

Since in *The Midnight*, the poet is the compiler of memories, this distancing of her perspective from a devoted wader to an external observer is telling: by assuming the existence of a separate realm, are we transcending mortality through words, crafting a coping mechanism to reinforce our investment in earthly life after loss, or merely deceiving ourselves into accepting and enduring the material world? As usual, the poet's cryptic style refuses to provide an explicit answer. What is at stake is her belief that such a differentiating framework is not coherent. She is compelled to reformulate it constantly, as if no bifurcations, be it death and life, incorporeal and corporeal, or heaven and earth, can manifest its essence. It can be and needs to be embedded in different contexts, with the transcendence of some of its embodiments appearing more promising than others. Since the crease between life and death reveals itself only in fragments and in indefinite terms, we can neither prevent mortality from infiltrating our phenomenal experience by encircling it with a well-defined boundary, nor will we reconcile with the emptiness and disorientations brought by death once and for all through writing or reading an elegy. Instead of offering closure or legitimatizing the replacement of the dead as we conventionally imagine the genre to be,⁶⁷ *The Midnight* relativizes experience, beliefs, and even the very expression of such indetermination, so that the poet's initially befuddled response to mortality evolves into a commitment to formal and semiotic experiment, where multifarious tones, morals, and the dynamics among signs, objects, and interpretants (as Charles Peirce, one of the key figures in Howe's writings, would say⁶⁸), are simulated. These differentiations will manifest more distinct patterns in the prose section, ultimately leading toward an epistemic structure for mourning and healing.

⁶⁷ Even though gender is not a central concern of this discussion, it is useful to consider Celeste M. Schenck's essay "Feminism and Deconstruction: Reconstructing the Elegy," which argues that elegy by contemporary women poets seek for lasting connectedness, whereas traditional elegy seeks for elimination and replacement to perpetuate patriarchal structures. Specifically, the latter eulogizes the dead to provide a conclusion to the forebearers' achievements in order to announce the coming of a new age.

⁶⁸ Peirce's life and writings serve as the raw material for Howe's early long poem *Pierre-Arrow* (1999).

If we visualize the verse sections of *The Midnight* as a series of outbranching discontinuities that confirm the continuity of an expansive poetic field, the verse part in Bai's *An Ideal Couple* conceals discontinuous pleats under an illusorily coherent and graspable narrative created by homonyms, smooth transitions through adapting the syntax of classical Chinese, progressive logical connectors, correlative conjunctions, and a relatively clear plot. Remembering the leisurely life Mao and Dong shortly enjoyed before the fall of the Ming Dynasty, the section "Household [25]" ("家居[25]") reads:

人之一生：春、夏、秋、冬[26]
很快，你发现了新的喜乐：
女红、饮食、财务及管理[27]。

子曰：“仁者静。”[28]
你就在静中洒扫庭除并亲操这份生活[29]。
“其德性举止，乃非常人。”[30]

家务是安详的，余闲也有情[31]:
白日，我们在湖面荡舟，
逸园和洗钵池最让人流连[32]；
夜里，我们在凉亭里私语，
直到雾重月斜[33]，
直到寒意轻袭了我们的身子[34]。

曾记得多少数不清的良辰，
你长饮，说话，若燕语呢喃[35]，
而我不胜酒力，常以茶代酒[36]。
有时，我们又玩别的游戏，
譬如读诗或抄写[37]:
“人闲桂花落，夜静春山空。”[38]

这一切不为别的，只为闻风相悦[39]，
只为唯美，只为消得这水绘的永夜[40]。⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 6–7.

A man's life: spring, summer, autumn, winter [26]
Soon, you discover new enjoyments:
Needlework, culinary arts, financial and household management [27].

Confucius says "the benevolent is demure." [28]
You, in this modesty, lave and sweep the rooms and the yard, attending to this very life
personally [29].
"Her virtue and deeds are impeccable." [30]

The chores are restful, and the spare time is tender [31]:
During the day, we rowed in the pond,
The Leisure Garden and the Inkstone-Washing Pond were where we linger [32];
At night, we whisper to each other in the pavilion,
Until the mist was heavy and the moonlight slant [33],
Until the chilliness gently clothed us [34].

I remember so many uncountable enjoyments,
You sipped the wine slowly, talked like the soft ni-nan chirping of swallows [35],
But I can't hold much liquor, often substituting tea for wine [36].
Sometimes, we play other games,
Like reading and copying books [37]:
"A man idles the osmanthus away; the silent night clears the spring mountain." [38]

All this is for nothing else, but the genuine cheerfulness when hearing the wind [39],
But pure beauty, but the spending of this water-painted eternal night [40].

Exemplifying both Mao's and the poet's keen interest in details and the quotidian, these stanzas exhibit smooth transitions through internal resonations: they start with the seasonal cycle, then transit into succession of days and nights, and end with a vision of eternity, embedding enumerations in a continuous rhythm; the subject alternates between "you" and "I" that complement each other and the collective "we" acting in unison; symmetries are further manifested in local designs, considering the first stanza that starts and ends with four parallel items and the second stanza that starts and ends with quotes; metaphors, even those ingrained in idiomatic expressions like "the soft twittering of swallows," are carefully selected to echo the garden setting of the scene; since the lines copied by Mao and Dong envision a setting that is in accordance with the Water-Paint Garden (a private residence garden first

built by Mao's great-grandfather), the external reference does not appear external at all; moreover, repetitive and correlative conjunctions like "until" and "not for...only for..." almost suggest a purifying process leading to some ultimate expression of pure art of life, thereby instilling a unidirectional momentum into the development of the poem.

If we scrutinize these symmetries and parallels, however, we find many latent literary experiments that offer alternative meanings. Sometimes, these bifurcations lead to a more refined consciousness of how intimacy, affection, and appreciation are reflected in the quotidian. The second line of the second stanza fuses archaic, literary wordings with modern ones. If we regard "sweep and lave the rooms and the yard" ("洒扫庭除") as an obsolete but not unknown formulaic expression in modern literary scenarios, "attend to ... personally" ("亲操"), when used independently, combines a monosyllabic adverb followed by a monosyllabic verb, resulting in a structure that violates modern Chinese grammar. But the suggested parallel between "sweep and lave" ("洒扫") and "attend to ... personally" ("亲操") makes the latter less obtrusive, for the watery image in the former reminds us of another archaic four-character formulaic expression literally means "attending to water-fetching and rice-husking" ("亲操井臼"). This phrase resembles "sweep and lave the rooms and the yard" ("洒扫庭除") in grammatical structure (both follow the verb-object structure (动宾式), one of the principles in Chinese morphology) and synecdochic rhetoric (both are commonly employed to signify household duties in general). Instead of opting for the more obvious and orderly pairing of two synonymic four-character, the poet substitutes representative details in the second phrase with a general term rendered in modern Chinese, i.e., "this very life" ("这份生活"). Such explicitness not only enables the line to oscillate between the particular and the general as well as between Classical Chinese and modern Chinese. It replaces the implication of triviality in the original expression with dignity, for the deictic quantifier implies a complete whole where all its components are handled just right. In addition to

diligence, which is the focus of Mao's original elegy and the primary female virtue in traditional Chinese culture,⁷⁰ the poet discreetly shifts readers' attention to Dong's artistic and even pious attitude toward the quotidian.⁷¹

Similarly, the second line of the fourth stanza quoted above enfolds a linguistic bifurcation under the pleat of a chiasmus. The line transitions from a common verb-object phrase into a vivid and highly literary phrase assuming the subject-verb structure. Meaning the call of the swallow in both modern Chinese and Classical Chinese and casual conversations over wine in Classical Chinese, "the soft chirping of swallows" ("燕语") is a condensed expression of the harmony between the characters and the setting of this section—a pleasant spring evening. As an onomatopoeia, "ni-nan" ("呢喃") imitates the melodious call of the birds through the combination of a close vowel and an open vowel, both nasalized to suggest continuity. This chiasmus situates us in a wistful recollection where the speaker remembers Dong not so much through events as the intuitive affinity with the external world arising at her presence.

While these bifurcations enrich our aesthetic experience of the quotidian through the correspondence between the traditional and the modern, both linguistically and culturally, others strike us with contradictory implications. The last line of the third stanza, for instance, employs a polysemic verb "袭," meaning both "to clothe" and "to invade." At first glance, the poet imagines the cool air in the evening as some thin fabric covering the lovers, in accordance with the adverb "lightly" and other misty images in the line before. Yet, "gently clothe" ("轻袭," pronounced as "qingxi") sounds

⁷⁰ See, for instance, the first admonition in Ban Zhao's "Lessons for Women" (《女诫》), the best-known treatise on female conduct in premodern China.

⁷¹ This detail exemplified how Bai's rewrite somewhat modernizes the original text, which would be a euphemistic presentation of extreme gender exploitation and repression according to modern feminist reading. However, Bai still shows a lack of gender sensitivity by idealizing Mao and Dong's married life even in the prose section, where he speaks mainly from his own perspective. While we can defend this choice by arguing that Bai portrays Dong as an enthusiastic woman who manages the quotidian with exquisite taste, and the victimization of her would contradict this image, I also want to confess my uneasiness upon the fact that femininity is understood superficially under a twofold male gaze in *An Ideal Couple*. For details, see Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 136–7.

like another verb in Chinese—"侵袭" (pronounced as "qinxi") meaning "to invade." Indeed, a large socio-political threat loomed over this seemingly reclusive world of the couple, which would be shattered alongside the Manchurian conquest of the Ming Dynasty. Similarly, in the last stanza, Bai intertwines two different logics. The series of "only for" eagerly roots the scene in something lasting, first in the material world, then in idealism, and finally in the sublime language directly promising eternity. At the same time, this lyrical ecstasy finds itself upon a growingly transient base, first the incorporeal but at least sensible wind, then an immaterial belief, and finally a night whose claim of eternity is fulfilled only in elegy after it is "spent." Linguistic, rhetoric, and semantic folds overlap each other, with longing for connections and the threat of separation flowing among the couple, their immediate surrounding, and the larger historical and social background.

More than local ambiguity, bifurcations in Bai's long poem multiply themselves into meandering traces that unfurl over the course of the long poem. We may take the spent eternal night as an example, whose multiple folding and refolding seek to structure the tension between the elated feeling of transcendence and the repressed knowledge of human transience. This theme reappears in a highly erotic scene, where "the drapery is lowered, blankets overlay" ("帷帘四垂、毛毯覆叠"): "The boundless incense was blurry and omnipresent,/ like antelopes' horns among the trees, without any trackable traces [54].../ slowly wore away our prime years" ("无涯的香迷离广大,/ 似挂角之羚羊, 无迹可求 [54]...../ 悄悄消磨着我们的好年华").⁷² The rhetoric is reversed: instead of everyday particulars gradually and purposefully consuming the abstract ideal of eternity, some potent and mysterious sense of fate is secretly deducting the couple's remaining happiness. Since "悄悄" (pronounced as "qiao qiao" and meaning "slowly") and "消" (pronounced as "xiao" and meaning "to wear down") resemble each other phonetically and graphically, their juxtaposition alludes to the

⁷² Bai 柏, 11.

inconspicuous yet unnegotiable ticking of the clock. This trope of expenditure further emerges in a setting fourteen years after Dong's death. After social unrest was largely appeased following the complete collapse of the Ming Dynasty, Mao refurnished the Water-Paint Garden and hosted a grand gathering there. "The opulent life is shining upon this ever dazzling white night [68]" ("富贵人生映照着这依旧夺目的白夜[68]"), says the poet through Mao's voice, as if trying to restore and even exaggerate his earlier wholehearted devotion to the enjoyment of life.⁷³ Yet in contrast to the delicate poetic taste in "Household" and the simultaneously enchanting and melancholic tone in the bedroom scene, the resplendent word choices here ("opulent," "shine upon," and "dazzling") are utterly materialistic that they present an unsuccessful disguise of Mao's wail: with Dong's death, the luxury of love and beauty is reduced to the financial; eternity is attested by neither human gaiety like the intimacy between the couple and their harmony with nature nor human tragic like their vague sense of a destined separation at the moment of physical and psychological unity, but the passing time's indifference to happenings on mortals.

The essayistic entries appended to "eternal night" ("永夜") and "white night" ("白夜") contribute additional layers. Since the composition of the prose section will be scrutinized later, it suffices to provide cursory summaries of these entries for now to suggest that the interconnectedness of discontinuities extends itself further into the prose section. In the entry "Eternal Night," Bai assumes the voice of a cultural historian and presents the biographical background of a poem by Du Fu which also employs the phrase: "Du's 'eternal night' is a footnote to his desolation and loneliness, but it does not diminish other's happiness and harmony, such as our protagonists Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan's eternal night that is sometimes exquisite and other times magnificent" ("老杜的'永夜'是悲凉孤独的注脚，但也不妨他人的美满和谐----譬如我们的主人公冒辟疆和董小宛的

⁷³ Bai 柏, 15.

清隽或华丽的‘永夜’”。⁷⁴ If this entry demonstrates how folds foreground and conceal different meanings in each flip, the endnote “White Night” adopts a more personal, self-reflective tone. A brief cultural memoir that starts with Zhai Yongming’s bar White Night,⁷⁵ refracts into a generational obsession with the confrontational spirit in Soviet literature, and finally contracts into Bai’s own lyric agenda, the entry attests to Bai’s effort of exploring different combinations of creases to find the most fitting manifold that accentuates the node of “white night”:

因为它无关对抗，也没有白热的个人情结。我在这个西方词语中容纳了一个古典的语境，它仅仅是指一个明末夜晚的华贵的雅集画面，在江南，在水绘园，古典与现代互现。它复现了晚明王朝最后的风华声教，追忆了一个永世不在的以精致闲雅为时尚的移民世界。⁷⁶

“It is not about resistance, and it does not contain any personal fervor. I incorporate a classical [Chinese] sentiment in this Western word. It restricts itself to an evening in the late Ming and to a magnificent gathering among literati. In Jiangnan, in the Water-Paint Garden, the classical and the modern set each other off. It duplicates the remnant of the cultural and social prosperity of the Ming dynasty, recollecting an irrecoverable world of Ming loyalists, who regarded delicate and luxurious lifestyles as the vogue.”

This dense statement reveals a double reminiscence: while Bai deposits his yearning for a depoliticized, idyllic way of living in the irrecoverable past, the characters that he gazes upon project their wistfulness on a more distant past, i.e., before the fall of the Ming Dynasty. The multiple oppositional pairs Bai delineates, including the nostalgic versus the contemporary, active resistance versus passive disinterest, and personal life versus collective passion, are manifested by the poet, his characters, and their interplay. Concurrent with the narration of Mao and Dong’s the tormented romance are the mourning of the Ming literati for the demise of their regime, the elegy of the generation born and raised in the

⁷⁴ Bai 柏, 178.

⁷⁵ Cofounded by Zhai and her friends in 1998, this bar is a local landmark and a symbol of contemporary art. Many acclaimed writers and artists meet each other and host readings and talks here. For details, see Zhai’s essay collection *Tales of the White Night* (《白夜谭》).

⁷⁶ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 320–1.

Maoist era for the collapse of their artistic and political ideals⁷⁷, and Bai's own difficult transition from a passionate lyric advocate to a restrained poet searching for inspiration in the classics. These layers gradually reveal themselves as readers flip around the pleats of Bai's delusively straightforward narrative in the verse section.

Fractals in Prose

Gilles Deleuze proposes the fold as an operative concept whose “formal element” initiates a way of expression into being.⁷⁸ Using the concept to study the Leibnizian calculus and Baroque art, he organizes the sinking and the uplifting motions in Baroque art in terms of infinite enfolding and unfolding, through which traditionally divided dualities like heaven and earth, and soul and matter implicate each other. Dualistic thinking dominating Western philosophy thus falls apart. Instead of directly manifested by his materials, Deleuze's folds are results of his active construction most of the time. To identify a structure among endless bifurcations, he conceives them as iterative divisions and thus organizes them into self-embedding folds, or “fold upon fold, fold after fold” in his own term evoking Pierre Boulez's music.⁷⁹ The philosopher further exemplifies this structure by an ordered infinite sequence displaying different behaviors depending on which subsequence we analyze.⁸⁰ Specifically, the reiterative production of folds allows observers to assume wider perspectives to synchronically capture patterns formed by bifurcations on different levels. Local bifurcations may turn out to converge and reinforce a specific shape on a global scope (e.g., in Deleuze's folds, local

⁷⁷ The revolutionary commitment brewed in the Maoist period was replaced by the fight for democracy, individualism, and liberalism after Mao's death. Yet various scales of resistance (including underground publications, sexual promiscuity, the proliferation of literary schools, and campus activism) in the name of these new values soon lost their momentum after the Tiananmen Protests in 1989. In the context of Chinese contemporary poetry, a few important texts reflecting and critiquing the changing psychology of intellectuals living through that period include *The Left* by Bai Hua, “Poetry after 1989 in China: Nativism, Middle Age Characteristics, and Intellectual Identity” (《89后国内诗歌写作：本土气质，中年特征与知识分子身份》) by Ouyang Jianghe, *Spectator: Volume 2* (《旁观者2》) by Zhong Ming.

⁷⁸ Gilles Deleuze, and Jonathan Strauss. “The Fold.” *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (1991), 246.

⁷⁹ Deleuze and Strauss. “The Fold,” 227.

⁸⁰ For instance, While the reciprocals of triangular numbers produce a convergent series, the reciprocal of all positive integers (which include all items in the former example) diverge.

divergence can become global convergence; to give a more vivid example, in a fractal tree, a splitting line segment can vanish in the luxuriant canopy as we zoom out).⁸¹

The professional geometric term for similar statistical properties across scales is self-affinity.⁸² It is most evident in fractals, a shape that fascinates both scientists and poets. According to Benoît B. Mandelbrot, the mathematician who coined the term “fractals,” fractal geometry studies shape’s “roughness” and “fragmentation.”⁸³ These tactile word choices evoke the generation of creases and novel texture in folding. Indeed, the act is employed technically and metaphorically in Mandelbrot’s writing. In descriptions like “a single β -fold bifurcation,” the term denotes the number of recursions, and in statements like “[Brownian motion] has preceded fractal geometry by decades but has been incorporated in its fold,” it conveys the complexity of the system.⁸⁴

More pertinently to the concern of this chapter, the term “fractal” has appeared in several critical appreciations of Howe’s and other avant-garde poets’ works. Lynn Keller’s “Singing Spaces: Fractal Geometries in Cole Swensen’s *Oh*” employs the figure to describe how Swensen’s registers move across scales and how she conceives each page as a miniature of the entire book, while pointing out that the latter design is inspired by Howe.⁸⁵ Following Swensen, in a monographic study on Howe,

⁸¹ This feature makes the fractal an effective conceptual apparatus especially in modern Western philosophy, where traditional beliefs in stable, dualistic ontology beg questions. In addition to Deleuze already discussed, Jacques Derrida adopts fractals to study Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry, arguing that the ontology of texts is a complicated referential and self-referential manifold, where binaries in literary studies are subverted. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 173–286. Other similar uses can be found in phenomenology and new materialism, as the fractal reconciles the contradictions of our experience of modern reality, either as a flux of disorienting changes or as incalculable structures. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Duquesne University Press, 1983); Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford University Press, 2019); David Morris, “The Fold and the Body Schema in Merleau-Ponty and Dynamic Systems Theory,” *Chiasmi International* 1 (1999): 275–85.

⁸² For perfect fractals, the characteristic would be self-similarity. I use a less strict term out of the consideration that in actual application, some fractals have a certain degree of randomness. More importantly, given my goal of exploring the critical potential of geometry in literary studies, leaving room for variance will enable us to identify general structural designs without losing nuances in poets’ ingenious maneuverings of details.

⁸³ Benoit B. Mandelbrot, “Fractal geometry: what is it, and what does it do?,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. A. Mathematical and Physical Sciences* 423.1864 (1989), 4.

⁸⁴ Mandelbrot, “Fractal aspects of the iteration of $z \rightarrow \lambda (1-z)$ for complex λ , z ,” *Annals NY Acad. Science* 357 (1980), 251; Mandelbrot, Benoit B. “Fractal geometry,” 13.

⁸⁵ Lynn Keller and Cole Swensen, “Singing Spaces: Fractal Geometries in Cole Swensen’s ‘Oh’,” *Journal of Modern Literature* (2007), 141.

“The Small Space of a Pause”: Susan Howe’s *Poetry and the Spaces Between*, Elisabeth Joyce argues that repetitions in *Pythagorean Silence* are emblematic of fractal geometry, which offers an alternative to the masculine, authoritative, and coercing metaphors in the Pythagorean cosmology: “Fractals permit the literal fracturing of space that creates a space for women not admitted through dyadic thinking.”⁸⁶ Even though the exact term has never been directly mentioned in interpretations of *The Midnight*, Marjorie Perloff’s incisive evaluation of intertextuality in the poem—“When *documentary* reaches a certain density, it morphs into its opposite—the hyperreal of ‘factual telepathy’”—visualizes a process where constant layering leads to the emergence of a panoptic image contradicting its local details.⁸⁷ This phenomenon can also be encapsulated by fractal geometry, as suggested by the example of fractal trees already discussed. Upon these foundations, I argue that in the prose sections of *The Midnight*, fractal geometry structures the alternation between personal experience and collective narrative, as well as between the often slow and longing rhythm and radical semantic reversals, thereby supplying a lyric and epistemic structure that make grief and loss more graspable, in consciousness and in language.

The prose sections in *The Midnight* also consist of vignettes on a myriad of interrelated topics. Strategies for folding and unfolding meaning developed in verse reappear in prose: the poet’s keen interest in names—a passion for “nominalism” in her own words⁸⁸—is reflected on her quotation and analysis of dictionary entries; enumerations, dense language, and tactical avoidance of paraphrasable narratives focus readers on differentiation in the texture of language; and differentiations still accumulate to reformulation of relations. However, in contrast to the verse sections, the predilection for complete syntax and associations between words and sentences in prose not only leaves more

⁸⁶ Elisabeth Joyce, *“The Small Space of a Pause”*: *Susan Howe’s Poetry and the Spaces Between*. (Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell University Press, 2010), 88.

⁸⁷ Marjorie Perloff, “The Rattle of Statistical Traffic: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*,” *Boundary 2*, v. 36.3 (2009), 228.

⁸⁸ Howe, *The Midnight*, 48.

room for thoughts to unwind but also conveys a pensive musicality.

Here are some typical examples selected from the first prose section “Scare Quotes I,” where rhetoric and meaning are patiently unfolded until divergences become confluences:

In *An American Dictionary of the English Language* a curtain is a cloth hanging used in theaters to conceal the stage from the spectators, while an itinerant is someone who travels from place to place and is unsettled; particularly a preacher.⁸⁹

After a meticulous account of how she encountered the book *Bed Hangings* as she was preparing for a graduate seminar on the Great Awakening, the poet continues:

When Europe enters the space of its margin, the “Kingdom of God in America” receives European memory into itself. In thin places bedsteads confront their own edges.⁹⁰

Logically speaking, the juxtapositions in these two sentences are not less perplexing than the “instant articulation” of bifurcations in the verse section.⁹¹ Yet the long clauses and the recurring reflexive syntax (“enters its margin,” “receives...into itself,” and “confront their own edges”) generate a series of encircling movement, diffusing the intense conceptual contrast between the theatrical creation of a fictional world and the religious devotion to establishing the Kingdom of God as well as the radical shift from world history to a private bedroom.⁹² In the first sentence, the reference to dictionary definitions establishes a self-similarity, where a specific word is first abstracted into a category (“cloth” and “someone”) and then narrowed down by distinguishable traits. The image of the “preacher” is coded as a subset of itinerants, inheriting the latter’s characteristics. Departing from a division of space, transgressing the boundary “from place to place,” and arriving at a more intimate psychological displacement of being “unsettled,” the sentence presents a meditation on space that gradually descends

⁸⁹ Howe, *The Midnight*, 43.

⁹⁰ Howe, *The Midnight*, 43.

⁹¹ Howe, *The Birth-Mark*, 173.

⁹² A recall of the verse renderings of similar themes, e.g., the itinerant preacher with “An inattention to the necessity/ of changing damp clothes” and revisionist work “from House to Museum,” can help us better anchor the difference (see Howe, *The Midnight*, 20; 5). While the verse sections provide strong sensual stimulations through words dramatizing conceptual discontinuities, the prose sections prefer a nonchalant unwinding.

the spectrum of abstraction.

Likewise, the second passage quoted here convenes earlier themes like European settlers, eloquent sermons during the Great Awakening, and presumably the illustrations in *Bed Hangings*⁹³, while foreshadowing developments later in “Scare Quotes I.” These historical incidents will gradually digress into the discussions of the Irish culture embodied by the poet’s maternal relatives, her paternal American identity, and her fascination with thin places (margins of books, marginal meanings of words, liminal moments, etc.), where she finds herself torn between intimacy and the inability to integrate her legacy into a relatively stable self-identity.⁹⁴ For the convenience of analysis, we may divide the sentence into three semantic units, with the comma and the period marking their boundaries. The first and the second parts mirror each other, presenting the same historical event from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized. The third part rephrases “entrance” and “reception” as a “confrontation,” adopting a neutral standpoint through an analogy between a continent and a room. Instead of emphasizing the sharp oppositions among different perspectives, the poet indicates a keen interest in testing how rhetoric can create enough similarities until incompatible perspectives can be effortlessly connected by an adverbial clause, as if displacements were natural, smooth processes.

Marjorie Perloff’s article “‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic’: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*” compares the long poem to modernist classics like *Cantos* and *Arcades*, and vividly describes Howe’s style as moving among “flat statement,” “documentary assurance,” and “lyric fantasy.”⁹⁵ Perloff attributes this mixture to contemporary self-consciousness in the “information age,” where “the lyric self is increasingly created by a complex processing of negotiation between private

⁹³ Some illustrations in the book present beds positioned in small bedrooms, with the edges of the beds almost leaning against the wall. See Figures 30, 31 in Abbott Lowell Cummings’s *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds*, 1650–1850.

⁹⁴ About halfway into “Scare Quotes I,” Howe describes herself as a “grave robber,” who has the opportunity to lay hands on books and cultural memories passed down to her through her maternal relatives yet without the ability to fully claim them. See Howe, *The Midnight*, 60.

⁹⁵ Marjorie Perloff, “‘The Rattle of Statistical Traffic’: Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*,” *Boundary 2* 36, no. 3 (August 1, 2009): 205–228, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2009-030>.

feeling and public evidence,” further suggesting that “only by adopting the language of the library and the database [...] can the contemporary poet create what is paradoxically a new poetic sphere.”⁹⁶ A lyric subjectivity and a lyric world are created through the poet’s citations of words and images to avoid a self-centered lyric subjectivity, which would sound suspicious to contemporary poets and readers. By uncovering the fractal expansion in the poem, we further realize that intertextuality constitutes an effective interrogation on the functioning, efficacy, and ethics of elegy.

The fractals in *The Midnight* are appealing: they are adequately abstract to imply some revelation on grand topics like human development and sufficiently intricate to enable apposite analyses of twisted emotions and detailed syntax. But instead of indulging readers and herself in the excitement of orderly totalities, Howe invites skepticism through her meticulous pursuit of structure. As demonstrated by her sentence about the European colonization of North America, the image of a narrow space drifting among political, cultural, and domestic discourses offers unconvincing explanations on the complex colonial history: if the statement were to be taken at its face value, colonization would have been a smooth and triumphant exodus, where people and culture from “the margin” of Europe would have naturally flowed into the “Kingdom of God in America.”

Such an overt simplicity reveals that the fractally organized space is a temporary syntactical effect rather than a genuine explanation. In particular, later entries soon unravel the hardship of extending personal and collective memories beyond their initial carriers—memories become blurred (as shown by Howe’s uncertainty in recalling her childhood memory and Frederick Law Olmsted’s indirect remembrance of his mother—“I now only remember that I did so remember her”), physical evidence conveys fragmentary or even contradictory meaning (as shown by Howe’s great-aunt Louie Bennett’s book, whose “preservative denial” has been violated by both Howe and an unidentified American preschooler), and ideological and military invasions result in violence and pain (as shown

⁹⁶ Perloff, 208; 227.

by Howe winding *The Master of Ballantrae* and its historical context of the Jacobite rising of 1745 into her narrative).⁹⁷ Indeed, when themes like preachers, insomnia, and memory converge again, their mutual connection is reversed: instead of desire brimming over a narrow place, the poet reconvenes these threads by the exactly opposite image of a slim, sinuous thread in the vast space of geography, thinking, and memory:

Come away—This way, this way—Calvinists, Congregationalists, Anabaptists, Ranters, Quakers, Shakers, Sandemans, Rosicrucians, Pietists, reformers, pilgrims, traveling preachers, strolling players, peddlers, pirates, captives, mystics, embroiderers, upholsterers, itinerant singers, penmen, imposters scattered throughout antiquarian New England, Pennsylvania, and New York, I cling to you with all my divided attention. Itinerantly. It's the maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance.⁹⁸

If their meanings are secondary and indefinite, what is the purpose of constructing these exquisite verbal fractals? To address this question, Howe evokes a fundamental poetic, logical, and even cognitive device—the chiasmus—to parse the reproductions of affinities until initially exclusive concepts are interconnected.

Howe first recognizes the presence of chiasmi in her observation of a stranger with obsessive-compulsive disorder walking in her neighborhood, as the man “halted in a frenzy of anxiety” before “attempting a leap” “at each line of tradition between pavement slabs”:

In a chiasmus the second half of a sentence repeats the first; but with the order of the two main elements inverted so that the meaning of the second half returns to its source in the first half, hovering between identities. “We’ll hang together—or together we’ll hang.” The direction is always toward the middle. There are people who can challenge transition on its own terms and people who cannot. He was one who could not. As I watched his inertial journey, the murderous aphorism “Step on a crack—break your mother’s back” continually inserted itself into my thoughts. I wondered about the relation between one concrete slab and another concrete slab.⁹⁹

The reflective axes of the chiasmuses are consecutively anchored in gaps between tiles, linguistic twists

⁹⁷ Howe, *The Midnight*, 65–66; 67; 59; 73.

⁹⁸ Howe, 66.

⁹⁹ Howe, *The Midnight*, 115.

in aphorisms, and physical and psychological wounds left by mortality, with these repetitions leading readers to wonder whether the poet is as compulsive as her character. The gentle, melodious tone in phrases like “hovering between identities,” “toward the middle,” and “inertial journey” alludes to a meta-reflection on the writing style of the prose sections, which are dominated by pensive rhythm as well as the mutual cancellation of bifurcating and convening motions in words. It is tempting to perceive these reflective axes as a space of indeterminacy and inaction rather than gaps, for the former image temporarily exonerates us from “challeng[ing] transition on its own terms,” i.e., from facing unprepared change heroically, directly, and in its entirety, a confrontation that can lead to self-destruction and self-blame as suggested by the second half of the two chiasmic aphorisms quoted by Howe.

However, the chiasmus is not pure escapism. Rather, it intertwines material truth and felt connections, two contradictory forces that can be traced back to the family dynamics in the poet’s childhood. While her father insisted on their separation by identifying chiasmuses in logical contraposition and thereby reducing possible worlds into neat permutations of symbols, her mother, intertwining them, “believed with evangelical fervor in the literal truth of the theater.”¹⁰⁰ These forces formulate Howe’s poetic self-identity as a “library cormorant” whose thoughts and existence are intertextual¹⁰¹: “dim rustle of papers—hushed buzz—discreet door release click—researchers let in or out. In a chiasmic universe only relations exist—nothing exists absolutely.”¹⁰² For Howe, the chiasmus envisions a structure where people separated by time are gathered in a mysterious, sensual, and almost surreal space of texts, coordinating multiple discontinuities such as paper folds, incessant sound, and non-linear movement. In this performative sentence, which is fragmented into a chiasmus embedding instantaneous stimulation in lasting yet obscured consciousness, she further reveals how a new identity

¹⁰⁰ Howe, 134.

¹⁰¹ Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 18.

¹⁰² Howe, *The Midnight*, 137.

emerges thanks to the structure's curation of minute and interrelated differentiations: experience of body parts like hands, ears, and feet are integrated into a claim of identity as a "researcher." In more explicit terms in *Spontaneous Particulars*, Howe meditates on how the aura of research libraries and special collections inspires her poetic creation:

Often by chance, via out-of-the-way card catalogues, or through previous web surfing, a particular "deep" text, or a simple object (bobbin, sampler, scrap of lace) reveals itself *here* at the surface of the visible, by mystic documentary telepathy. Quickly—precariously—coming as it does from an opposite direction.¹⁰³

Gathering subtle, provisional, and fragmentary differentiations, the chiasmic structure of experience leads to more palpable reversals: it turns around the fold of surface and depth, animating the past, the dead, and the buried.

Howe further suggests that the fragmentary and minute auditory stimuli from the libraries' protection system triumphantly leads toward a lyric epiphany: "From somewhere in the twilight realm of sound a spirit of belief flares up at the point where meaning stops and the unreality of what seems most real floods over us. The inward ardor I feel while working in research libraries is intuitive. It's a sense of self-identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time."¹⁰⁴ Even though the melancholic sentiment in *The Midnight* would render this kind of eagerness for connections transcending discontinuities in time, space, and mortality out of context, Howe's incessant digressions by flimsy associations do accumulate into a vision of transtemporal connections. Specifically, if incomplete relations suggesting "disinheritance" on their own can conglomerate into a fuller expression of "inheritance" after being fractally organized, a slight transcendence of mortality not only becomes conceivable but also appoints poetry as its means. As Howe's own musing at the end of the section "Scare Quotes II" reads:

Midnight is here. The brig *Covenant*. I go in quest of my inheritance. Portmanteau for a voyage—hazel wand—firings—tattered military coat and so on. Are the children asleep? All

¹⁰³ Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, 1st edition (New York: New Directions, 2014), 18.

¹⁰⁴ Howe, 63.

who read must cross the divide—one from the other. Towards whom am I floating? I'll tie a rope round your waist if you say who you are. Remember we are traveling as relations.
Well it's the way of the world¹⁰⁵

While the quest of flimsy traces compels the undertaker to risk anxiety and disappointment, it reveals fractal mirroring across temporal-spaces—including Manning's life, Howe's intellectual development, her writing of *The Midnight*, and our reading of the long poem: details of this mental and psychological voyage undertaken by the poet overlap with Manning's multiple physical crossings of oceans and seas depicted throughout the long poem;¹⁰⁶ the poet's investigation of her maternal inheritance as a writer parallels her tracing of her intellectual lineage as a reader; moreover, as the current narrative time coincides with the title of the poem, the poet's writing and our reading form a symmetry, where mutual devotion between the poet and readers is concretely imagined and insisted upon.

It is not a stretch to claim that these fractally expanding structures constitute an epistemology, which enables us to answer our earlier question: what is the significance of intertextuality in *The Midnight*? Like the fractal structures demonstrating two contrastive tendencies, i.e., divergence and confluence, these reverberating experiences propose that instead of being grasped conceptually and holistically, the realization of mortality is gradually felt in the details of Howe's daily life. The ubiquitous manifestations of bereavement gather into an intertwining of guilt, anxiety, longing, and misunderstanding. This complex, layered experience that cannot be expressed otherwise, as suggested by Howe's own saying, "Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced."¹⁰⁷ As the fractal geometry (and the chiasmus which also exhibits a fractal extension and reversal) organizes death and loss into a process of self-exploration, the initial cognitive limitation exposed by the disruption of death and loss now conveys an ontological weight, as suggested by the poet's insistence on relations

¹⁰⁵ Howe, *The Midnight*, 146.

¹⁰⁶ Howe, 75; 119; 133.

¹⁰⁷ Howe, *The Midnight*, 85.

as fundamental to the material. It further leads to existential implications, as revealed by her frequently entangled claims about her identity, like “[i]t’s the maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance” and “I go in quest of my inheritance.”¹⁰⁸ More importantly, as various textual identities including the reader, the poet, and the researcher emerge from intertextuality, mortality is appointed as a shared human experience that can enable empathy and serendipitous recognition across time and space. In other words, Howe’s detailed tracing of the concrete dynamics of death suggests an indirect redemption that can be fulfilled by a humble poet through observing fragmentary experience, relating to others’ words and thoughts, and offering her private and genuine reactions to establish potential connections. Fractal intertextuality thus renders both grieving and healing imaginable.

Even though “fractal” is not a familiar concept in contemporary Chinese poetics, similar systematic expansion in *An Ideal Couple* is evident. The ninety-nine prose entries stemming out from words in the verse section employ an extra-diegetic perspective and repetitively interpret the story of Mao and Dong from different angles by relating it to anecdotes of the poet and other eminent writers throughout Chinese history, with multiple voices collaborating in this process as I will analyze later. This polyphonic structure lends itself to be visualized as a loose fractal with numerous reiterations, where the initial pattern is rotated, modified, and rescaled, while still remaining recognizable.

In contrast to the verse section driven by a clear plot and vehement emotions, Bai’s prose roams between conscious digression and synopsis. According to his meta-poetic comments, the conceptual trajectory of his prose follows the physical rhythm of reading and writing, where divergence and convergence are equally constitutive to a well-paced experience:

时间终于到达了 2007 年 6 月 4 日，这一天我为了冒董这一对水绘仙侣也写下了一首《来临》，它当然与拉金的《来临》是风马牛不相及之事。想到此节，饶有兴味，

¹⁰⁸ Howe, 66;146.

欲说还休，在此专门宕开一笔，将拉金此诗引来如下，只为触动自己也触动读者浮想联翩的思绪……¹⁰⁹

略作愉悦的小憩，随即回到正题 [...]。¹¹⁰

下面我要翻转一笔，从大的传统文学意义上梳理一遍有关‘虎丘诗会’的美与意义。而这一美与意义，当然也适合水绘雅集以及一切中国文人墨客的雅集盛会。”¹¹¹

Time finally arrived at June 4th, 2007, the day when I also wrote a poem for the ideal couple in the Water-Paint Garden called "Coming." Of course, it is completely unrelated to Larkin's "Coming." Thinking of this [eponym], I am intrigued but will restrain myself from going into details. Instead, I will redirect my stroke here, quoting Larkin's poem, just to incite my own as well as readers' associative thinking...

After a pleasant break, we will soon return to our main concerns.

In what follows, I will turn around my pen [here, the poet likely thinks of a brush], teasing out the beauty and significance of "Tiger-Hill Poetic Gathering" in the grand perspective of traditional literature. Such beauty and significance certainly suit all literary gatherings throughout Chinese history, including the one in the Water-Paint Garden.

In these metaphors, divergence is presented as an intuitive component in the poet's bodily rhythm, in readers' affective response to literature, and in the visual shape of strokes in Chinese characters. In contrast to these intuitions, convergence happens through the poet's self-discipline against unrestrained expression of his personal obsession and his conscious claim of cultural heritage by contextualizing his writing and experience in some broader literary tradition. It is striking that these two contrastive modes of engaging with materials—one flowing and one anchored—usually happen side by side, as suggested by all three quotes above. A qualified subjectivity of the poet marks their intersection, with intuition privileged over forceful actions and concerns about structural congruity as well as readers' reading experience over willful composition.

¹⁰⁹ Bai 柏, 52.

¹¹⁰ Bai 柏, 55.

¹¹¹ Bai 柏, 260.

Unlike the personal and even confessional tone in *The Midnight*, the voice in the prose sections of *An Ideal Couple* is calm and distant most of the time, contrasting sharply with the exuberant emotion in verse. For instance, one of the major sources of pathos in verse is fatalism crystalized in ominous signs Mao and Dong observe in divination and divine worship. In the first stanza, the poet already alludes to a “lottery poem” (“签诗”); yet its detailed content is not revealed until the end of the main text of the verse section, right before the appendix. As a fortune-telling practice common in the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, people shake a bucket containing multiple sticks until one of them drops out. Then, people will interpret the future according to the enigmatic poem inscribed on the stick. Despite its convoluted syntax and ambiguous attitude, the lottery poem, which Dong and Mao have repetitively obtained since before they met, manifests key words like “remember” (“忆”), “separate” (“分”), “half” (“半”), and “unfulfilled” (“不谐”), all consistent with their tragic romance. Framing the verse section, the motif of the lottery poem dramatizes human limitation and the characters’ vain but noble devotion to their tragic life: the delayed announcement of the content of the lottery poem compels readers to suffer uncertainty, admire Dong’s devotion to love, and anticipate a happy resolution, only to realize at the end that all the hopeful turns in the story are designed in preparations for the lovers’ separation—the exact same process in which Mao and Dong realize their fate after all their effort falls short.

In contrast, in the corresponding prose entry “lottery poem” (“签诗”), though it is only the third endnote, Bai is already eager to play down regret and futility. Adopting an impersonal perspective, the poet addresses other unexpected sentiments inspired by death that may not be immediately intuitive, like wonder, nostalgia, and even relief to some extent. Extensive intertextuality provoked by incessant comparisons and contrasts simulates multiple possibilities concerning the ominous power of poetry, which relativizes the ingrained fatalism in the verse section. In the endnote entry, Bai first

dismisses this foretelling power as a superstition: “the so-called lottery poetry is just a way to predict fortune and misfortune in life, or a superstition in other words” (“所谓签诗不过是提前预知生命吉凶的一种形式，亦是一种迷信。”)¹¹² As he enumerates examples where poets’ ingenious metaphors uncannily predict their causes of death, however, his language takes on the dramatic effect of hypophora and dialectical oppositions—common rhetorical techniques in political speeches and newspapers during the Maoist period to urge for ideological loyalty¹¹³: “Let’s look at a foreign example: who wrote ‘the blood circulating, I carry the cascade that is walking’¹¹⁴? It’s Tranströmer. I do not mean to say who wrote this poem, but to say that whoever wrote it would have a stroke. Indeed. The Swedish poet Tranströmer died of stroke” (“再看一个外国例子：是谁写出了‘血在循环，我带着走动的瀑布’？是特朗斯特罗姆。我的意思在此并不是要说谁写出了这句诗，而是要说写出这句诗的人会的一种病——中风。果不其然，瑞典诗人特朗斯特罗姆就因为中风去世。”)¹¹⁵ While the parody of incontestable conjunctions feigns a coercion of belief that turns out to alleviate the gravity and omnipotence of destiny in verse, Bai reinforces the deterministic relation between Tomas Tranströmer’s line and his death in image and prose rhythm. The unidirectional movement of waterfalls echoes the irrecoverable time. Despite the fact that the Chinese phonetic translation of Tranströmer’s name is long and hard to pronounce, Bai insists on repeating it twice: the first time, the name rhymes with the Chinese word for “cascade,” and the second time, the additional restrictive appositive before the name instills a subtle internal rhyme among the Chinese words

¹¹² Bai 柏, 34.

¹¹³ Bai gives an extensive discussion on how dialectical thinking, particularly as a legacy of the Maoist era, still constitutes the motifs, grammar, and rhythms of contemporary Chinese poetry in his essay “Three Modernities in the Poetry Writing of Three Eras” (《三个时代三种现代性的诗歌写作》).

¹¹⁴ This is a loose translation of Tomas Tranströmer’s poem “Kort paus i orgelkonserter,” presumably done by Bai according to the poem’s English translation.

¹¹⁵ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 35.

meaning “poet,” “Tranströmer,” and “die,” respectively. Such a mutual infiltration between one’s death and one’s literary creation makes the terrifying announcement of fate seem less tragic.

The poet’s position shifts again, as he resumes a distanced view in discussing other cases where the ominous implications in poems are posteriorly identified after their poets’ misfortunes: “the writer collects these well-known stories about ominous poetry not because he believes in this power; readers should take it with reservation, just to broaden their horizon. Ominous poetry may just be a coincidence” (“笔者将以上这些家喻户晓的诗谶小故事集中记录下来，并非相信诗谶，读者且姑妄听之，以扩大见闻就行了。这些诗谶或许是巧合吧。”).¹¹⁶ While “coincidence” proposes randomness, readers are reverted to awe for the perfect timing and unnegotiable arrangement in predetermined destiny, as they proceed into a lengthy account of a failed battle quoted from the Chinese translation of *The Cambridge History of China: Late Ch’ing*. There, Bai foregrounds words like “coincidentally” (“碰巧”), “moreover” (“又”), “thereupon” (“于是”), and “moreover, it is even the case at that time that” (“而且当时甚至”) as the beginning of his sentences. These terms, while connotatively related to coincidence and surprise, pile into a causal chain manifesting the perfect correspondence of opportunity, logic, and time.¹¹⁷

These approaches to fate—i.e., a superstition mediating our intuitive fear of the unknown, an aesthetic commitment where poetry is lived out, and a rhetorical effect coordinating our complex temporal experiences—diffuse the agony in the verse section and lead toward an intersubjective lyric consciousness. In the verse section, lyric ecstasy—as in “All this is for nothing else, but the genuine cheerfulness when hearing the wind [39],/ But pure beauty, but the expenditure of this water-painted eternal night [40]” (“这一切不为别的，只为闻风相悦[39]，/只为唯美，只为消得这水绘的永

¹¹⁶ Bai 柏, 36.

¹¹⁷ Bai 柏, 36.

夜[40]")—is achieved through a growing purification of the contrast between the will for eternity and the transient reality.¹¹⁸ In contrast, the intertextual complex of thoughts and feelings in the prose section incubates a self-conscious lyric mode, where elaborations on diverse impulses and their respective rationale launch a deeper comprehension of lyric functioning.

For instance, when Bai redirects readers back to Mao and Dong's story after surveying literature and hearsay on ominous poetry, he incorporates those different interpretations into his tracing of the emotional undulation instigated by the lottery poem from the perspectives of the characters, the narrator of their romance, and their readers—three different identities that indicate diverging knowledge, interest, and lyric impulses. Bai depicts the arch of Dong and Mao's parabola of feeling—from confusion to wonder and diminishment and to their eventual realization of fate—as follows:

当然，九年之后，董姬亡殁，这一切的不解统统都得以解开。签诗中的每个字句都被一一坐实。原说求签不解，这是世间常情，无需惊怪。但对董冒而言，这股奇异的力量远远超出了他们的把握。¹¹⁹

Certainly, nine years later, Dong died, and all the confusion became clear. Every character in the lottery poem had been verified one by one. It is usually not advised to try to understand the lottery poem, [whose unintelligibility] is a common phenomenon that is not surprising. But for Dong and Mao, this miraculous force is way beyond their grasp.

Then, the poet switches into the role of the narrator of their romance, persuading skeptical readers of his insistence on investing symbolic significance in this incident:

这首诗——注意我说的是同一首诗——在他们的生命中出现了三次。三次！这是何等惊人的巧合啊！¹²⁰

This poem—note that I'm talking about the very same poem—has appeared in their lives three times. Three times! What kind of astonishing coincidence this is!

¹¹⁸ Bai 柏, 7.

¹¹⁹ Bai 柏, 38.

¹²⁰ Bai 柏, 38.

After a direct quotation of Mao's own description of his multiple drawings of the same lottery poem in "Memories from the Shade Apricots Temple," the claim of the narrator's right to structure the plot through central motifs transitions into the voice of readers, who possess a more comprehensive knowledge of the plot than the characters but are still excited by the unfolding of their fate:

这不详的签诗来势汹汹，完全将冒董两人包裹在了命运的图谱中，使他们徒有忧惧，又无能为力。这美好的爱情故事，还未开始，就已写完了它悲剧的结局。诗谶！“春尽花宜尽”；预感！烟中怨，在江南……我不禁又要脱口念出俄国诗人勃洛克的两句诗来[...] ¹²¹

This ominous lottery poem arrived so invincibly that it completely absorbed Mao and Dong into the arrangement of destiny, leaving them in fear and futility. This beautiful romance, even before it started, had been doomed to its tragic end. Ominous poetry! "The spring is over and so are the flowers" ¹²²: Presentiment! Regrets in the mist, [regrets] in Jiangnan...I again cannot help but recite two lines from the Russian poet Blok [...].

Therefore, in the prose section, lyric sentiments are achieved through subjecting themselves to meta-poetic reflections: how can different relationships to a text lead to different attitudes? For characters who are limited in the ongoing plot, the inexplicable content of the lottery poem causes fear. Emerging through interpellations of readers and himself (as shown by abrupt phrases like "note that I'm talking about the very same poem" and "I again cannot help but"), the narrator is excited mainly by the repetition, which offers a convenient and impressive trope to turn "astonishing coincidence" into determinism. Readers, with analepsis in the verse section, marvel at the characters' acute intuition, lament for their whole-hearted devotion to happiness however transient, and elevate their emotional reaction to Mao and Dong's romance into a synesthetic experience that evokes temporal ("spring"), local ("Jiangnan"), and atmospheric ("mist") sensibilities. Yet unlike usual synesthesia that leads to lyric catharsis, this alignment of intuition, mood, and scenery dilutes Dong and Mao's tragedy into a

¹²¹ Bai 柏, 39.

¹²² A typical line on the lottery stick.

vague feeling of uncanniness that can well occur in everyday life without the direct pressure of incidents like death, separation, and fatalism.

The indefinite tone, blithe digressions, swift changes of perspectives, and dilution of the gravity of the verse section together envision a different kind of lyric power. Instead of overwhelming readers with a holistic feeling or intellectual epiphany, the lyricism of the prose section of *An Ideal Couple* is imminent within the poet's extension of its multiple offshoots, so that shared themes circulate smoothly among different voices and perspectives. But the next question is, since the prose section of *An Ideal Couple* is disproportionally longer than its verse section, how does the digression in this long poem provide reflections and comfort? Or more abstractly speaking, as the endlessly refracted content and emotion presents lyricism through the procedural manifestation of human conditions and the inclusion of diverse perceptions and feelings, how should we imagine lyric redemption?

Unfolding Lyricism through Folded Elegies

Bai's intertextual practices suggest that Mao and Dong's losses are not unique. Indeed, besides a tragic romance, *An Ideal Couple* simultaneously mourns for the losses in Bai's own life, including the waning poetic energy in this contemporary materialist society, the demise of his previous poetic identity as a fervent lyricist, and, most importantly, the death of his best friend Zhang Zao, which happened shortly before the publication of the long poem's initial edition. We see an example at the end of the prose entry "lottery poetry," as Bai again employs a metaphor of calligraphic shape¹²³ to portray his mental roaming: "Following the tendency of this stroke, I also think of Zhang Zao (1962-2010) in 1983. That spring, he flipped through an English dictionary and drew out words like lottery sticks, predicting a sudden romance (between Zhang and Tang Weiming) and its pre-determined imperfect ending. Thirty years later, I wrote down this love story he told me in a half-fictional manner"

¹²³ Even though given Bai's general metaphoric predilection, he is likely to use the word "顺势" ("following the stroke") with a visual, calligraphic metaphor, it is an idiomatic expression that can indicate the following of any tendency, besides the trajectory of strokes in Chinese characters.

“顺势，我还想到 1983 年的张枣(1962—2010)，他在那个春天以翻阅英文字典、查字抽签的方式，预言了他一场突如其来的爱情（张枣和唐为民）及其注定不完美的结局。三十年后，我将他对我说的这个爱情故事以半虚构的形式写入诗中”。¹²⁴ Then, Bai’s poem “A Love Letter from 1983” is quoted in full. Delivered in striking brevity and plainness, this purportedly inadvertent remembrance refracts the poet’s laments for his friend over the years. Despite Bai’s deliberate understatement, we know from his book *Odes to Oranges: To Zhang Zao* (《橘颂：致张枣》)¹²⁵ that ominous poetry¹²⁶ became their shared obsession, after Zhang drew out words from the dictionary during their second meeting, they talked overnight.¹²⁷ Still keeping the paper where Zhang wrote down enigmatic words like “ominous poetry,” “the absolute night,” and “cause of death,” Bai regards lottery poetry as a marker of the beginning of their friendship and a forecast of Zhang’s rootless personal and intellectual life, as Zhang frequently relocated in and beyond China in the rest twenty-five years of his life.¹²⁸

Bai’s quotation of his own poem “A Love Letter from 1983” fasts forward the timeline by thirty years, with the ardent conversation replaced by an unrequited letter. Although Bai pretends that the poem is a semi-fictional romance, the predetermined tragedy in the poem is not so much the fruitless love as Zhang’s death in his prime years. For the ending lines of the poem read,

多年后
我仍爱写信，但你已经
变了，你不再眺望；但有

¹²⁴ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 39.

¹²⁵ *Odes to Oranges* is Bai’s explicit elegy dedicated to Zhang, including letters, poems, and essays Bai wrote for Zhang before and after the latter’s death.

¹²⁶ According to Zhou Dongsheng, Bai’s student as well as a scholar of Zhang Zao, it is more likely that Zhang’s flipping of the dictionary took place in 1985, after his initial discussion with Bai about ominous poetry (from my private conversation with Zhou on March 12th, 2024).

¹²⁷ Bai Hua 柏桦, *Ju Song: Zhi Zhang Zao 橘颂：致张枣* [*Odes to Oranges: To Zhang Zao*] (Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing Ltd., 2022), 16.

¹²⁸ Bai 柏, 9.

另一个消息来自苍茫云海……¹²⁹

Many years later
I still enjoy writing letters, but you have already
Changed, You no longer look into the distance; but
There is another message coming from the vast sea of clouds...

This is an adaption of a scene in Zhang's famous poem "The Sky of Clouds" ("云天"), whose beginning reads "Whenever I feel most lonely/ I always stare at the sky of clouds" ("在我最孤独的时候/我总是凝望云天").¹³⁰ Death transfers Zhang's loneliness to Bai. Their paralleling gazes at the clouds across space and time offer both comfort and regret by suggesting a mutual understanding that comes too late.

Beyond the endnote entry of "lottery poetry," the very revision of *An Ideal Couple* constitutes an oblique mourning for Zhang. The first version of the long poem, which the poet deemed as "a dedication to Jiangnan," was published in May 2008, two months after Bai saw Zhang for the last time at a poetry event there.¹³¹ As one of the first readers of the long poem's manuscript in 2007, Zhang found it "enjoyable," although "the poetical part is a bit weak."¹³² This comment guided Bai's revision of the poem for its reissuing, where Bai circumvented solemn morals and aimed for a pleasurable

¹²⁹ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 40.

¹³⁰ Zhang Zao 张枣, *Zhang Zao de Shi* 张枣的诗 [Zhang Zao's Poems] (People's Literature Publishing House, 2010), 98.

¹³¹ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 8.

¹³² Bai Hua 柏, 橘颂, 296.

reading experience.¹³³ Intertextuality helps Bai highlight what he often terms as a “leisurely” (“逸乐”) or “lighthearted” (“轻”)¹³⁴ aesthetics of writing that aligns with Zhang’s compliment of the poem’s enjoyability, the hermit ideal in premodern China, and the delicate natural scenery and lifestyle in Jiangnan—the context of Mao and Dong’s happy years. Remaining discreet about his personal life, Bai frees himself from diving deep into his inundating sorrow and his readers from the moral obligation of mobilizing their deep emotions to show empathy. With local colors, he secures a harmony among his reading experience of the source texts, his writing experience, as well as Zhang’s and other readers’ reading experience.

More importantly, oblique mourning through extensive intertextual writing contextualizes loss and absorbs it into the ongoing poetic creation and life, as Bai describes in “Events in Poetry,” an essay that casts light on the arrangement of essayistic materials in *An Ideal Couple*:

而诗歌中的事件之于我往往是在记忆中形成的。在面对一个事件时，它触动我，接着推动我追忆相关的一个过去的事件，并使之连成一片，相互印证、说明、肯定，

¹³³ Many examples, though often sporadic and oblique, indicate Bai’s concurrent mourning and revising. For instance, in endnote entries like “Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter” in the second version, where he added his recent work “Four Seasons in Suzhou,” a poem agilely swinging among syntaxes and rhythms found in casual modern conversation, traditional drama, Confucian classics, and formal classical Chinese. Depicting how local customs in Suzhou are shaped and organized by seasonal cycle, its portrayal of people’s enthusiastic preparation for New Year’s Day starts with the custom of displaying and eating oranges—also Zhang’s characterizing poetic symbol: “At New Year’s Eve in Shantang people crowded around the fire, after some wine I think of oranges.../ I in fact think of someone (whose name is a secret)” (“山塘过年围炉，酒后思橘...../其实是酒后思人（名字保密）”). With this halted confession under the effect of alcohol, Bai neither indulges himself in sorrow nor fully reconciles with the loss. Rather, he experiences the sudden detachment and sentimentalism death brings with half-torment and half-expectation, as if they would temporarily recover the two poets’ tacit understanding of each other. This motif of seasonal cycle builds upon the mutual implication between separation and connection in “lottery poetry” but secularizes the latter’s connotation of supernatural revelation into the ceaseless passage of time latent to all experience. The poet’s scattered, veiled references to his confidant’s death find a justification: with the sudden, terminating death absorbed into regular life, mourning becomes a lasting condition that creeps into our consciousness from time to time. Instead of a ritual practiced to achieve closure about a past happening, mourning shapes our experience of the current fleeting moment. As the awareness of irrecoverable loss emerges in our admiration of the renewal of life, a melancholic yet intimate realm also consolidates itself in the public setting of the New Year celebration. On the other hand, the fact that private mourning surfaces within the crowd of people, perspectives, and miscellaneous texts conveys a reassuring message: the remaining traces of the loved ones are still identifiable in our current reality. Charged with the potential of new connections and self-awareness, the mortal life appears less confined: “I have yet fully expressed myself [...], still wanting to experience a man’s life again and again—spring, summer, autumn, and winter” (“我仍意犹未尽[...],依旧是想反反复复体会人之一生——春夏秋冬”), as Bai remarks perceptively. For details, see Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 132; 129.

¹³⁴ See, for instance, a conversation between Bai and his friends: Li Shangyu et al. 李商雨 et al., “Zhu Xiao Wu Ren Tan” 《竹笑》五人谈 [Smiling Bamboos: A Conversation of Five], *Hongyan*, no. 3 (2017): 170–78.

从中找出自己的成长轨迹，命运的必然。换句话说，这些经年历月在内心深处培养出来的一个一个的故事，它们已各就各位、跃跃欲试，一吐为快。它们通过诗歌讲述给读者听，也讲述给自己听。为此，它们试图解释了生活，解释了某种人格类型，也解释了时光流逝的特定意义。毋庸置疑，我所有的诗都是从此出发的。¹³⁵

For me, events in poetry are often formed in memories. When I encounter an event, it touches me and propels me to recall another relevant past event, until events are interconnected into a plane where they mutually verify, explicate, and acknowledge each other, until one distinguishes one's own trajectory of formation and the inevitability of destiny within. In other words, these stories that have been long incubated in secluded corners of the heart have assumed their places one by one, ready to be tested and expressed. They narrate themselves to readers and to the poet through poetry. In this manner, they attempt to explain life, explain certain kinds of personality, and explain the specific meaning of the passage of time. Without a doubt, all my poems start from here.

Similar to Howe's proposal, analogical and reversed correlations among events offer Bai an epistemic and affective structure leading toward the core of his lyric poetics, where sorrow is understood and redeemed through quotidian motifs, the current ongoing life, and the accumulation of fragmented knowledge about life and death. However, unlike Howe, whose intertextual reconfigurations of various events are tightly intertwined with their materiality as I will analyze later, Bai removes his memories from his own lived experience and recontextualizes them in the intertextual web that he is currently developing. As shown in the passage just quoted, once entering poetry as raw materials, "memories" and "events" do not bear possessive pronouns like "my" or "our" to suggest a self-distancing; in *An Ideal Couple* and even Bai's entire oeuvre, factual details of an incident are often

¹³⁵ Bai Hua 柏桦, *Jintian de Jiqing: Bai Hua Shinian Wensuan* 今天的激情: 柏桦十年文选 [Passion of Today: Selected Essays from Bai Hua in the Past Decade] (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), 100.

altered at will to adapt them to the developing works.¹³⁶ Moreover, the intertextually reconfigured memories lead to the development of selfhood and the enrichment of feeling. These effects brim over the poetic texts and provide comfort to the poet's phenomenal self, which is now relegated into a fellow reader.

What is at stake for Bai is an expansion of elegy from a reaction to particular loss grounded in real life into an aesthetic of writing and living in general. Oftentimes, Bai links lyricism with nostalgia evoked especially under the urge of some imagined finality, a sense that is constitutive to human consciousness according to Frank Kermode. Bai argues,

我通过诗歌抒情去抓住一些情感，至少对于我来说这是重要的，即便它最终是虚幻的。[...]所以我要去抓，从幻觉当中去抓。而这是抒情诗的奥妙所在，流逝，失去，然后挽留。¹³⁷

I capture some emotions through poetic lyricism, an attempt matters to me, even though it might eventually be illusionary. So I need to grasp, to grasp in illusion. This is the mystery of lyricism—to flow, to lose, and to hold on to.

And similarly,

只要我开口说出“夏天”，无论何时何地，我的声音就会立即进入一种莫名的似乎已是最后的抒情。[...]我所能做的，只是尽力让诗——这种回忆的艺术在我有限的生命中不时地闪出光来，以慰藉那些逝去的，以挽留那些将逝的。¹³⁸

Once I say "summer," whenever and wherever, my voice will immediately enter an inexplicable and almost final mode of lyricism. [...] What I can do is to strive to make poetry—this art of

¹³⁶ In the prose entry “Winter in Jiangnan” (“冬天的江南”), for example, Bai quotes a poem by himself. Originally an ironic poem where the poet taunts with his former lover when they meet each other in Nanjing, it is only partially quoted and pretended as a genuine admiration for the easeful and delicate lifestyle in Yangzhou. Presumably, the poet believes that slyness and pride are too abrupt emotions to be incorporated in an entry that also includes texts like Li Dou's *Records of Decorated Boats in Yangzhou* (《扬州画舫录》) and Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*. This strategy is confirmed by Bai's claim that “the core of the power [of poetry] depends on narrating an accurate event” (“[诗歌]感动的核心是基于对一个准确无误的事件的叙述”; See Bai 柏, 今天的激情, 101.). Instead of providing an accurate narrative for an event, he “narrates an accurate event.” Accuracy indicates the process where the narrated event relates itself to other events to achieve maximized poetic effects.

¹³⁷ Bai Hua 柏桦 and Jiang Fei 姜飞, “Guanyu Shi Yu Ren de Duihua” 关于诗与人的对话 [A Conversation about Poetry and People], *Modern Chinese Culture and Literature*, no. 1 (2005): 224.

¹³⁸ “Bai Hua Zhuanfang” 柏桦专访 [Interviews with Bai Hua], in 我们的人生：柏桦诗文自选集 1981-2021, by 柏桦 (Southwest Jiaotong University Press, 2021), 466.

reminiscence—to emit its light from time to time, to comfort what has been lost, to hold on to what is about to be lost.

Many transitive verbs in these passages lack proper objects, as if the gesture of mourning itself—despite the lack of a material base—is already sufficient to substantiate lyric expressions. Words implying imperative and determinism, such as “eventually,” “whenever and wherever,” “instantaneously,” and “final,” create a cataclysmic presentiment. The poet eagerly reconciles with this presentiment by “grasp[ing]” and “hold[ing] on to” what might be broadly described as the irrecoverable passage of time, an image encoded in the morphology of the Chinese term for “elegy” that literally means “songs sung by people pulling the cord of hearse.” The efficacy of this kind of lyricism lies not in its potential of retrieving loss or subverting death, which the poet has already deemed as “illusory,” but in its ability to transform the poet’s discontinuous, cataclysmic intuitions into a continuous experience of time through registering its incessant passing. Inducing a wide range of emotional and intellectual experiences including pain, illusion, comfort, lyric inspiration, and a temporary faith in memory’s power of bearing witness to the transient life, Bai’s melancholia manifests itself as a desire for being immersed in the unidirectional continuity of time despite sorrow and regrets.

Bai says, “Yes, recollection, as destined, is just like life itself” (“是的，回忆作为命运，如同生活本身”). Mao’s original text attracts the poet because it imbues the ongoing life in reminiscence and results in an acute, subtle, and aesthetically generative consciousness of ephemerality.¹³⁹ It provides Bai with ready materials to exploit and subvert conventional lyric techniques, as he practices through verse and prose respectively. When he expands the elegy from a matter of content into a general attitude toward life that incorporates remembrance in the envisioning of futurity, the poet identifies the redemptive potential as constitutive to each moment that is mindfully lived. This belief finds a vivid manifestation in Bai’s reading of Mao’s “Memories from the Shade Apricots Temple,”

¹³⁹ Bai 柏, 水绘仙侣, 356.

where Bai sensitively notices that that olfactory stimulants often trigger Mao's remembrance of Dong, because Dong was enthusiastic of studying incense. Bai writes in an endnote as follows: "Most of the life will fade into the background, but art pours down buckets of light, shadow, and smell on the obscure background. Here, Mao's sensitivity to smell is connected to an intense elegiac feeling. Death and resurrection, with the help of smell, miraculously recover a never fading feeling" ("大部分的生活都会褪为背景, 但艺术却在阴暗的背景上投下了一桶一桶的光影与气味。此处, 冒辟疆对气味的敏感, 正是和一种强烈的悼亡之情关联在一起。死亡与更新, 借助气味奇妙地还原了一种永不褪色的情感").¹⁴⁰ This interpretation of "death and renewal" is not entailed by Mao's original text, which, on the contrary, wails the impossibility of resuscitation by comparing Dong's life to the burnt incense vanishing into air and ashes. Without deviating from the original too boldly, Bai's "renewal" proposes an eternal remembrance that evokes its failure to effectuate eternity: this "never fading feeling" is valuable exactly because its initial physical embodiment has already vanished. Emphasizing the secular and even artificial nature of this symbolic resurrection, the poet imagines the accumulation of remembrances as stage lamps whose prismatic colorings overlap each other to cast the ongoing present in a new light—a scene of procedural multiplications, modifications, and recombinations in time analogous to the folded extension in *An Ideal Couple*. In this manner, limited human beings attain a fuller temporal experience. As testified by the poet's alluring images like light, shadow, and the partially enlightened background, such an agenda of lyric poetry instills desire and wonder into the inevitable pain brought by the passage of time.

In a nutshell, Bai proposes that the core of the lyric is elegiac; its scale varies, ranging from specific, individual experience to collective memory; its mourning and redemptive potential are intertwined in ordinary sensibilities of the current fleeting moment; while lyricism is often inspired by

¹⁴⁰ Bai 柏, 224.

the presentiment of finality, it takes on the voice of acceptance, consolation, and aesthetic fulfillment, rather than resistance and heroism; furthermore, besides radical conversion of faith, sublime visions, and emotional outpouring, lyric redemption can also be achieved through the incorporation of loss into a tender attending toward things however trivial. All this entails Bai's limited commitment to the factuality of his subject matters, for rather than symbolically recovering what is lost in words, his main concern is to create an enriched present.

Howe intervenes alike into the dynamics between sorrow and comfort, the past and the present, and the personal and the collective memories through the lyric genre. Even though she would not attribute her lyric impulse to the expectation of some dramatic finality and claims that "I almost never put the word *death* in my in my poems," remembrance, response to loss, survival guilt, and the experience of some surreal reality through reconnecting with the dead are prevalent in her works.¹⁴¹ In fact, her lyric voice is often inspired and even justified by her elegiac observation of people, archives, and more broadly speaking, history. In contrast to Bai's tendency to epitomize real-life objects' intertextual significance at the expense of abstracting and even tampering with their empirical reality, however, Howe regards their materiality and especially the unendurable nature of their materiality as the key to reestablishing her own connections with the dead, claiming interpretative right, and reconciling with the innate insufficiency of elegy. After all, the remembrance of a past that is not completely knowable will always risk distortion and misunderstanding.

In *The Midnight*, the poet meticulously describes the material details of the books she inherited from her relatives, including the texture of their interleaves, their physical wear, and faded scribbles on paper strips tucked in them because they are "transitional objects" that relate her ancestors' coping with great changes in life with her own endeavor of understanding bereavement¹⁴²: "In all transactions

¹⁴¹ Howe, *The Birth-Mark*, 117.

¹⁴² See, for instance, Howe, *The Midnight*, 57; 59; 76.

of life we have to take a leap. My mother's close relations treated their books as transitional objects [...] to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated."¹⁴³ "Transitional objects," according to D. W. Winnicott from whom Howe borrows the term, are things assisting infants to process their inevitable deviation from the person or object of their initial relationships (such as the parents) to enter the social world.¹⁴⁴ Transforming her ancestors' transitional objects into those of her own through writing, the poet reinforces her attachment to the books' previous owners by commemorating inconspicuous but intimate evidence of lives, while confirming their absence by letting the latecomers to take the authority of interpreting such evidence.

Howe remains conscious that the mutual implication between attachment and separation as well as presence and absence can be an ethical paradox. In *The Midnight*, we find detailed account of how her ancestors' books were inherited, read, and preserved in ways against their will.¹⁴⁵ More explicitly in "Melville Marginalia," a long poem published as early as 1987, Howe portrays a "compiler" that foreshadows the "compiler of memories" in *The Midnight*—the lonely pilgrim striving to transcend the boundary of mortality. In this earlier version, the poet renders lyric transcendence in an affirmative tone at first glance: "Come afterward compiler/ the impediment of words/ torn to pieces by memory/ [...] / Between ourself and the story/ so low almost a whisper/ Lyric for crossing over."¹⁴⁶ Yet this lyric vision is surrounded by ironic and even grotesque images—"Narcissus you are free" and "Vulturism trimmed for binding/ who will be interpreter"—to express reservations concerning the ethics of the work of compiling.¹⁴⁷ The latecomers' interpretation is parasitic and dictatorial, "binding" a coherent narrative to serve our own ends.

¹⁴³ Howe, 60. This sentence is probably an appropriation from D. W. Winnicott's definition that transitional object is "excitedly loved and mutilated." See Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Psychology Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁴⁴ Joan Jonas, Susan Howe, and Jeanne Heuving, "An Exchange Between Joan Jonas, Susan Howe, Jeanne Heuving," in *Joan Jonas: Five Works*, ed. Valerie Smith (New York: Queens Museum, 2003), 130. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 5–8.

¹⁴⁵ Howe, *The Midnight*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1993), 149.

¹⁴⁷ Howe, 148–9.

When structured through the fractal, this ethical problem of mourning is further developed into a paradox internal to lyricism—a mode of writing that aspires to employ temporally and spatially defying expressions to deliver an incident that is temporally and spatially confined. In a painful but restrained single-paragraph section in *The Midnight* that is titled “What if”, Howe writes, “I wonder if a child can perceive a loved parent as he or she really is. Maybe the eyes of love aren’t blind but visionary so they feel a deeper, more real reality. ‘Are you seeing anyone?’ My mother was constantly asking me this after David died. ‘No one,’ I would angrily reply.”¹⁴⁸ This is a fractal structure of anguished memory, where the passing of a family member is embedded in that of another. Complex feelings imply each other through similarity and reversals: in both cases, connection in “a deeper, more real reality” is built upon disconnection in the obvious, immediate reality; the potential connection with the poet’s mother has been inadvertently denied through an indefinite pronoun “no one” in the context of her second husband’s death; besides an indication of recollection, the intriguing subjunctive mood rather than simple past tense in the sentence “I would angrily reply” makes the denial read like a veiled complaint of being abandoned, which the poet prepares to say during her encounter with Manning in the “more real reality.” Similar permutations of feelings are beyond my enumeration.

Howe’s inquiry of the “more real reality” turns twofold. As a search for deeper knowledge and more intuitive connections to the dead, this delicate fractal attests to Howe’s careful folding of memories and thoughts, as she endeavors to elicit just the right level of love to enter the deeper reality. Meanwhile, evoking the rich metaphorical potential of sight in poetics, her wonder ruminates on how lyric functions through layers of simultaneous attachment and separation that characterize the psychology of mourning: Is such a covert progression from a physical action (“perceive”) to a half-descriptive, half-epistemological adjective (“blind”) and to an almost supernatural quality

¹⁴⁸ Howe, *The Midnight*, 141.

(“visionary”)—which delineates the typical trajectory of lyric poetry from concrete material phenomena to some heightened awareness—really valid?

To answer this question, we need to venture beyond *The Midnight* to observe how folds of simultaneous connections and disconnections enable us to delineate a lyric resurrection in Howe’s poetics. For Howe, “a fierce elegist”¹⁴⁹ according to the 2010 Bollingen Prize judging committee,¹⁵⁰ elegy is not just a poetic genre but the interpretive lens through which she reflects on the potential and problematics of lyricism. In her first experiment with the genre in “Sorting Facts; or Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker” published in 1996, she has already extended elegy from an expression of specific loss into a historical consciousness permeating our experience as a constituent of humanity:

In my writing, I have often explored ideas of what constitutes an official version of events as opposed to a former version in imminent danger of being lost.

Sorting word-facts I know only an apparition. Scribble grammar has no neighbor. In the name of reason I need to record something because I am a survivor in this ocean.¹⁵¹

Instead of approximating original facts, elegists only refer to “a former version,” as if the history is the “indefinite fold [on the word *appearance*],” to borrow Jacques Derrida’s description in his study of Mallarmé.¹⁵² Avoiding the logo-centric ideal that would oblige the designation of an official representation of history, phrases like “a former version,” “imminent danger,” and “being lost” situate readers in the transience of time, create a sense of inevitable separation, and thus instigate our elegiac sentiment toward time and history—a deep feeling evoked by concepts that initially sound impersonal and abstract. As shown by the more deliberated images and rhythm in the second paragraph quoted here, (e.g., emotionally charged images; rhyme among ending words of most semantic units such as “apparition,” “reason,” and “ocean”; enigmatic metaphors like “scribble grammar”; and an incipient

¹⁴⁹ Howe terms her style as “poetic documentary.” See Howe, “Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker,” 385.

¹⁵⁰ See <https://news.yale.edu/2011/03/01/susan-howe-named-2011-winner-yale-s-bollingen-prize-american-poetry>

¹⁵¹ Howe, “Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker,” 381–82.

¹⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 211.

identity that internalizes the passing of time), the poet's argumentative tone transits into a nostalgic one. Equally important, this affect bypasses transcendent visions or unity of feelings that we usually expect from elegy. Rather, the weighing between the impossibility of "neighbor[ing]" and the rationality of sharing an "ocean" suggests that the mourning consciousness born out of human mortality will eventually grow into an ethical view with bearing on the current, practical life.

In 2008, Howe suffered the loss of her close companion of life once again. Her mourning for the sudden death of her third husband Peter Hare in *That This* returns to the entangled relationships between personal grief and broadened consciousness about human existence, between the need to find some traces of connections for psychological comfort and the imperative to delineate the boundary between life and death in order to recommit herself to the current reality: "After the loss of your closest companion there has to be some sort of redemption. I say redemption, because you feel guilty for surviving. I can't rely on religious belief the way Lewis did, but the essential lyricism of faith—for me, the mystery of art or artifice; 'contrived, compassed or brought about by constructive skill,'—provides its own sacraments."¹⁵³ By quoting the dictionary definition of "artifice," in which a series of consonance ("contrived," "compassed," and "constructive") subtly shifts the ontological import of lyricism from being fake into being purposeful and humanly attainable, the poet insists on a secularized "faith." According to her religious language, redemption through elegy is a necessary ritual, but the result of this redemption is not a new life but the right of surviving, a modest statement that rejects to move forward completely.

Let us return to Howe's question "Maybe the eyes of love aren't blind but visionary," which I have implicitly rephrased as "Maybe the eyes of a poet aren't blind but visionary" in previous discussion. With lyric poetry usually conceived as a form rooted in personal feelings, embodied in a

¹⁵³ Howe, "An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation," Academy of American Poets. September 7, 2011. <https://poets.org/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation>

personal voice, and fulfilled by some revelation, Howe's anxiety over generalization and transcendence is inevitable. However, it can become less poignant, if those folds of personal, quotidian details that accumulate into the turnaround from the personal to the general and the material to the transcendent will still lead us back to our current lives. In other words, lyric redemption needs to be constantly qualified in its generation, development, and outcome: it is achieved through the strenuous effort of limited human beings who strive to use language to shape experience; it should remain insecure about its effects to remain ethical; and it guarantees not a transcendence but a folding back to the current, concrete existence.

Reconfiguring Folds

Expressing not only the structural principle of *The Midnight* and *An Ideal Couple* but also Howe's and Bai's commitment to layered implications in words, objects, and primordial human conditions like mortality, the figure of the fold reifies a series of interrelated poetic insights through its geometric qualities. Its crease refracts meaning and feelings, so that our experience of mortality is charged with multiple interrelated and often oppositional perspectives. The self-embeddedness of folds situates specific deaths first in their multiple symbolic manifestations and their reversals and then in the very passage of time, with the closure constantly deferred until mourning and comfort overflow the poems' exquisite structures and thus initiate a consciousness of art, time, and history permeating our current experience. Meanwhile, the rapid change of scales in folded fractals encourages poets to move fluidly among intertextual references, between the particular and the abstract, verse and prose, poetic experiments and meta-poetic reflections, and individual tragedy and the limitations of human existence. For Howe and Bai, elegy ventures beyond processing specific loss to meditating on cultural legacy and experimenting with the lyric genre, until expansive empathy, existential meditations, variegated emotions, and heightened consciousness of the current moment all become attainable through a lyric voice that is diffusive, gradual, and rooted in the quotidian life.

As Howe's and Bai's lyricisms develop the fold from a structure of ontology, epistemology, and subjectivity into a concrete expression of intricate thoughts and feelings, some of the most poignant discussions of their poetic works resonate with those commonly found in philosophy. Anxiety centers around whether this kind of refractory accruing of significance will lead to a proliferation of meanings, where no actual objects and experiences remain distinguishable. For instance, the deconstructionist approach to texts is often attacked as a complete retreat into language, and Robert Cohn, whose work Derrida has quoted favorably to show how the indeterminable references accumulate in the enfolding of texts and real-life incidents, argues that "I feel Derrida and many with him have gone astray, not only in Mallarmé study but much else in our time: they become obsessed with one dimension, in this case the undecidable, or call it what you will, in the monotonous, monolinear chain of deconstruction."¹⁵⁴ In the introductory chapter of *The Shape of the Signifier*, Walter Benn Michaels evaluates Howe's archival poetics as a typical example of excessive commitment to the materiality of the signifier which will entail a commitment to the primacy of personal, especially political, identity.¹⁵⁵ Michaels argues that Howe's postulation of meanings based on how material details appeal to her regardless of authorial intention threatens to make nothing meaningful by making everything potentially meaningful: "In any case, the claim that the text means nothing will turn out to have exactly the same cash value as the claim that it means different things to different people."¹⁵⁶ Li Haiying, in a highly critical essay on recent Chinese long poems "Igniting a Lamp in Bright Daylight; Extending dry streams out of a Grand River," argues that Bai's curation of miscellaneous texts and tales in *An Ideal Couple* reduces the poet to "a museum tour guide," whose explications to all details

¹⁵⁴ Robert Greer Cohn, "Mallarmé on Derrida," *The French Review* 61, no. 6 (1988), 887–8.

¹⁵⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 1–18.

¹⁵⁶ Michaels, 8.

creates an inclusive context for interpretation but “effaces what could have been characteristic” and “reduces [those repeatedly unpacked themes] into debris without tensions or artistic appeals.”¹⁵⁷

All these criticisms of folds demonstrate a pattern. They dismiss the identification of fold (“hymen” in Mallarmé’s essay; scribbles on manuscripts in Howe’s scholarly work; and quotidian detail in Bai’s poem) as arbitrary: it is elected out of a myriad of motifs and objects that could have served as the starting point of folding, with poets’ predilection or willful postulation as the only principle. They are concerned that the constant division and diversion into further folds will diminish both the analyzed texts and the real-life issues these texts address into mere formal games. Yet Howe’s and Bai’s experiments of the folded structure in lyricism reveal a different hermeneutics. Namely, we do not have to drive relativization to the extreme where differentiation collapses into uniformity, where all boundaries are renounced. Instead, as the vehicle for meaning that refuses to be captured once and for all, rippling folds manifest the structure of our feeling and knowing as limited human beings, for whom patient weighing of differences is necessary to approach the ineffable through communicative language, relate personal incidents to shared human conditions, and shape past longing into a desire for the present. In such a recognition of limitations in space, time, and personal life and their elasticity, poetry, empathy, and an invested way of being in time emerge. As attested by *The Midnight* and *An Ideal Couple*, instead of negating meaning, indeterminable ripples only renounce fixated interpretation, with instability urging the poets to relentlessly interrogate their stance on language, reality, and the interrelations between the two.

¹⁵⁷ Original: “但诗人像个热情的“导游解说员”,生怕我们对眼前的风景缺少发现、不会欣赏,不厌其烦地在那儿指指点点,不时地制造陈词滥调的暴力灌输,比如那些反复解释的“春夏秋冬”、“仁者静”、“洒扫庭除”、“燕语呢喃”、“闻风相悦”等词条,最终成为毫无张力和艺术感染力的废料。” See Li Haiying 李海英, “Baizhou Ran Mingdeng, Dahe Jin Kuliu — Lun Dangxia Zuowei ‘Zhenghou’ de Zhiming Shiren Changshi Xiezuo” 白昼燃明灯,大河尽枯流——论当下作为‘症候’的知名诗人长诗写作 [Igniting a Lamp in Bright Daylight; Extending dry streams out of a Grand River: A Diagnosis of Long Poems Writing by Famous Contemporary Poets], *Jiangnan Academy* 34, no. 2 (2015): 29.

If we return to the figure's geometric root, we realize that even in mathematics, the fold does not nullify boundaries but encourages us to delineate and reconceive them. Though slightly problematic mathematically speaking, Deleuze, following Leibniz, proposes that the infinitesimal is analogous to the infinitely small folds we obtain when downscaling is no longer possible.¹⁵⁸ While such a conception uses the fold as a metaphor for reiterative procedures and deliberately ignores its creation of discontinuity, fractal approximation uses both. In modeling irregular shapes in the natural world, the sensitivity of the fold attained by its creation of discontinuity enables it to capture the rough edges, and its potentially infinite self-generation compels us to predetermine a suitable shape, the length between vertices, and times of reiteration. If we allow infinite recursion, the generative folds will display behavior for which the usual description in Euclidean geometry is insufficient: for instance, an initially one-dimensional curve can “almost” grow into a plane, thereby compelling us to conceptualize dimensionality in non-integer form.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, by entertaining the outcome of infinite folding, mathematicians construct many novel objects that are theoretically possible yet practically inconceivable, including a developable, or “foldable” in common language, surface that is nowhere continuous¹⁶⁰, and more recently speaking, a torus with folds piling up on its surface so that all its latitudes and longitudes are of the same length (a rough visual presentation was obtained in 2012 by Hévéa Project).

These applications inspire us to extend the metaphor of the fold even further. If in geometry, it initiates, challenges, and expands both our understanding of limit—a specific value fundamental to calculus and analysis—and epistemic boundaries we draw for the sake of rigorous and systematic studies, what kind of limit do the folds in Howe's and Bai's poetry amount to? Howe once has said,

¹⁵⁸ If we intend to be mathematically rigorous, what continuous embedded folding approximates is the tangent line of a smooth curve, rather than the infinitesimal.

¹⁵⁹ More precisely speaking, this curve is called the space-filling curve. While such a curve can reach every point on a two-dimensional plane, it goes through some of the points more than once. Thus, we cannot simply describe its dimension with an integer.

¹⁶⁰ This is a loose description; for details, see Christian Wiener's zigzag developable surfaces.

“it takes space to fold time in feeling.”¹⁶¹ In their experiments, folds recognize, test, and bend the limits between the rustling sound of the flipping pages and the form of the long poem, between linguistic experiments and the commitment to living the current moment by folding other experiences across time and space into it. Folds’ delicate nodes envision new intersections where the dead meets the living, where lyricism meets life.

¹⁶¹ Howe, “Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker,” 178.

Chapter Three: The Concentric Epic Ambitions

At first glance, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and Yang Lian's *Narrative Poems* (《叙事诗》) are motivated by epic ambitions. These autobiographical long poems aspire to be all-encompassing, situating personal lives in grand sociopolitical contexts, bearing witness to large-scale socio-political changes that have not only shaped the developmental trajectories of the United States and China but also modified their people's individual sense of identity. According to Hejinian, her poem is set in a time of great social instability. Informed by the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and feminist movements, it represents "the ongoing processes of subjectification and cultural placement that occur along the way" and "the making of the American mid-twentieth century family, but with a very public history (virtually epic) and with ramifications."¹ For Yang, *Narrative Poems* recovers the "spirit of the family" ("家风"), a metaphor evoking the virtuous upbringing that used to be valued by the mainstream Confucian values before they were disrupted during the political turmoil of modernization, decolonization, and socialization during the twentieth century. Covering several turning points in Chinese intellectual history, including the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square protests, Yang maintains that "[*Narrative Poems*], if put in two sentences, asks how grand history is entangled with individual destiny, and how individual thoughts constitute the depth of grand history" ("[叙事诗]概括成两句话就是：大历史如何纠缠个人命运；个人内心又如何构成历史深度").² Through representing these eventful eras, both poems reorganize language to uncover latent social structures and even to establish new epistemological structures that can navigate social reality. In Hejinian's provocative essays on Gertrude Stein's realism, she argues that Stein "turns a detail into a clue" and "replaces false or insufficient with true or adequate detail."³ Since *My Life* often echoes

¹ Lyn Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments: Call to the Everyday* (Wesleyan University Press, 2023), 114.

² Yang Lian 杨炼, *Xu Shi Shi* 叙事诗 [Narrative Poems] (Huaxia Publishing House, 2011), 4.

³ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (University of California Press, 2000), 91.

the recurrent syntax and the gradually defamiliarized themes in Stein's writings, and since Hejinian has discussed Stein's autobiographical poetics extensively and originally,⁴ this comment reveals her own ambition for writing as a mode of reorganizing knowledge and lived experience. In a more overt manner, Yang declares that each line written by a contemporary Chinese poet should orchestrate "all resources from the ancient to the present, from the foreign to the domestic" ("古今中外的所有资源"), in order to reestablish poetic potential upon the impoverished revolutionary rhetoric of the Maoist regime.⁵

However, traditional epic techniques including charismatic heroes, grand narratives, and teleological narration are associated with the repressive, deceptive propaganda that both poets fiercely deconstruct.⁶ Instead of employing the genre of the long poem as a direct means of uncovering and even establishing orders in events and language, Hejinian and Yang propose to approximate their epic ambitions processually and negatively: they subscribe to a particular kind of formalism (for they adhere to prescribed forms but avoid usual rhythmic, logical, and emotional patterns in poetry) in order to dramatize limitations in writing with the overflowing potential of meaning during social turmoil. They attest to the epic times they live in and the epic potential of their languages through the impossibility of writing an epic poem as conventionally defined.

Both poets evoke concentric shapes to address this agenda of writing. Formal regulations in *My Life* and *Narrative Poems* exhibit this geometry, as do the poets' views on the functioning of language in general. Despite the risk of committing the intentional fallacy, a mixed discussion of both poets' poetic theories is necessary to do justice to their innovative takes on the relation between the autobiographical and the epic, the personal and the social. Even though Hejinian and Yang are well

⁴ See Hejinian's essay "A Common Sense." Hejinian, 355–82.

⁵ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 7.

⁶ See, for instance, Lyn Hejinian's "Barbarism" and Yang Lian's "'Touched by the Ancient Betrayal Once Again'—A Virtual Conversation about Poetry" (《“再被古老的背叛所感动”——关于诗的虚拟谈话》).

canonized contemporary poets nowadays, when they embarked on their writing lives in the seventies and eighties, they regarded themselves as marginalized writers keen on challenging readers' interpretive capacity. They engaged enthusiastically with poetics to justify their conceptual and political approach to literature, believing that, as Hejinian says, "[poetics] can open [poetry's] doors to history."⁷ More practically speaking, the eighties were the heyday of theories in both cultures: in the American case, French theory circulated widely among American intellectuals; in the Chinese case, the sudden exposure to the international world in the post-Mao period prompted many intellectuals to translate and introduce international cultural, social, and political theories to the Chinese reading public, a phenomenon often referred to as the "culture fever."⁸ Theoretical writing at these moments was an effective way to gain cultural capital. In keeping with these considerations, this chapter aims to strike a balance between assessing the poets' theory and practice. That is, it will discuss how Hejinian and Yang conceive of concentric structures as an epistemic reconciliation of the tension between viewing writing as processual, personal, and insufficient on the one hand, and envisioning language and poetry as unbound by place, time, individual speakers, and readers on the other. The poets' divided commitments to these conceptions inform their actual practices in *My Life* and *Narrative Poems*, works that show both poets to be inspired no less by the efficacy of the concentric structure than by its insufficiency.

⁷ Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments*, 223.

⁸ The end of the Cultural Revolution largely liberated the content and forms of intellectual debates. However, scholars have argued that it would be inaccurate to regard cultural discourse in the post-Mao period as a complete reversal of that during the Cultural Revolution. As Wang Hui argues, intellectuals' keen interest in theories and their construction of an unofficial space that could directly affect the party-state's policy demonstrate not only a partial fulfillment of Mao's initial vision in launching the Cultural Revolution but also a continuation of several theoretical debates within the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the Maoist period also laid a constructive foundation to the prosperous cultural scenes in the 1980s. See Wang Hui 汪晖, *Qu Zhengzhibhua de Zhengzhi: Duan 20 Shiji de Zhongjie yu 90 Niandai 去政治化的政治：短 20 世纪的终结与 90 年代* [Depoliticized Politics: The End of the "Brief Twentieth Century" and the Nineties] (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008), 1–57.

According to Hejinian, a poem “means” as “[c]oncentric circles draw more and more in as they radiate out; more and more lake is contained by the stone.”⁹ Multiplicity is manifested through the constant redrawing of boundaries—a simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that suggests the poem’s incompleteness. Likewise, Yang describes his various poetry collections¹⁰ as exploring the same themes and structures from disparate angles. Based on the visual effect of concentric circles, where what originally appears to expand and include can shrink down to a point, he argues by analogy that his poetic intention is to drive “the sea” (i.e., Yang’s symbol for transhistorical, universal concepts such as tradition and the total potential of language) to the “end,” an end suggesting not finitude but “essential endlessness.”¹¹ In other words, even though Yang’s writing often aims to push itself to the point where imagery, lyricism, and even language will fall apart to reproduce the intensity he feels in real life, he sees this dramatic effect as a reflection of the limited capacity of individual minds of the poet and the reader, rather than of the exhaustion of resources in language or reality.¹²

This negative approach to epic ambitions through the impossibility of their full execution is embodied in both poets’ formalization of the long poems. Geometrically speaking, concentric structures are shapes of varying sizes that display a shared center. If these shapes are individually enclosed and adopt the same axis¹³, we obtain a series of nested patterns, e.g., concentric squares and

⁹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 105.

¹⁰ Yang has a very specific taxonomy for his works. While all the following collections subscribe to similar formal rules, he regards *Yi* as a long poem, *Non-person* (《无人称》) as a collection of short poems, and *Where the Sea Stands Still* (《大海停止之处》) as a serial poem. As for *Narrative Poems*, Yang deems it as a long poem.

¹¹ Yang Lian 杨炼, *Guibua·Zhili de Kongjian: Yang Lian Zuopin 1982–1997 Sanwen·Wenlun Juan* 鬼话·智力的空间：杨炼作品 1982–1997 散文·文论卷 [Speech of Ghosts·Space of Intelligence: Yang Lian's Works 1982–1997 Essay and Literary Criticism] (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1998), 313.

¹² For instance, in the last three sections of *Concentric Circles*, Yang’s language is disintegrated into parataxis of syntactical fragments, concrete poetry, and even lists of individual strokes. But if we collect the titles of all the poems in these sections together, we realize that they are different derivatives from three radicals—“言,” “土,” and “寸”—which put together becomes “poetry” (“诗”). The potency of poetry is verified exactly through the fragmentation of language for poetic effects. See Yang Lian 杨炼, *Dabai Tingzhi zhi Chu: Yang Lian Zuopin 1982–1997 Shige Juan* 大海停止之处：杨炼作品 1982–1997 诗歌卷 [Where the Sea Stands Still: Yang Lian's Works 1982–1997 Poetry] (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1998), 607–43.

¹³ If concentric shapes are not coaxial, there will be intersections among shapes of different sizes.

concentric circles. *My Life*, a procedural project, has two major versions. When it was first published in 1980, the poem consisted of thirty-seven sections. Each section is a paragraph of thirty-seven sentences justified on the page with clear edges and 90-degree angles. At the upper left corner of each paragraph, there is a square box featuring an aphoristic statement. Sometimes, these visually embedded¹⁴ statements are immediately relevant to major themes in their corresponding paragraphs; other times, they seem tangential at first glance but will be evoked and recontextualized in other paragraphs, recursively updating our interpretations of their structural function within their corresponding paragraphs and in the long poem. In 1987, a second version was published following the same geometric layout, except that this reissue contains forty-five sections with forty-five sentences each.¹⁵ Other derivatives of the long poem include an sixty-eight-sentence version and an eighty-sentence version of the ninth section appended to Hejinian's essay "What's Missing From *My Life*," published in 2009 and 2023 respectively.¹⁶ In addition, in 2003, Hejinian published *My Life in the Nineties* with Shark Books, an edition with ten sections of sixty sentences each. In 2013, Wesleyan University Press printed the 1987 edition and *My Life in the Nineties* together, and the poet only made changes to a few word choices. Loosely speaking,¹⁷ the number of sentences in each section corresponds to Hejinian's age at the time of writing. We may visualize the transformation of each section of the long poem as a series of concentric squares of n (years of contemplation) $\times n$ (sentences), enlarging themselves year after year. Taken in its entirety, the long poem consists of n (paragraphs)

¹⁴ Cole Swensen argues that this is an allusion to medieval manuscripts and thus grounds Hejinian's poem in the Western literary and technological (in particular bookmaking and printing) history. See Cole Swensen, "Re-Membering Time in Hejinian's 'My Life,'" *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, no. 147 (2016): 94–5.

¹⁵ For the first thirty-seven sections, Hejinian inserted eight sentences to each section. The place of insertion varies section by section. As I will discuss later in this chapter, these flexible additions fuse actual experience with different degrees of retrospection, highlighting the malleable nature of memories.

¹⁶ The 2009 version was published in *The Grand Piano*, volume 9; the 2023 version is published by Wesleyan University Press in *Allegorical Moments: Call to the Every Day*.

¹⁷ The discrepancy can be explained by the publication process. In the 2009 version of "What's Missing," Hejinian herself wrongly remembered that the two major editions of *My Life* were published in 1978 and 1985, which would establish an exact correspondence between the number of the sentences and her age.

set of concentric squares overlaying each other, yoking three dimensions—the plane of remembrance, the plane of writing, and the plane of living.¹⁸

In other words, every year, Hejinian rereads her memoir, inserting a sentence to each section and composing a new section. The place where the poet inserts the new sentence is not defined, and in fact, she often takes this opportunity to break up the original logic and emotion. As for other sentences inherited from earlier versions, she only makes very few revisions, most of which are editorial. While the materialist correspondence between the poet's age and the number of sentences is Hejinian's invention, she describes it as a "convention," emphasizing how this unusual rule makes the compositional process an arduous, persistent labor of several decades that have even taken on some ritualistic connotation: "[t]he book as a whole is organized according to structural conventions which I laid out in advance and imposed on the writing."¹⁹ Her concentric structure invites a diachronic and a synchronic reading, though we often find ourselves shifting seamlessly between them. When viewed diachronically, Hejinian's steadily growing squares indicate both her metaphysical understanding of time and her embodied experience in time. Specifically, the construction of each widened square depends on the previous square. Emphasizing ongoing constructiveness, she models the tension between the seemingly unrestricted potential of writing and imaginary ways of living versus the limited execution of such potential in actual words and deeds over a limited span of time. For even

¹⁸ Imagining *My Life* as an evolving three-dimensional entity conforms to her own writing agenda. Hejinian often employs spatial metaphors in her literary criticism. In particular, she uses the image of an extensive, two-dimensional plane to describe the semantic potential of a particular word, consciousness, and synchronicity. See Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 46; 61; 116. Most tellingly, Hejinian analyzes Gertrude Stein's writing, a style that has influenced her extensively, as follows: "Time is pressed onto and spread out over the imagined spatial plane, and it is in language that details, and especially temporal details, are specified and, as it were, made physical. Distinctions must occur—activity takes place—across the language plane itself. In terms of spatial syntax, configurations and relationships occur in sets rather than in sequence, so that the perceptual activity, which has taken the form of writing, makes essential comparisons, oppositions, and distinctions." For details, see Hejinian, 118. In this description, Hejinian does not regard these various planes as independent and mechanically additive to one another. This view partially explains her insertion of additional sentences into the middle of the original passage rather than appending them at the end, for each added sentence fundamentally shifts the original plane of consciousness. Moreover, Hejinian's view of poetry as intersecting planes verifies our visualization of *My Life* as a temporal-spatial entity made of concentric squares.

¹⁹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 186.

though the poet's words enrich themselves year by year, the full potential of life is nevertheless reduced to countable gaps, including the periods that impose interruptions, the mechanical measurement of life in years, and even the very implication that memories are added in proportion to and the number of revisits as the poet rereads her previous narration—an act that fills in some obvious gaps only to reveal further gaps.²⁰ Or, as Hejinian argues in “The Rejection of Closure,” an essay explicating the formal intention in *My Life*, “[o]ne of the results of this compositional technique, building a work out of discrete fields, is the creation of sizable gaps between the units.”²¹

The attention to the change of concentric squares in time grounds idealistic imaginations about life and poetry in their concrete, partial, and temporary manifestations in reality. However, Hejinian's concentric squares are not restricting or diminishing. According to the poet, they liberate writing not only from conventional versification rules but also from the concentric patterns themselves. For instance, rather than meters and lines, *My Life* is measured in sentences, with Hejinian's often incomplete or run-on syntax instilling a sense of chance into the composition. But this breakthrough is not rendered in a triumphant tone. In 1988, right after she had published the second version of *My Life*, Hejinian claims that she was experiencing uncertainty about the sentence, “except as it is modified by the line (which discontinues the sentence without closing it).”²² Envisioning her sentences as capable of enjambment and rhyme, she moves fluidly between verse and prose, rhythmic language and seemingly banal editorial rules—similar explorations of sentences are pervasive in *My Life*. Meanwhile, the termination of Hejinian's reiterative squares is arbitrary and temporary, for the long

²⁰ Instead of an arbitrary mechanical rule, counting involves cognitive, semantic, and embodied dimensions which together make the process of mathematical reasoning an intersubjective practice and secure the induction from concrete experience to abstract knowledge. For details, see Brian Rotman, *Mathematics as Sign: Writing, Imagining, Counting* (Stanford University Press, 2000), a foundational work in the semiotics of mathematics. In Hejinian's *My Life*, even though sentence counting is an overtly partial representation of the richness of life, it is also through this finitude that we may imagine a subjectivity that is shaped by concrete socio-historical conditions without being completely subservient to them.

²¹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 46.

²² This quote is taken from Hejinian's essay “Lines.” Intriguingly, in the essay, while the poet mentions “sentence” once, she never alludes to lineated verse explicitly. It seems that the line, as an analytic unit, is equally applicable to verse and prose for the poet. Hejinian, 133.

poem continues to grow after its publication. The recognition of provisionality ensures that words will not turn didactic. In Hejinian's own words, "since the determination that something matches the norm or that the norm has been properly applied has to come from something apart from the norm and after its application, it can never have the last word."²³

However, Hejinian's epic ambitions are not merely suppressed as shadow reflections of her procedural writing. Instead, glimpses of ideality manifest themselves when her usual diachronic approach to concentric shapes suddenly turns synchronic. In addition to previous quotes from her poetics that uphold gaps and revisions over time, she also argues,

To myself I proposed the paragraph as a unit representing a single moment of time, a single moment in the mind, its content all the thoughts, thought particles, impressions, impulses—all the diverse, particular, and contradictory elements—that are included in an active and emotional mind at any given instant. For the moment, for the writer, the poem is a mind.²⁴

Here, we find a series of singular terms, including "a unit," "a single moment," and "any given instant," pointing toward intensity and even instantaneous revelation. When viewed together, squares of varying sizes indeed offer an image, where the shared center represents the singular and ultimate expression that the myriad elements along the edges of the outer squares are striving toward. This center secures its status as an abstract idealization: while it embodies the principle due to which individual squares are classified together, it can be approximated and alluded to but never described directly and wholistically. After all, the point that the squares narrow down to is a concept without size; all the squares surrounding it, however small, have a positive extension. Mathematically speaking, the point and the squares belong to two separate ontological realms, just like the Platonic Form and matter. For the poet, the contrast between the synchronic and diachronic views of concentric structures is not a logical fallacy. Instead, it is the fundamental motivation for meaning-making: "If language induces a

²³ Hejinian, 81.

²⁴ Hejinian, 44. This quote is extracted from Hejinian's well-known analysis of her compositional method—"The Rejection of Closure." In the essay, she uses *My Life* and a manuscript-in-progress called *Resistance* as examples. The immediate context of this quote is *Resistance*, which is also written in sentences. The manuscript of *Resistance* was later incorporated into Hejinian's poem "The Green."

yearning for comprehension, for perfect and complete expression, it also guards against it."²⁵ Such a meaning-making process, moreover, finds temporary satisfaction in creating a new temporality, i.e., a vital nowness of poetic creation:

I wanted to release the flow of accumulated time in syntax and thereby to make time happen. Obversely, I wanted to release the flow of accumulated syntax in time and thereby make sentences (and their concomitant thoughts) happen.²⁶

Through "accumulation," the synchronic and diachronic interpretations are reconciled. Synchronicity shifts its emphasis from comprehensiveness to depth of poetic language and thoughts, and diachronicity from the irrecoverable lapse in material time to a non-directional "flow" of subjective memories swirling into intellectual and psychological depth.²⁷ In a letter to Bob Perelman, Hejinian explicitly states that "[t]o experience things in time is to experience the fleeting instant, to experience time in things is to experience *now*—as a recognition that *this is happening*."²⁸

In contrast to Hejinian, Yang's approach to concentric shapes privileges their synchronic aspects, only obliquely referring to their formation in time in his works after the millennium. He argues that concentric shapes, especially concentric circles, offer an apt diagnosis of the Chinese language, Chinese cultural history, and the urgent need a post-Mao Chinese literature. Yang insists that as an irreflexive, hieroglyphic language, Chinese is spatial:

我在西方朗诵，总会被问到：“中国诗常给人一种表现主义或超现实主义的味道，是否它们在中国也流行过？”言外之意：“这二三十年代的风格，在西方早已过时了。”稍有学识的西方读者，都能谈谈李白、杜甫；诗人或出版社，则仍是庞德的隔代弟子：当年庞德标榜“意象”——他提倡过的诸多“运动”之一——迄今仍是西方偷窥者的万能钥匙。而中国诗人更乐此不疲：借助于中文文字的灵活、语法的自由——而藏拙，把“无话可说”变成“有话不说”。于是，目前太多关于中国当代诗的讨论，只是为了证明：这些诗无需讨论。它们太特殊了，以至译者和研究者，可以无限丰富

²⁵ Hejinian, 55.

²⁶ Hejinian, 22.

²⁷ Hejinian makes this comment when talking about her book *Writing is an Aid to Memory*, which can be read as a poetic meta-reflection on *My Life*.

²⁸ Lyn Hejinian, letter to Bob Perelman (20 August 1995), in Hejinian Archive, UCSD (Box 92, Folder 12): 1, [Hejinian's emphases].

其内涵，从“共产党”到“禅”无所不容，所以，也最好搁置不计。²⁹

When I give readings in the West, I am always asked, “given that Chinese poetry often gives readers an expressionist or surrealist impression, have these [aesthetic trends] also been in vogue in China?” This question implies, “these are trends from the twenties and thirties and are long outdated in the West.” Any slightly more informed Western readers can talk about Li Bai and Du Fu; but poets and publishers remain Pound’s descendants. Many decades ago, Pound proposed “imagism”—one of his several literary “movements”—and it remains the skeleton key for many Western voyeurs [of Chinese culture]. Chinese poets themselves are even more enthusiastic: they take advantage of the flexibility of Chinese characters and grammar to conceal their artistic deficiencies, turning the impoverishment of their language into a deliberately veiled speech. Thus, most criticisms of Chinese contemporary poetry only strive to prove that those poems do not require a poetics. They are too singular, both for translators and for scholars. And their meaning is diverse and boundless, ranging from “the Communist Party” to “Chan” or whatever. So, it’s best to just leave them be and not talk about them.

According to its context, this excerpt does not imply the lack of innovations in contemporary Chinese poetry. Rather, it is a genuine reflection on how poetic potential was discovered and developed after the Cultural Revolution upon personal trauma amid violent social movements, a language whose symbolic meaning was exclusively confined to upholding Mao’s reign, and traditional cultural resources that had been negated and dilapidated even since the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the final imperial dynasty in the Chinese history.³⁰ Yang is not the only Chinese writer to subscribe (though with reservations) to Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound’s orientalist and linguistically inaccurate

²⁹ Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 177.

³⁰ Yu Jian wrote a provocative essay in 1995, “Rejection of Metaphors” (《拒绝隐喻》), reflecting on how the political rhetoric during the Maoist period distorts people’s relationship with referential meaning, which should have been intuitive. The essay is at the center of the debate between the so-called “intellectual poets” and the “popular poets.” Generally speaking, the former group believes it is of imperative to recharge language with rich symbolic potential and interpretive challenges, so that it cannot be relegated to propaganda like before, and Yang’s early predilection for the abstract and even esoteric style serves as a telling example. The latter group, represented by poets like Yu Jian, believes that the abstract, unstable references in metaphors and symbolisms make language vulnerable to official control. Poetic experiments following the latter view include Yu’s long poem “File 0” (《零档案》) published in 1994. For details about this debate that characterized Chinese poetry of the 1990s, see Maghiel van Crevel, “What Was All the Fuss About? The Popular-Intellectual Polemic,” in *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Brill, 2008), 399–458.

understanding of Chinese characters and Chinese classical poetry.³¹ Yet Yang's comments stand out by demonstrating multiple intertwining anxieties characterizing post-Mao poetry. The first one is an anxiety toward so-called "Western" literature, namely high modernist literature (mainly anglophone). Since anglophone modernism is characterized by condensed images, fragmented syntax, and a rejection of didactic messages, which are all characteristics of post-Mao poetry, especially Misty poetry,³² Chinese poets are plagued by the insecurity that all their writings are mere imitations.³³ A synchronic view would temporarily suppress this anxiety of influence, suggesting both the orientalist tint in modernist poetics and the modernist aesthetics in post-Mao poetry as inevitable developmental stages in world literature. Second, by exaggerating the flexible, tenseless character of Chinese syntax, Yang insists on the inner coherence in Chinese culture: spatial poetics provides inexhaustible potential which inspires poets from the ancient times to nowadays. Third, while the poet effaces time to assert shared features of poetry transcending time and space, his last two sentences abruptly turn toward the specificity of each poem. Sarcastically alluding to both Western stereotypes of Chinese literature and the homogeneous socialist literature during the Maoist period, the poet imagines a kind of inclusive poetry whose infinite interpretations resist simple categorization.

³¹ For Yang's more substantial reflection on Pound's synchronic poetics, see "In the Timeless Air—Chinese, Pound, and the *Cantos*" ("In the Timeless Air—中文、庞德和《诗章》"). For his implicit references to Pound's thinking, see the first chapter of "'Touched by the Ancient Betrayal Once Again'—A Virtual Conversation about Poetry." Many post-Mao poets who are attentive to the sonic aspects and temporal potential of Chinese poetry still tend to read Pound very generously. For them, Pound reveals how classical Chinese poetry can serve as a foundation for cultural modernization and secure a sense of cultural inheritance that has been disturbed by political changes during the twentieth century. For details, see Yan Lianjun's "Stepping on the Toes, Can Reality Reach Tradition?—A Discussion of the Influence of Pound's Poetics on Chinese Contemporary Poetry" (《踮起脚尖，现实就能够得着传统？——试论庞德诗意在当代汉语新诗中的反响》). However, it is also important to point out that even though Yang refers to Pound's theory on Chinese characters to advocate for his own spatial poetics, his agreement with Pound is a strategic move for the sake of his current argument. As shown by "Hallucination and Coherence," a commentary Yang wrote with John Caley, the poet is aware of the insufficiencies of Pound's theory.

³² A school of poetry that obtained its label because of its employment of obscure images in resistance to the exclusive pursuit of moralism and realism in the proletarian literature during the Maoist regime. This name was derived from the official condemnation of their works as pretentiously obscure; nowadays, it is usually regarded as a neutral, standard term in literary criticism. Yang Lian is usually regarded as a leading figure in the school of Misty poetry.

³³ This anxiety is most tellingly reflected by the wide influence of Göran Greider's speech, where Greider describes Bei Dao's Misty poems as the invention of the bicycle for the second time. The speech was translated by Chen Maiping and published in *Today*, second series, no.1 (1990).

In those passages where Yang's defense of poetry turns so fervent that it leads to lyric ecstasy, he maintains that when synchronicity is contextualized in concentric circles, it can not only revive faith in literary originality and efficacy but also transform the seemingly meaningless calamities during the ultra-leftist years into poetry, which bears witness to history and preserves human sanity. He depicts concentric circles as a dynamic pattern that first shrinks to a point of intensity of meaningless and voidness before gradually releasing itself to incorporate new meaning³⁴:

在中国，随手可触的一切都与历史紧密相连。或者说，永远处在一种缠绕的时间状态之中。昨天和今天不分彼此地渗透成一片。历史又是现实，而现实又梦幻般转瞬加入历史。流逝的岁月是一所使所有人迷失在其深处的一动不动的大房子，一座迷宫，每个路口都写着“禁止通行”，但你却不得不走下去，转弯，碰壁，再转弯，再碰壁……直到所有感觉、经验、思想、语言、以至年龄被挤压成一团黑糊糊的东西。³⁵

In China, everything is closely bound to history. In other words, we are permanently in a state where time is entangled. Yesterday and today permeate each other and become inseparable. History is also reality, and reality, like a dream, suddenly transitions into history. The passage of time causes everyone to be lost in a deep, solid, big house, a labyrinth, where every crossroad says "No Entry." Yet you have to keep on walking, turning around, hitting the wall, turning around again, hitting the wall again...Until all feelings, experiences, thoughts, language, and even the lived years are compressed into a bundle of black, gluey mess.

Just before its ultimate erasure, this suppressed subjectivity struggles to expand itself:

人在行为上毫无选择时，精神上却可能获得最彻底的自由。人充分地表达自身必须以无所期待为前提。因此，他的诗只是他独自寻找的一条通往永恒之路：现在的永恒！他第二次是被自己流放到这个位置：成为囚禁他的时间的当之无愧的叛逆者、成为孤独地漫游于历史和现实交叉小径中的蒙面人。继承一种经过无数生命过滤的语言，并创造一个与这世界最隐秘的因果关系相连的超现实世界：一首诗，一个俯瞰平庸万物的奇迹！³⁶

When a man has no option to act, his spirit reaches the utmost freedom. He can only fully express himself when he has no expectations. Thus, his poetry is only the lonely road he is seeking toward eternity: the eternity of the present! He exiles himself once again to this position, becoming a real rebel of the imprisoning time and a lonely faceless man wandering at the crossing of history and reality. He inherits a language filtered by numerous lives and create a higher reality that bears the most secret causal relation to this current world—a poem,

³⁴ Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 168.

³⁵ Yang 杨, 162.

³⁶ Yang 杨, 163.

a miracle that surveys all the traces of mediocre existence!

Despite Yang's enthusiastic, even ecstatic word choices, his epic ambitions—including turning the current, transient moment into "eternity," connecting with the fundamental truth of life and language, and revealing the principles of the world's operation—are never directly attainable. They are suggested *a contrario* through the poet's struggle against his impossibility in actual writing, because of political censorship, the limitations of language and human cognition, and the self-imposed spiritual impasse. Even if unrealizable in practical writing, these ideals' embodiment in concentric shapes enables the poet to address artistic anxieties popular in his times. Specifically, he alludes to several concentric images—the labyrinth, tightening chains, imprisonment, filters, and a bird's eye view—to describe the surreal experience of time during the Maoist period, where the most intuitive sense of existing in time with some level of stability was denied by rapid, mutually contradictory, and radical political campaigns. Thanks to the synchronicity that collates the constricting and expanding momentum into concentric shapes, the trauma of the Maoist period is embodied by the tension between intellectual and even bodily confinements out of mutual persecutions among citizens, past friends, and even family members on the one hand, and an illusory sense of liberation out of the demolition of social structures, the extreme pursuit of egalitarianism in both official and unofficial discourse, and political instruments like the "four bigs" on the other hand.³⁷ With experience during the Maoist period absorbed into the concentric structure that promises aesthetic potential, past suffering finds an explanation, and current artmaking is legitimized and necessitated. In fact, as suggested by a series of absolute word choices like "every," "all," and "the utmost," Yang sublimates concentric circles into the essential structure of existence: it exposes the futility of human efforts and any means of expression in front of larger

³⁷ "Four bigs" refer to the encouragements of declaration of opinions, liberation in thinking, free debates, and big-character posters as means to democracy. These political instruments started to take shape during the Yan'an period in the 1940s and were constitutionalized in 1975. For details, see "People's Republic of China Constitution 1975," Chapter 1 Article 13.

sociopolitical changes; but at the same time, the poet believes that it is through the extreme deprivation of personal language, feelings, and subjectivity that one can realize the common essence of seemingly overwhelming instabilities and multiplicities.

Apart from the fact that a series of well-balanced concentric shapes can restore artistic pursuit and legitimize artistic creation, Yang's emphasis on their synchronicity has a practical objective: synchronicity circumvents the connotation of progression and linearity, thus distinguishing his writing from socialist writing during the Maoist era and the root-seeking aesthetics³⁸ popular in post-Mao novels. In the essay "Grinding the Mirror—Three Levels of Symmetry in Contemporary Chinese Poetry" that situates poetry writing in the mutual reflections between the traditional and the modern, language and reality, poetry and the poet,³⁹ Yang suggests that the imposition of a linear teleology led to blind policies and destruction in the Maoist period; while the root-seeking literary movement strove to salvage cultural legacies, their creation of a linear historical legacy nonetheless tended to collude with Maoist cultural policies and to replace individual critical thinking with conformity.⁴⁰

Despite the potency of the synchronic approach, Yang's interpretation of concentric circles still drifts to the diachronic side from time to time. After all, such an intricate structure of symmetry,

³⁸ By acquiescence, Yang is often characterized as a major figure in the root-seeking movement in usual critical discourse because of his epic works in the eighties.

³⁹ The title envisions a hexagonal space structured by mirrors, whose reiterative mutual reflections create layers of *mise en abyme* that further reveal a concentric structure.

⁴⁰ In Yang's own words: "So, the pursuit and expression of 'self' without an individual makes language rigid. It is only left with restrictions, losing all potentials. In the eighties, the trendy term in Chinese mainland literature is 'root-seeking,' which is exactly the opposite of its origin from the American bestseller *Roots: the Saga of an American Family*: it is not root seeking, but to be sought by the root—the traditional way of thinking that has been effaced by the rhetoric of newness in terms like 'the new society,' 'the new China,' 'the new culture,' etc. This root is highlighted by the extreme dictatorship and the blind submission during the Cultural Revolution and manifested by our destruction of cultural heritage and the unrestrained insanity within such acts. Those who want to pursue the root of suffering cannot sidestep the darkness within." The Chinese original is as follows: "于是, 没有人的探寻和表达'自我'的要求, 语言就没有了变形的动力。它只剩限制, 却丧失了可能。八十年代, 中国大陆上文学'寻根'热的潜台词, 正与这个从美国畅销书《根》借来的命名相反: 不是'寻根', 是'根'来寻你——传统思维方式, 被'新社会'、'新中国'、'新文化'……无数'新'的词藻淹没的、被'文革'极端专制和盲从的事实凸现的, 用我们外面毁坏无遗的文物和里面泛滥无边的疯狂展示的: 谁试图追问苦难的原因, 谁就不能回避这内在的黑暗。" See Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 189.

return, and embeddedness has to be observed and processed in time before it can be grasped in its entirety:

但，诗迫使你出走也迫使你返回：“现在是最遥远的”。但“现在”，又是唯一的入口：追问，总在更加“形而上下”时抵达形而上：意象——结构的表述、音乐——节奏的内在能量，诉诸直觉、思想和文字的创造力，终使我多年的漂泊被一首诗显形。⁴¹

But poetry that forces you into exile will also force you to return: "the present moment is the remotest." Yet "the present" is the only entrance: inquiring thoroughly, [one] reaches the metaphysical through the descent into the mere physical. Image—the expression of structure; musicality—the internal energy of rhythm. When they are completely registered in intuition, thoughts, words, and creativity, my years of exile finally manifest themselves through a poem.

The diachronic aspects emerge, exactly when Yang tries to saturate his metaphor with synchronic images. As he visualizes time as a closed circle where the entrance is the destination and the bottom is the top, his descriptions like “inquiring thoroughly” and “further” show this spatialization as the result of gradual realization. The diachronic tendency is increasingly pronounced in Yang’s more recent long poems. While the comparison between music and poetry in this excerpt from the mid-nineties⁴² can suggest a potential temporal flow, it emphasizes the rather mechanical musical beats. Indeed, Yang’s actual poetic practices in the nineties—especially the fifth section of *Where the Sea Stands Still* (written between 1992 and 1993) and the entire series of *Concentric Circles* (written between 1994 and 1997) —display a stubborn pursuit of symmetric arrangement. For instance, the fifth section of *Where the Sea Stands Still* contains four homonymic poems, and each contains three moves. In each poem, the various moves are about the same length; the second move (also the section in the middle) always serves as a stabilizer, constituted by stanzas of the same number of lines. In *Concentric Circles*, each poem has another poem mirroring it in form and content: for a seven-stanza poem titled “There

⁴¹ Yang 杨, 181–2.

⁴² This essay is not dated in Yang’s essay collection. Tang Xiaodu, in his analysis of Yang’s diasporic writing, dated Yang’s relevant theoretical writings to the mid-nineties. For details, see footnote 14 in Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Zhongyu Bei Dahai Mo Dao le Neibu” —— Cong Dahai Yixiang Kan Yang Lian Piaobo zhong de Xiezuo “终于被大海摸到了内部” ——从大海意象看杨炼漂泊中的写作 [“Finally Touched by the Sea from Inside”——Reading Yang’s Diasporic Writing from the Image of the Sea], Yang Lian, August 14, 2005, <https://yanglian.net/yanglian/comment.html>.

Was” (“曾在”), there is a corresponding seven-stanza poem titled “There Is” (“正在”), etc. In contrast, in *Narrative Poems*, the correspondence between poetry and music emphasizes dynamic variation in forms according to thinking and feeling.

In his foreword to *Narrative Poems*, Yang still insists on the image of concentric circles, arguing that the long poem manifests the pattern in its internal content and its synoptic role in his writing life. In his own words, it refracts his own experience into a testimony for “Chinese complex vicissitudes of reality, culture, and literature during the twentieth century” (“概括二十世纪中国复杂的现实、文化，以至文学沧桑”). Meanwhile, he views it as an orchestration of his previous major poetic projects—his poetry about Chinese local mythologies and religions, his exile in Australia and New Zealand, and his life in Europe—into a continuously self-enlarging poem that encapsulates intellectuals’ struggle for self-preservation during the Cultural Revolution, military and political expatriations in and beyond China, and the European musical tradition.⁴³ These concentric circles follow the melodious unfolding of Benjamin Britten’s cello suites. Britten’s first cello suite, i.e., Op.72, consists of six major movements framed by a double-stopped canto that returns every two movements. Likewise, the first book of Yang’s *Narrative Poems* is framed by three sections all entitled “Canto: the Ghost Composer.” These three cantos meditate on the relationship between music and life, centering on images of birth, childhood, and death respectively. Sections enveloped by these cantos are of

⁴³ While this poem aspires to be inclusive and even comprehensive in its content, it is exclusive in its imagined readership and purports to address the well-educated intellectuals, who are lauded as “the most impoverished materially speaking” but “the most affluent spiritually speaking” (“金钱的低下人” “精神的上上人”). The poet assumes a patronizing attitude to his readers, taking pride in not only his family education but also his own obscure writing style. For instance, he deems the preface of *Narrative Poems* as a compromise: on the one hand, he believes that prefaces, as a tool to make the reading process less demanding, should be avoided; on the other hand, *Narrative Poems* is an exception because it sets the paradigm for writing about family, national, and cultural history. Moreover, Yang employs self-apotheosis to grant himself the authority to execute this goal. Through a pun on his given name Lian which means “to smelt,” Yang says, “The steady flame of poetry, mysterious and enduring, ‘smelts’ out the essence of the poet” (“诗之文火，幽幽远远，‘炼’出诗人真身”). See Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 2; 8. Despite the supercilious tone, this eagerness of solidifying the intellectual community and establishing its autonomy and the venerated status can be generously interpreted as a reaction against the anti-intellectual policies and social discourse in China during the second half of the twentieth century.

uneven length: the first canto leads six sections, the second leads eight, and the third leads ten. In sections corresponding to expressive movements like the Lamento, Yang's images tend to be nostalgic and idyllic; in sections corresponding to percussive movements like the Serenata where all notes are plucked, Yang's narration grows eventful.

As *Narrative Poems* continues to evolve, it becomes evident that although Yang still insists on his understanding of concentric circles as drilling into some essential notions of human existence, his poeticization of this geometry indicates a meticulous consideration of how sound, words, thinking, and feeling develop in time, thus striving for an organic integration between formal constraints and the content. For instance, the second book of *Narrative Poems* corresponds to Britten's Cello Suite No.2, Op.80, both consisting of five movements. Yang's style varies radically across these movements. When the tempo for the corresponding musical section is marked as "Largo," Yang answers with a lengthy section of eight pages of dense verse. When the tempo shifts to "Allegro molto," the section is divided into seven discrete scenes, each concerning a poet or artist assuming a particular attitude toward dictatorship ranging from Qu Yuan's martyrdom to Thucydides's exile and to more recent incidents like Christa Wolf's cooperation with and reservations about the East German government. These rapid shifts in time and space echo the accumulating intensity of the music. The third book of *Narrative Poems* contains short sections filled with fragmented, grotesque, and even apocalyptic images appearing one after another in a dazzling way, reproducing the effect of the uninterrupted unfolding of the nine movements in Britten's Cello Suite No.3, Op.87. Notably, Yang's poetic rendering includes ten sections: the final extra section, titled "Empty Book—Overflowing Book in the Fire," alternates between seven-line stanzas and three-line ones, which are numbers of completion and genesis in the

Bible and the *Book of Change*. This final section thus corresponds to the silence after the cello performance, when sublimity and emptiness overwhelm the audience simultaneously.⁴⁴

The alternation between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on concentric shapes suggests the Hejinian's and Yang's divided commitments regarding the relation between words and the world. On the one hand, the synchronic gaze focuses the poets and readers on concentric patterns' orderliness, suggests a potential of infinite self-generation, and creates a tunnel visual effect implying depth. These visual effects offer convenient metaphors for literature that purports to be an organic whole, an embodiment of some universal and perpetual dynamics, and a revelation of the fundamental structure of reality. On the other hand, diachronic observations ground viewers in the discrete and periodic qualities of concentric shapes, reminding us of gaps, repetitions, adjustments, and mechanical and even compulsive reinforcement of particular patterns over and over. These qualities are reflected by literature that casts light on the selective nature of emplotment, the mundaneness of the depicted life, the difficulties and even impossibilities of identifying an absolute ground of knowing, and the arbitrariness of the selected medium of observing and representing. Hejinian dwells in the latter perspective most of the time, while presenting the former as an unattainable end that discloses itself from time to time to encourage innovations in language and form; Yang writes in the former mode most of the time, while regarding the latter as the hidden essence of writing that reveals itself only when language and form are driven to the extreme of intelligibility. In the rest of the chapter, I will analyze how these two sets of beliefs play out, when miscellaneous quotidian details and historical events contract into poetic subjectivities in *My Life* and *Narrative Poems*. Through the centripetal crafting of subjectivity, the succession of events reveals depth from time to time, enacting reflections

⁴⁴ Gerhard Schultz once adapted *My Life*, especially the scene of a mistaken air raid alarm during the Cold War, into a musical piece called "Lights that were Visible." The recurring rhythm imitates the circling of a plane in the air as well as Hejinian's and Schultz's geometric imagination of memories. As Schultz proposes: "When reading through [Hejinian's] memories, I so often wound up in my own." For the musical score and the musician's reflection, see Rod Smith and Jen Hofer, eds., *Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian* (Edge Books, 2016), 169–84. For Hejinian's original text, see Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Green Integer, 2002), 10–11.

on sociopolitical happenings while preserving heightened perspectives, so that personal memories, critical insights, poetic creativity, interpersonal connections, and social commitments do not appear completely transient and vulnerable. Based on these centripetally constructed subjectivities, I further argue that Hejinian and Yang adopt centrifugal expansion that is often incomplete and distorted to condition the generalizability from the personal to the social and the present to the historical. As a strategy to approach the poets' epic ambitions negatively and processually, the concentric shapes manifest an ethic of acknowledgment, where the negative approach is not a reluctant compromise. Instead, it is a conscious preservation of the self and the other that delineates the limit of compassion and mutual understanding in order to facilitate them.

Centripetal Subjectification

Concentric shapes frequently appear in scholarship discussing how Hejinian reconciles the divergent poetic impulses of immersing herself in time versus elevating herself above time. Carla Billitteri argues that the two sets of connotations are the metaphysical core and the actual praxis of Hejinian's epistemology, respectively.⁴⁵ What serves as "the middle" is "the epistemic engine of uncertainty," while the poem's shrinking and expanding in time is "punctuated by specific and recurrent tropes: enjambment, ellipses, metonym."⁴⁶ David Jarraway argues that while "digressions, versions, and volumes" in *My Life* reflect the instability and indeterminacy of reality, which can only be represented through generative and processual writing in time, the motivation for this conception of reality and words is the absence of a solid, introspective subjectivity, or the absence of a substantial center.⁴⁷ Following Ron Silliman, Jarraway phrases this absence as "a primal lack" and deepens the atemporal connotation in his reading through the image of concentric "mirrorlike black holes," which

⁴⁵ Smith and Hofer, eds., *Aerial 10*, 118.

⁴⁶ Smith and Hofer, 118.

⁴⁷ David R. Jarraway, "'My Life' through the Eighties: The Exemplary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Lyn Hejinian," *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 2 (1992): 329.

absorb Hejinian's attempts to describe reality "into bottomless pits."⁴⁸ As Silliman and Jaraway anchor the immutable and the fundamental in Hejinian's construction of poetic subjectivity, Bronwen Tate suggests that it is rooted in the poet's subject matter, i.e., the everyday life in the second half of the twentieth century. According to Tate, Hejinian's repetition captures the periodic household chores. Establishing a structural analogy between her numerical form and domesticity, Tate presents Hejinian's form as fundamental and inevitable.⁴⁹ Yet as Tate turns from the analysis of repetition to metonym in *My Life*, a rhetorical trope requiring close observation of how individual phrases and sentences are strung together, the critic diagnoses that both the poem's form and the everyday it strives to depict are linguistic and social constructs replete with inconsistencies and randomness. Cole Swensen visualizes *My Life* as "an erosion of the timeline of the past into an ever-expanding field," again evoking concentric shapes' flexible orientation and size enabled their symmetry and embeddedness.⁵⁰ Swensen depicts memory as simultaneously in and above time: remembrance is not only a retrospective mind overseeing the past but also the enactment of some version of the past in the present moment, or a "re-setting of time back to zero [...] every time something is remembered" in Swensen's own words.⁵¹ In this metaphor, lived experience in time is contracted into a point "zero," which opens up a heightened—if not transcendent—temporality.

These multiple usages of concentric shapes point toward Hejinian's view of memories. As the shared structure for thematic, rhetorical, and epistemic readings of *My Life*, concentric arrangements are operative on levels ranging from plain narratives to figurative images, philosophical reflections, and even existential abyss. The shifts among these cognitive levels are sometimes smooth and other times abrupt, as the poet investigates when and where lived experience invite or resist poetic

⁴⁸ Jaraway, 329.

⁴⁹ Bronwen Tate, "The Day and the Life: Gender and the Quotidian in Long Poems by Bernadette Mayer and Lyn Hejinian," *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 1 (2016): 42–64.

⁵⁰ Swensen, "Re-Membering Time in Hejinian's 'My Life,'" 96.

⁵¹ Swensen, 97.

processing and how concrete notions of the self emerge through remembrance. As we will analyze in detail, in *My Life*, poetic subjectivity takes a plural, fragmented, and protean form depending on how the poet's discrete memories aggregate into recognizable linguistic patterns. In the ninth section of *My Life* in the 1987 edition, for example, Hejinian maneuvers her memories analytically, synesthetically, socio-politically, and symbolically. The section begins as follows:

From here each day seems like a little boat and all the days are swept and tilted back and forth across an immense and distant bay of blue, gray, green. We were like plump birds along the shore, caught by the mortal breaks. Dimension, longevity, color, and pleasure. So that if I tell you my intentions, I force myself to maintain those intentions. I wanted to see a mountain lion but had to content myself with a raccoon. The dog was jealous and pretended to limp. The fog was so fine that it was more like an odor than a texture in the air, an odor of seaweed and roses growing so remarkably red and pink and yellow in that sandy soil. There was something almost religious about it, something idolatrous, something insufficient. That was the break in my sentiments, resembling waves, which I might have longed to recover. I think they were cicadas, though off the trees.⁵²

The first three sentences already build up a concentric pattern: water in the bay moves orbitally; as it approximates the shoreline, it breaks down to imitate the shoreline's contour. Within this concentricity, the poet identifies a logical induction from "each" to "all": the sinuous trace of a single boat vanishes in the simultaneous movements of numerous boats and further in the extended conjecture about the view of "an immense and distant bay" beyond the horizon. As the concretely lived experience is pushed into distance, the originally abstract and vague representation of mortality (the blue yonder) is forced to the foreground (the vulnerable birds and the border between the water and the land), as if there exists a contraposition in the metaphorical system of sea and life. Confirming this contrapositive logical relation, the list of "dimension, longevity, color, and pleasure" prioritizes the abstract senses and defers the embodied ones. Meanwhile, since the list purports to be a complete, stand-alone syntactic unit, the listed items also claim referential power as if these different senses of life are

⁵² Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Green Integer, 2002), 35. This is a reprint of *My Life* (Sun & Moon Press, 1987). Besides the concern that this version is comparatively accessible, I choose it for reference because of a coincidence: the reprint belongs to the Marjorie G. Perloff Series of International Poetry. According to the series' list page, another book published in the same series in the same year is Yang Lian's early long poem *Yi*.

individually identifiable and arrangeable. What kind of poetic subjectivity is implied by this logic-driven structure of memories? We notice self-alienation through the poet's changing of tenses, where a transcendent perspective finds itself in an enigmatic "here" and indifferently inspects the vulnerable self living in time. Carrying an authoritative connotation, this logic-oriented structure of memory compels the poet to not only sustain the logical transformation in language for as long as possible but also insist on her prediction about life. However, the impeccable reasoning is interrupted by a childish voice from the poet's nine-year-old self, where self-persuasion falls short in front of disappointment ("I wanted to see a mountain lion but had to content myself with a raccoon"). As shown by the contrastive tone in the two self-reflexive phrases "I force myself" and "[I] had to content myself," the determined and even triumphant subjectivity fails to address the inevitable compromise one needs to learn to make in socialization.

Given the aloofness in the logical organization of memories, Hejinian constructs an alternative concentric pattern based on sensual engagements with the external material world: through the "fine" touch, the refreshing smell, the splendid color, and back to a more distinct texture with some granularity, the poet's circular syntax creates an all-encompassing experience. This synesthetic structure is progressively vivid in its descriptive attempts, i.e., from an abstract adjective of "fine" to metaphors and subjective feelings and steadily narrows down to their shared center—the fog. Memories embellished by such imagery lead to a longing for feelings. In the parallelism of "something almost religious about it, something idolatrous, something insufficient," Hejinian fuses available metaphors together regardless of their logical and moral compatibility. Even the inaccuracy of language (as shown by "almost") is not attacked as a logical defect but viewed as another chance to intensify the affect of the excerpt through an apocalyptic "break." In contrast to the determined, self-disciplined subjectivity in the previous case, here, we find a sentimental subjectivity indulging itself in emotive metaphors and hesitant to take action. There is hardly a distinct subject of "I" in these

sentences, let alone strong, willful verbs like "force" and "want." Even the sentence "I might have longed to recover," which is the closest this emotional subjectivity can get toward taking action, is cast as a past potential suggesting uncertainty and passivity.

The sentence following the concentric pattern of turbulent emotions, namely "I think they were cicadas, though off the trees," resumes the poet's childhood lesson in making compromises. While our empirical knowledge of raccoons' sound invites us to consider the pronoun "they" as referring to the animals, syntactically speaking, the only plural noun in the second half of the quoted passage is "sentiments." It is only after words have reproduced the blurry ambiance of that day—either because of the vagueness of memories where things appear unclear or because of the precision of memories where even details like the weather are recalled—that the poet can see through the eyes of her childhood self with sincere curiosity toward the world. Even though the subjectivity arising from the synesthetic concentricity is frail, it evokes enlivening metaphors to soothe the disappointment in the logical processing of memories and transforms the premise-like equivalence between day and boat into an ingenious image. When recalled, memories create new emotional turbulence resounding across the passage of time, like ripples in water and sound waves of cicadas.

Halfway into the ninth section of *My Life*, another concentric organization emerges in the account of an idyllic trip. Hejinian interweaves multiple perspectives including her childhood self, her adult self, her mother, and her imagined readers that form a vague "we," inquiring how language ranging from clichés to profound symbolism contributes to our situation of ourselves in social dynamics:

As for we who "love to be astonished," I'm not your maid I'm your mother. Little sailboats were capsizing in the bay. It didn't seem the least bit amazing that they had tunneled the highway through the living redwood tree, for in so doing they had changed the tree into the tunnel, made it something it had not been before, and separated it forever from any other tree. The universal is animated by individuality.⁵³

⁵³ Hejinian, 37.

A tunnel assumes the shape of a series of shrinking concentric semicircles. As a usual motif for the process where characters undergo fundamental changes in fairy tales, the iconic California drive-through trees demystify this procedure as a linguistic construct. Concentric shapes also find other expressions in the passage: it visualizes the process in which the quotidian and even mundane life described in clichés can suddenly open up to depth, providing an extensive range of available vehicles for growth and identity formation besides the tunnel motif. For instance, repeated many times throughout the long poem, the first phrase of the quote above highlights the grammatical role of “we” in the clause rather than that in the main sentence (which would be “As for those of us who ‘love to be astonished’”). In the second part of the same sentence, the clichéd complaint from the mother is not enclosed in quotation marks, but a seemingly genuine expression of shock is. Since in autobiography, “I” is both the object of being written and the subject that writes, these two unusual textual features lead to a series of recursive questions: does the unquoted, clichéd reprimand suggest that during the poet’s childhood, she has already internalized a female identity torn between a selfless care provider and an exploited woman trying to regain authority, with both possibilities of womanhood equally structured by social discourse? Does the quoted phrase hint at a stereotyping of women as hysterical and ignorant, which is ironically confirmed by the mother’s astonishment at her children’s lack of respect? As for the grammatically erroneous pronoun of “we,” does it suggest a rejection of stereotyping by assuming the normative form to suggest agency, or does it take on the normative form only to imply that the speaker finds it natural to identify with the stereotype? These multiple objectifications and subjectivations nest into a developing consciousness of the self as well as its linguistic and social context.

In addition to social identities, the formation of poetic symbols is investigated, as seemingly innocuous and even mechanical repetitions patiently sketch out a notion with social and literary bearings. The second sentence quoted above sounds like a sentence-building exercise suitable for a

nine-year-old: the second and the fourth clauses repeat the first and the third in meaning, with variations in parts of speech (the verb “tunnel” into a noun) and synonyms (“not before” into “forever”). Yet these paraphrases turn an action irreproducible in time and space into a stable noun, which is further embellished as a self-sufficient symbol capable of being imagined out of its immediate context. Demonstrating how effective imagery overrides logic, the poet’s proposal of the interchangeability between “individuality” and “universality” as the outcome of this constructivist understanding of meaning making invites skepticism: if distinct subjectivities and their resulting knowledge of their worlds form a mutually endorsing relationship, does it mean that aesthetic enjoyments in this process are artificial and arbitrary? In answering this question, Hejinian immediately presents what an utterly artificial and arbitrary symbol making would look like: “A name trimmed with colored ribbons. Shaped by the world since five-forty-one. They sing funny little numbers all praising the numerous pleasures.”⁵⁴ Without delicate repetitions and linguistic innovations gradually specifying the symbol to develop knowledge of the observed and the observer, these sentences reduce the referred item into a set of superficial and broad impressions, or “numerous pleasures” as the poet says.

In the examples discussed so far, concentric structures established in the diachronic succession of words and sentences fetishize their subject matter recursively until there emerges a distinct, self-sufficient, and pinpointable central notion. However, these consolidated notions do not reflect the synchronic imagination of concentric shapes as impeccable and timeless wisdom. As the long poem evolves, both in the same edition and across different editions, previously established centers may turn porous and vice versa. For instance, in the following temporal unit, namely the tenth section of *My Life*, some fragmented memories about equestrian competitions are recorded, requiring us to reevaluate information that we have just deemed as a perfunctory description: “A name trimmed with

⁵⁴ In later versions, “five-forty-one” is turned into “nineteen-five-forty-one,” further emphasizing the number’s random nature. For details, compare *My Life*, 37 and “What’s Missing from My Life,” 135.

colored ribbons. At the circus men were selling live chameleons which wore tiny collars and were attached to red and yellow ribbons that one could pin to one's dress or shirt as a living jewel. As for we who 'love to be astonished,' mother love."⁵⁵ On the one hand, a series of embedding collars and ribbons—animals in costumes performing on the stage, the dressed-up audience, and the chameleons wriggling on the ribbons—are modeled into a concentric and ironic representation of identity. On the other hand, the original interrogation of socially structured femininity is constricted into a typical maternal image characterized by anxiety and over-protection. This expansion and shrinkage of specific motifs turn even more prominent, if we ask how the passage evolves over the years. In the colossal eighty-sentence version of the ninth section, for instance, the added sentences connect initially scattered details through increasingly referential language, which periodically sways between an acceptance of the current sociopolitical conditions fostered both subtly (through "funny" superficial popular music) and forcefully (through xenophobia) and a craving for an independent and even enclosed notion of the self:⁵⁶

The universal is animated by individuality. To whom did the term "prejudiced," overheard from my parents' bedroom, apply? A name trimmed with colored ribbons. Shaped by the world since nineteen-five-forty-one. My mother and father had been added to my reading. They sing funny little numbers all praising the numerous pleasures. They insisted on the importance, the primacy, of "inner resources" and "inner qualities of mind," so that one could "bear up" under any circumstances. Nothing can prepare one for the sight of oneself in a mirror, no one is as unflatteringly represented in a photograph than I, more than half a century later, leaning forward eagerly, it being painful to stand straight. The next morning we discovered scratched into the newly painted surface of the front porch the crudely drawn message, *Fuck You*.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hejinian, *My Life*, 40.

⁵⁶ Presented in the context of Hejinian's article "What's Missing from *My Life*," which seeks to connect the long poem with the avant-garde agenda of writing, this eighty-sentence version specifically attends to the relationship among the personal, the public, and the historical. Evidently, concentric shapes' narrowing down to a seemingly enclosed self and broadening up into an open space where different needs and emotions can find their place provide Hejinian with a convenient structure to show why "the things that are ostensibly missing from *My Life* are in fact present in it." See Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments*, 115.

⁵⁷ Hejinian, 134.

Here, the centers of many previous concentric patterns are obliquely evoked, including critical reasoning, social consciousness, and an eagerness to single out certain symbols to understand the changing world. But what is the significance of fragmentizing previous concentric shapes with new sentences and recombining them into a new concentric structure with the vulnerable self at the center, a self that suffers physical pain, struggles to maintain self-integrity, and is alienated by the neighbors? In “The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography,” Louis Renza argues that autobiography is a distinct act whose significations reside beyond the narratives it produces. Its factual base—namely the author’s own experience and thoughts—is subverted once it is put into words, because the self that writes differs from the self being written. Inhabiting different temporality, the former’s retrospective representation of the latter can never recover the latter. Meanwhile, autobiography’s fictional aspect—namely as a narrative taking shape in the flow of language here and now—is undermined because, unlike usual fictions that assume the existence of an apparitional reader who will confirm the imaginative verifiability by suspending one’s disbelief as the narrative develops, autobiography not only remains unverifiable but also assumes the absence of a reader. In other words, the autobiographer existing in the time of writing must highlight his or her existence as the sole authority for the selection and presentation of materials. Yet because of the previous corollary, the writing self cannot claim this authority unproblematically.⁵⁸

Hejinian’s concentric structures complicate the problem even further: instead of two relatively consolidated selves separated by time and space, the poet proposes a self for each additional year, with all of them reading, commenting on, and fusing with each other. The multiple temporal points, the factual and the fictional, the phenomenological and the retrospective, and the narrative and the reflective are all swirled together as an ongoing discursive act. *My Life* does not rely on a stable factual base. First, not only are empirical details results of the concentric patterning in language, but they

⁵⁸ Louis A Renza, “The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography,” *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 1–26.

further participate in this patterning to modify and enrich themselves ceaselessly. Second, by presenting life as a constructivist project that can never exhaust its full potential, the long poem does not proceed through soliciting belief and verification from the readers or the poet. On the contrary, it invites us to question those notions where we tend to deposit our beliefs—including distinct subjectivities, social relations, authentic voices, and empirical details with deep connotations that seem to ground our being—by presenting them as temporary and artificial formal effects. As a result, *My Life* initiates a unique intersubjective process, where the writer's own fragmented consciousness disseminated over several decades converges into both the primary reader and the writer of this autobiography. Since in this way the writer becomes less embodied and the reader becomes less apparitional, Renza's paradox about the divided ego in autobiography is resolved by a fuzzy entity that is too porous to be divided.

The centers that Hejinian's concentric patterning shrinks toward are snapshots of subjectivity in the sense that they present concrete focal points for observing and responding to the outer world as an individual. In Yang's *Narrative Poems*, the centers emerging through centripetal delineation are often impersonal principles, where events of all time converge. This difference is already evident by the role of families in these poems. In "What's Missing from *My Life*," an essay that explicates the dynamic relationship between the poet's personal memories and their sociopolitical context⁵⁹, Hejinian writes, "Barrett Watten once proposed to me that the book is ultimately about the family. There is something to that claim, and it's under consideration in 'What's Missing from *My Life*.' But the unfolding of a life and the subjectivity that gets constructed in the course of it take place within

⁵⁹ For Hejinian, there exists a continuous reality independent of writing. Yet the limitation of human cognition and human language compels us to participate in the continuous reality through discontinuous phenomenological experience and incoherent subjectivities. See Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 77. She further argues that poetic impulse means a desire to extend and expand "the scope and continuity" of subjective consciousness to recognize the reality that is neither completely intelligible nor completely expressible. This situating of the poetic impulse between the limited language and the expansive world resonates with my discussion of the poet's negative approach to epic at the beginning of this chapter.

relationships that extend far beyond the familial.”⁶⁰ The poet’s own interpretation is valid in the sense that even though there are extensive references to her family members in the poem, her interactions with them are illustrations of her relationship with the wider world in general. But for Yang who grew up during the Maoist period, where families were regarded as capitalist products that needed to be disintegrated to create real socialist subjects, poetically valorizing the notion of family is a political resistance. This trope reclaims the interpersonal connections and cultural bonds demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike the proliferation of the subject “I” in *My Life*, *Narrative Poems* are motivated with kinship terms (e.g., “father,” “mother,” and “second aunt”),⁶¹ a collective “we” that temporarily unifies the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic, a “you” that directly addresses readers, as well as other historical figures in and beyond China.⁶² Even in moments of self-reflection, the poet tends to address himself in the second or third-person singular, a deliberate split of the self to establish further interpersonal connections through interpellating other people who may share similar experience⁶³. By corollary, Yang’s centripetal momentum usually narrows down to a center of metaphysical profundity or emotional ecstasy that is stable, sharable, and even revelatory, so that it can serve as the foundation for interpersonal connections in and beyond the long poem.

Besides its correspondence to Britten’s cello suites, *Narrative Poems* follows a chronological order in its first two volumes, sequentially presenting Yang’s birth in Switzerland when his parents

⁶⁰ Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments*, 114.

⁶¹ Technically speaking, the second aunt refers to the nanny in Yang’s family.

⁶² The only exception is in “Narrative Poems of Water Mint II—Elegies of Love”(“水薄荷叙事诗（二）——爱情哀歌”), where we find regular employment of the first person singular.

⁶³ According to Chee Lay Tan’s stylometric analysis of pronouns in Yang’s poetry, there is a significant shift from privileging the individual voice and the first person into privileging second-person perspectives after Yang’s exile. See Chee Lay Tan, *Constructing a System of Irregularities: The Poetry of Bei Dao, Yang Lian, and Duoduo* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 168–9.

were diplomatic personnel stationed in Bern⁶⁴, the family's return to Beijing, his experience as a sent-down youth in the countryside of Beijing, and the exile of Yang and his wife Yo Yo⁶⁵ after the Tiananmen protests in 1989. In the third volume, Yang adopts a dense and abstract style and presents a series of metaphysical discussions of poetry and history. Concentric circles can be identified both locally (as reflected by Yang's construction of particular images and scenes) and globally (as reflected by his recurring fetishizing of specific symbols throughout the long poem). In the very beginning of the long poem, for instance, the poet already experiments with topological transformations of the concentric circles. As his incessant figuration is just about to pin down a shared center, this emerging center is turned inside out to encompass the outmost periphery:

这看不见的 鬼魂写下的节奏
 搭建一座红色演奏厅
 子宫中小嘴抿着鲜红的淤泥
 蛆虫似的五指 拱出就抓着母亲
 抓紧一页热烘烘的乐谱
 珍珠白的粘液涂满一把大提琴
 猛地拉响 胎儿都挂在音符上

聆听 起点上沉溺的结构⁶⁶

This invisible tempo written by the ghost
 Builds a red concert hall
 The little mouth in the uterus sips the scarlet mud
 Fingers like maggots grab the mother once he pulls himself out
 Seize a page of warm music score
 The pearl white mucus covers the cello
 Suddenly played the fetuses were hung on the musical notes

⁶⁴ Several major literary platforms that have published Yang's poems and interviews date the family's return to Beijing to when Yang was six years old. However, according to Yang's essay about his father as well as *Narrative Poems*, the family returned to Beijing either at the end of 1955 or in the beginning of 1956. See, for instance, Yang's own introduction to "Elegies of Homeland" ("故乡哀歌"), an excerpt of *Narrative Poems* which he published online separately: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/15hxFB3DPCB7Q6fBdtTAyg>

⁶⁵ In the poem, the exile starts literally and geographically, as readers obtain descriptions of Yang and Yo Yo's confusion and struggle in settling down in New Zealand, Australia, and Europe. The exile soon turns metaphorical and cultural, for Yang connects his experience with other social outcasts to further marginalize his thinking and language.

⁶⁶ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 4.

Listen to the overwhelming structure in the beginning

These lines demonstrate how something initially invisible and ineffable (i.e., the empty space at the beginning of the first line) manifests itself through the aggregation of metonymic symbols with periodic returns. The ephemeral apparitional rhythm is spatialized into a concert hall, which is further metaphorized as the uterus; with the labor scene obliquely delivered as the drawing of a bow on the cello, the cello inherits the uterus's generative power and fills the empty apparitional rhythm with a melody. The circularity of the six unindented lines operates on multiple dimensions. Affectively speaking, hearing, sight, taste, and touch are named and enacted one by one, and after reaching the sensual climax of giving birth, all the awakened senses are condensed back into a single sense, that of hearing. From lines two to four, a musical scene is transformed into a parturition, and in lines five to seven, life is converted back to musical notes. As for the two indented lines at the beginning and the end of the quoted excerpt, they fulfill each other: the first line turns the invisible into the audible, and the last line turns the audible into the visible. Most importantly, when various round containers nesting into an ear—or a synecdoche of the protagonist's birth that provides a concrete body and mind to reflect and reflect on the turbulent years of the second half of the twentieth century—this ear is soon refigured as the container of “the indulging structure in the beginning.” It reversely envelopes all other circular containers depicted so far, turning receptive to a vast universe that can only be negatively expressed by the empty space preceding the last line.

If the tension between specificity and universality is not particularly striking in this case because all the images appear impersonal, this assumption would fall apart if we consider the fact that this poem belongs to a sequence called “Photo Album One:/ 1955. 2. 22——1955. 5. 4. / Switzerland, Bern.” (“照相册之一： / 1955. 2. 22——1955. 5. 4. / 瑞士，伯尔尼。”)——a title that is presented as a lineated verse, as if the importance and suggestiveness of these objects, dates, and places

were self-evident. The verses in the sequence correspond to an album curated by Yang's mother, and those dates and the place in the sequence title are Yang's mother's annotations. Specifically, the dates marked Yang's birth and the first seventy days of his life which were spent in Switzerland. The end date, according to Yang's (historically erroneous) account in the foreword, almost coincides with the date when the cellist Pablo Casals, for whom Britten wrote the cello suites, played cello in France after eighteen years' silence in protest to Francoist Spain.⁶⁷ Yang dates Casal's performance to May 15th, 1955, but presumably, the poet is referring to the first Festival Pablo Casals de Prades in June 1950⁶⁸. The date May 4th, in addition to resonating with the famous historical event of the May Fourth Movement that is ingrained in Chinese collective memory, further foreshadows the date that Yang was sent down to the countryside to be reeducated, a turning point of his life which he recalls with a piece titled "Huangtudian South, May 4th, 1974" ("黄土南店, 一九七四年五月四日") in *Narrative Poems*. In other words, detached and non-referential as Yang's depictions sometimes seem, the birth scene in the beginning of the long poem alludes to Yang's awakening to political conflict, the initiation of a critical mind, and the beginning of his poetic resistance—all are critical moments in his life. Personally significant though these incidents are, Yang does not hesitate to purify them into abstract notions devoid of time, place, emotions, and events.

The more narrative sections of the long poem are also organized by miscellaneous images with increasingly conspicuous symbolism. In depicting his mother's sudden death in 1976, which remains one of Yang's deepest regrets for he was being re-educated in the countryside at that moment and did not return in time for the final farewell,⁶⁹ the poet becomes a detached external narrator. His senses of time, space, and emotions are all diffused in the vast sea—which, similar to symbols like the music

⁶⁷ Yang 杨, 5.

⁶⁸ See <https://prades-festival-casals.com/en/le-festival-historique/> for more information.

⁶⁹ For how this incident turned Yang into a poet, see his essay "The First Retrospection" (《第一次回顾》).

and the structure already discussed, serves as a fundamental expression of human existence capable of accommodating all happenings and reflections:

她的手抚摸 死后还抚摸
深海里一枝枝白珊瑚
被层层动荡的蓝折射

冷如精选的字 给儿子写第一封家书
亲笔的 声声耳语中海水冲刷
海流翻阅一张小脸的插图

跟随笔划 一页页长大
一滴血被称为爱 从开端起
就稔熟每天粘稠一点的语法

儿子的回信只能逆着时间投递
儿子的目光修改阅读的方向
读到 一场病抖着捧不住一个字

她的手断了 她的海悬在纸上
隔开一寸远 墨迹的蓝更耀眼
体温凝进这个没有风能翻动的地方

珊瑚灯 衬着血丝编织的傍晚
淡淡照出一首诗分娩的时刻
当所有语言响应一句梗在心里的遗言⁷⁰

Her hands fondle still fondling after death
The stems of white corals deep in the sea
Are refracted by layers of wobbling blue

Cold as the carefully selected words the first letter sent to the son from home
Written by hand those whispers are flushed away by sea waves
The sea waves browse through the illustrations of the little face

Alongside the strokes of the characters growing up page by page

⁷⁰ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 8.

A drop of blood called love since the very beginning
Is acquainted with the grammar that thickens day by day

The son's reply can only be delivered against the flow of the time
The son's gaze revises the direction of reading
Reading until a trembling disease that can no longer hold any character in hand

Her hand is broken Her sea is suspended on paper
Separated by an inch The blue of the ink is more dazzling
The warmth of the body is crystalized into this place that wind cannot turn over

The corals' light glows upon the dusk woven by blood streaks
Faintly illuminating a poem at the moment of childbirth
When the whole of language resounds with those parting words that stick in the heart

These stanzas constitute a section called “Mother’s Handwriting” (“母亲的手迹”), where incessant figuration spirally elevates constituents of a concrete scene of writing—including the mother’s hand, ink, and the photo album—into an imagined ideal poem that is comprehensive and autonomous. We can identify multiple threads of dematerialization and essentialization: from the mother’s gentle hand to the less lively corals and to the luminescent glow of the corals with mysterious and timeless beauty; from ink (“the blueness of the ink”) to the sea and the turbulent history (“layers of wobbling blue”); from leaves of letters and photo albums to the passage of time (“growing up page by page”) to the multiplication of significations (“the grammar that thickens itself day by day”). These increasingly disembodied images together spatialize the passage of time, in accordance with Yang’s spatial poetics, by mapping time onto the depth of the sea—which is turbulent on the surface and motionless at the bottom—as well as the linear progression of words on paper—whose reversal results in the failure of language (“can no longer hold any character in hand”). But unlike the concentric structures in Hejinian’s *My Life* that narrow down into subjectivities (however partial) that experience reality in specific ways, Yang’s concentric structures amount to a static moment where the emotional exchange between the mother and the son is suspended. The poet’s trauma is crystalized into an inevitable and

even divinely imposed (given the obvious reference to the biblical episode of the crossing of the Red Sea) experience. While this gap is incorrigible, it leads to the conception of a poem encapsulating “the whole of language” to match the unspeakable regret. Apparently, the poet is hinting at a perfect poem that cannot practically be written. What is at stake is the fact that this ideal poem is conceived by neither specific individual like Yang or his mother, nor the more impersonal notions of human beings like mother and son. It is generated by the correlation of the various symbols, all of which are abstracted by Yang’s concentric circles to suggest a lasting maternal tenderness that sets off the profound violence and the grotesque beauty of reality.

As mentioned earlier, *Narrative Poems* already deviates from Yang’s early triumphant epic ambition aiming for establishing transcendent order. But “Mother’s Handwriting” resonates with many of the tropes characterizing the poet’s early works in the eighties and nineties, including a voice capable of appropriating all available cultural resources, the construction of a self-sufficient and geometrically appealing system, and the projection of ideal writing. In his own words, these techniques establish poetry “this self-sufficient substance, embodying the qualities of the material and the spiritual as well as perpetual movement and stasis” (“这个自足的实体，兼具物质与精神的双重特性，永远运动而又静止”).⁷¹ In fact, were the poet still writing in his early mindset, the ending of this short piece could have served as the ultimate resolution on the topic of his mother’s death. Although their impressive scope, dazzling symbols, and overwhelming lyricism and vision shocked the Chinese literary field on their initial appearances, Yang’s early epic poems, especially “Ritualization of the Soul” (1985) and *Yi* (1994), are controversial. Li Zhensheng, at the end of the 1990s, describes Yang’s style as “despotically” and “violently” rearranging images and recombining syntax to create a form “with greatly enlarged capacity” that seems to incorporate all things and ideas. Given Yang’s disregard of

⁷¹ Yang, 杨, 161

usual syntax, meaning of words, and the original context of his cultural images as if he were “the Creator” and “a sage who has comprehended all the secret of human survival,” Li generously interprets this “arrogant tone” as the result of a “latent mental dilemma”: “the rejection and disappointment of the current cultural and living condition” drives the poet to “reconstruct a world where he can belong through his frenetic fantasy of the distant past.”⁷² Yet Li also points out that this overwhelming style, which was inherited by the so-called “wholism” school of poetry (“整体主义”) in the mid-eighties, is often disorienting, self-indulging, and intimidating in effect yet hollow in meaning.⁷³ In a highly critical but meticulous manner, Chan Tah Wei shows why Yang’s early epics deliberately reject interpretation and indulge readers in pure emotional shocks and ecstasies: an effort to unpack the referential meaning of the poet’s symbols would reveal that Yang’s cultural writing is a mere linguistic game that not only lacks historical accuracy but also fails to organically integrate history into contemporary cultural identity.⁷⁴ These insightful critiques are less applicable to *Narrative Poems*. Even though the long poem still synchronically fetishizes certain idealist notions to suspend them beyond time and space as shown in “Mother’s Handwriting,” the poet soon disintegrates them back into discrete happenings in specific time and space.

⁷² Original: “杨炼所擅长的这种处置词语的方式，这种以坚定无疑的必然之手驾驭词语，专断地撕裂本来彼此连贯完整的语象，或者相反，把彼此根本无缘的物象强行扭集在一起，即对语言采取施暴性行动的结果，却造成一种涵盖吞吐量大大扩增的诗体[...] 杨炼富有煽动力和外表狂暴的语词结构，则显然表达了这样一种隐潜着的意识困境，那便是对文明和生存的现状的失望和拒绝，他要从对远古的幻想和狂想中，重新构筑一个能使自己有所归属的世界。正是凭藉这种施暴性的语词模式，如同造物主一样，杨炼用一种阅尽人类全部生存奥秘的智者的高傲语气，为这个世界命名或重新命名，并宣谕人们在这个世界上生活这件事之所以还能够被人接受和忍受的各种道理。”Li Zhensheng 李振声, *Jijie Lunhuan: Di Sandai Shi Xulun* 季节轮换：第三代诗叙论 [The Cycle of the Seasons: A Discussion of the Third Generation Poetry], Series on Modern Chinese Literary Theory (Fudan University Press, 2008), 13–4.

⁷³ Li 李, 13–6.

⁷⁴ Chen describes Yang’s poetry as a labyrinth, where Yang’s own poetics and practices form a circular, teleological self-justification that resists external, critical engagements. See Chan Tah Wei 陈大为, “Xiangshang Xiujian de Feixu—Lun Yang Lian Shige de Zhishi Migong” 向上修建的废墟——论杨炼诗歌的知识迷宫 [Ruins Upbuilt: On the Knowledge Maze in Yang Lian’s Poetry], *Soochow Academic Research*, no. 4 (2018): 13–27.

“Mother’s Handwriting” foreshadows Yang’s mother’s death from the moment when she curated the family photo album. When the narrative time of the long poem actually reaches the point of her death in 1976, the ideal and complete poem manifesting the fundamental beauty of both love and suffering at the end of “Mother’s Handwriting” is diachronically diffused into the poet’s repetitive failings in mourning for over thirty years. The unmergeable nature of these particular temporal spaces expresses how remorse is so concretely felt that it cannot be abstracted and symbolically redeemed. The section “Death·Life: 1976” (“死·生：一九七六年”), which I consider the best section in the entire *Narrative Poems*, is quoted in full:

他一天天追赶母亲的死
追 一部早晨狂转的手摇电话机
自行车把顶着天空的噩耗后退
风砸在脸上 钢印砸进他的缺席

医院的味儿半握在蜡制的掌心里
母亲发脆的手 水泥地上摔断的树枝
带走了肩轴疼 磕坏的眼镜片
也在抱怨他来得太迟

或太早 一根蜡烛还得等三十年
完成那熄灭 那薄薄皮肤下黑暗的构思
逆着风佝偻蹬车 用字攻占一团果肉
三十年 缺席分娩他成一首诗

母亲一行也没读过的 一次次托梦
错过的 一种血脉滴洒墨汁
给一本蜡质的书无数早晨的篇幅
他星星点点涸开 像母亲隐秘发育的无知

用自己重写母亲诀别的年龄
自行车铃声似的死亡念头 太熟悉时
比事实还近 从碎了的骨灰瓮开始

他只剩双倍的生命和美丽⁷⁵

He chased after mother's death day after day
Chased after the rotary dial turning frantically in the morning
The bicycle handlebar receding against the sad news in the sky
The wind smashed his face the steel stamp smashed his absence

The smell of the hospital was loosely gripped in the wax-like hand
Mother's crisp hand the broken twigs on the cement floor
Removed the shoulder pain the cracked eyeglasses
were also complaining that he arrived too late

Or too early A candle that needs to wait for thirty years
To be extinguished The dark conception under the thin skin
Leans forward and cycles against the wind using words to seize a cluster of flesh
Thirty years absence delivers him into a poem

Which mother will never read despite her repeated appearances in his dreams
Missed encounter a kind of bloodline dripping ink
Grants a book made of wax the content of infinite mornings
He diffuses the ink as if it is mother's secretly growing innocence

Using himself to rewrite the age that mother died
The bell of the bicycle sounds like the idea of death so familiar that
It is closer than reality starting from the broken urn
He is left only with double shares of life and beauty

Instead of a consistent abstraction of all personal, material details into symbols evoking universal and fundamental human experience, Yang's second endeavor to lyricize his trauma in *Narrative Poems* is haunted by concrete moments that can neither be reached ("too early") nor returned to ("too late") because of their rootedness in linear time. Circularity is still salient, including both monotonous repetitions (e.g., "day after day" and "again and again") and resonance in images (e.g., the roundness embodied by the rotary dial, the turning wheels of the bicycle, and the steel stamp on the death certificate). However, these repetitions can neither sustain nor sublimate themselves. The circularity

⁷⁵ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 42.

in the first stanza is interrupted by the various irrecoverable breaks in the second stanza—the mother’s hand that is pale and fragile like wax, the tree twigs crushed by the rolling wheels of the son’s bicycle, and the mother’s broken glasses. Instead of amounting to a crystallization of mortality as a defining feature of existence as we see in the image of the divided sea in “Mother’s Handwriting,” here each break is explained as epitomizing concrete contradictory forces in Yang’s lived experience—the mourning through candle lighting versus the ritual’s incapacity to express the bereavement, the direction in which the wind blows versus that in which the bicycle moves, and the eagerness to redeem the mother’s death through words versus the fact that the mother will never read those words.

These concrete struggles within dynamic forces further converge into a rebirth, for the Chinese word “发育,” meaning “to grow,” carries a scientific and erotic tint. Even though this move denies death and life as mutually exclusive, *sui generis* stages of human lives, it could have implied a triumph of poetry, simply shifting the idealization of particular themes into the idealization of poetry in general. Notably, this potential is immediately repressed in the last stanza. Despite the fact that the mentioned elegy, i.e., the poem we are reading right now, is finally achieved after thirty years of repetitive failed attempts through dreaming, remembering, and writing, the poet grounds the mother in the narrative time and himself in the time of writing. More precisely speaking, he uses the coincidence between his current age and his mother’s age of death to show that symbolic connections fostered by numbers and poetry, however intuitive, relieving, and beautiful, cannot cancel the painful reality of separation. Instead, poetry results in a duplicated “life and beauty,” with the symbolic and the lived realities refusing to be intermingled with each other. Throughout these stanzas, the alternation between recurring poetic effects and the irrecoverable material facts results in unfulfilled romanticism, as reflected by the sole unrhymed ending persisting in each stanza. We see the poet’s point of view drifting among the consciousness of different characters (the mother, the son at the time of the mother’s death, the son as the narrator) to remind them of their situatedness in different material and

artistic realms. Such separation denies direct encounter, mutual understanding, and a complete circle of redemption.

Through poetry's centripetal patterning of images, Hejinian and Yang reveal the gradual formation of specific perspectives of engaging with the world. With the succession of objects and events in the irreversible flow of time opening up to symbolic depth from time to time, the synchronic concentric structures provisionally absorb us into realms of revelation about human conditions, abstract universal existence, emotional ecstasy, and appeal to fundamental artistic values, where our consciousness appears less conditioned by both banal material facts and incapacitating sociohistorical changes. More importantly, this retreat to language is temporary, because the periodic returns of similar themes over the course of the long poems resituate the seemingly transcendent moments in the diachronic unfolding of the world, the growth of individuals, and the changing narrative and self-reflective impulses at different stages of the poems. Thanks to these recontextualizations, poetic subjectivities crafted in linguistic vacuums turn porous, inconsistent, mutable, and, as the rest of the chapter will discuss, indicative of a particular way of participating in reality.

Centrifugal Expansion

While the previous sections of this chapter focus on how concentric structures elaborate on seemingly expansive notions—due to either their profound historical implications or their miscellaneousness and triviality—to consolidate certain perspectives, these perspectives expand socially and politically. Not only do both Hejinian and Yang conceive of writing as a political act, but their understanding of autobiographical techniques also makes the genre an effective means to their politics. When in the essay “Barbarism” Hejinian explains Language poetry historically, artistically, and

socially,⁷⁶ the topological flexibility of concentric structures lurks behind her arguments. She proposes that “a poem is not an isolated autonomous rarified aesthetic object” and “a person (the poet) has no irreducible, ahistorical, unmediated, singular, kernel identity,” evoking how the central motifs of a poem are gradually manifested as threads of dynamic thoughts and happenings cluster together. In other words, the poetic perspectives emerging through centripetal narrowing-down also centrifugally reflect the “border”⁷⁷:

Poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured in another Greek word, *xenos*. It, too, means “stranger” or “foreigner,” but in a sense that complicates the notion as we find it in *barbaros*. The *xenos* figure is one of contradiction and confluence. The stranger it names is both guest and host, two English terms that are both derived from the single Greek term and are thus etymologically bound in affinity. The guest/host relationship is one of identity as much as it is of reciprocity. Just as a visitor may be foreign to a local, so the local will be foreign to the visitor; the guest coexists as a host, the host as a guest.⁷⁸

Emphasizing notions like center and border, guest and host as relational concepts rather than essential identities, the poet endeavors to fuse these concepts to conceive a mutually acknowledged “coexistence” that undermines the implied hierarchy between the subject and the object in description. According to Hejinian’s various meditations on autobiography,⁷⁹ the genre is attractive to her exactly because the foreign other projected by its protagonist is not a mutually exclusive other. Rather, it is

⁷⁶ In “Barbarism,” Hejinian presents Language poets as a dynamic group with a coherent political commitment to language and reality, where “both Marxist and feminist theory were (and remain) of enormous importance, since they each provide a critique both of power and of meaning (and of powers instantiated in the various notions of ‘meaning’).” See Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 325. Yet as Alex Houen argues in *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s*, writers associated with the group have not formed an obvious consensus in their politics and even their attitudes toward the Language group. While some believe that it is a social group bounded by artistic activism, others see it as a reductive, stereotypical term that enables experimental poetry to seize power on the one hand and turns it into an easy target of criticism and marginalization on the other. See Hejinian, 193–201.

⁷⁷ Hejinian, 323.

⁷⁸ Hejinian, 326. I thank Haun Saussy for pointing out that Hejinian’s etymology is inaccurate. The English terms “guest” and “host” and the Greek term “*xenos*” all come from the Indo-European root “*hostis*,” meaning both “enemy” and “guest.” However, “*hostis*” became “guest” via Germanic and became “host” via Latin. Neither English word is derived from “*xenos*.”

⁷⁹ See Hejinian’s essays “A Common Sense” and “The Sad Note in a Poetics of Consciousness.” The section about introspection in “The Person and Description” is also relevant.

the subjectivity in the moment of writing that undergoes dynamic formation just like the intradiegetic subjectivity. This logical induction can proceed for one more step. The differentiation between the subjectivities internal and external to the text is provisional, for they strive to reflect and integrate each other throughout the compositional process. With the poet's subjectivity in real life undergoing dynamic change, its differentiation between itself and other individuals around it is also modified and challenged. Hejinian's variegated, contextualized, and perpetually evolving subjectivity thus lays the foundation for the kind of social participation she hopes to achieve through art. In her own words, "[P]ublic life is waking life—alert, conscious life—and that should be historical life, life without loss of context, life dense with temporality, in which historicity overflows ontology, becoming outwits being."⁸⁰

However, the gap between the personal and the public still needs to be bridged. Recent studies in political philosophy often employ concentric structures to visualize the relationship between the concrete self and vague collective notions like the society and the nation, a rhetorical phenomenon that Hejinian is conscious of and also critical of. For instance, she recalls how core families became a cultural obsession in the U.S. during the 1950s, as the Cold War rendered the consolidation of a national identity a political imperative. According to the poet, ordinary citizens in California relied for their self-identification as Americans on how their families resembled that of Governor Earl Warren's, and they even imagined the state and the country through a concentric expansion of the governor's household.⁸¹ Hejinian's diagnosis of the political rhetoric of her time resonates with William E. Connolly's problematization of usual employments of concentric structures in political theories, which tend to use the structures' geometric orderliness to imagine social identities and relations as overly stable and centralized:

The need today is to challenge the closures of nationalism and civilizopolism with a more

⁸⁰ Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments*, 223.

⁸¹ Hejinian, 127–9.

rhizomatic or network conception of political culture. The idea is not to delegitimize concentric identifications as such, for you need to participate in the family that nourishes you and the state that governs you. It is to appreciate how concentric circles of political culture are complicated and compromised by numerous crosscutting allegiances, connections, and modes of collaboration. Even more, it is to take advantage of the possibilities created by the compression of distance to enact a more vibrant plurality of connections exceeding the concentric model.⁸²

A concentric expansion from self to others is necessary to foster interpersonal empathy, social connections, and a sense of belonging. However, as Hejinian and Connolly both suggest, we should be wary of a patronizing expansion of our own ego. Instead of simultaneously assimilating and alienating others as “guests,” the poet believes in partial self-objectification and self-alienation to strike a balance between subject and object. In *My Life*, the centripetal construction of multiple intersecting subjectivities happens simultaneously with the poet’s centrifugal expansion of them, in order to contemplate how those constructed feelings, perspectives, and identities may inspire us to venture beyond our immediate surroundings. Hejinian’s expansion accords with Connolly’s proposed revision of the concentric structure by emphasizing dynamism, intersection, and indeterminacy, the result of which can be visualized as a spirographic structure.⁸³

In “What’s Missing from *My Life*,” Hejinian presents the eighty-sentence version of the ninth section of the long poem to defend herself against critics’ accusation that *My Life* lacks a wider consciousness beyond oneself.⁸⁴ There, she integrates broader social concerns exactly through delineating and striving against the border of her consciousness. Let us read two interrelated excerpts together:

From here each day seems like a little boat and all the days are swept and tilted back and forth across an immense and distant bay of blue, gray, green. Somewhere elsewhere often and once there was an African parent, but how tall she was and whether she wandered I cannot say. We

⁸² William E. Connolly, “Speed, Concentric Cultures, and Cosmopolitanism,” *Political Theory* 28, no. 5 (October 2000): 603–4.

⁸³ Hejinian once describes her form as “starry angular varieties of recurrent word and changed idea in constellation gather.” See Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 9. This image exhibits qualities like angularity, circularity, and gradual nesting—all of which can be found in spirographic patterns.

⁸⁴ Hejinian, *Allegorical Moments*, 115–6.

were like plump birds along the shore, caught by the mortal breaks.⁸⁵

Later toward the end of the section, the poet writes,

Mischief logic; Miss Chief. It is a stubborn child who, reprimanded and then punished, yet refuses to admit that she has an enemy within. At the dark front door framed by long narrow windows stood three white men jointly soliciting signatures on a petition demanding that Mr. P., the dark-skinned Greek who owned and ran the neighborhood grocery store, be banned from buying a house in the neighborhood, and the one closest to the door was screaming at my father, “You [n-word]-loving commie pinko, you don’t belong in the neighborhood either.”⁸⁶

In the first passage, the centrifugal dispersion from “here” to “somewhere elsewhere” and from personal observation to “an African parent” and further to a “we” relies on increasing destabilization of the border: the poet starts with a border that can be clearly drawn, i.e., the horizon line, proceeds into the fuzzily constructed racial segregation, continues with the imagined boundary of her social consciousness at nine years old, and arrives at a metaphysical border of mortality. In the more disturbing second passage, we also find an analogous generalization where an internal strife in “logic” is externalized as tension between parents and children and further broadened into social discrimination. In each expansion, we see the immature speaker’s genuine effort to extend her limited knowledge to understand the larger society by complicating her syntax. For instance, in the 1987 edition, without the imagination of the African parent, the pronoun “we” has a clear and concrete referent—a group of children playing along the shore. But here, with the addition of an image appearing mysterious to the child, the meaning of “we” includes all human beings. To give another example, both passages are saturated with colors, which play a crucial role in the child’s creative expression of her inner world and her curious observation of the outer world. When colors are employed as polysemes to denote race, they constitute a notion of belonging subverting the child’s

⁸⁵ Hejinian, 131–2.

⁸⁶ Hejinian, 135.

initial understanding of the neighborhood, which used to be a mere matter of frequent encounters in the grocery store.

Even though Hejinian's wordplay and her often serpentine syntax can create an illusion of continuity in these centrifugal dispersions of meaning, failures of inclusion, understanding, and empathy are more salient. Such failures remind us of the poet's insight that multiplicity and inclusivity are attested by boundaries that are simultaneously exclusive.⁸⁷ While lyric metaphors for quotidian life (e.g., a boat bobbling among the variegated sea waves) can be recalled with specificity and incorporated into our horizons "from here," the African parent is ironically beyond imagination. As shown by the hesitant syntax in "somewhere elsewhere often and once," generalized claims about "somewhere" and "often" fail to address the concrete experience of "elsewhere" and "once." Usual social discourse not only ignores the experience of marginalized races but also deems it as irrelevant to the establishment of social norms. More importantly, gaps in centrifugal expansions often happen in inconspicuous moments, like the seemingly innocuous wordplay of dividing the word "mischief" into an oxymoron of "Miss Chief." This method of separation, when applied to categorize human beings into antagonistic camps, causes actual suffering. Similarly, while colors blend into each other to generate a harmonious view of the bay, colors, when tied to social meanings, become a tool of differentiation and hostility. As Hejinian exposes the limitations of approaching others through expanding and analogizing one's own perspectives, she affirms the centrifugal model: even though a tangential force seems to set a point free as it spirals out, it is constantly pulled toward the center by another force that not only bounds it on the orbit but also highlights its inescapable self-centrism.

In the post-Mao era in China, the discussion of the relationship between individuals and society reflected intellectuals' intertwining political demands. First, they intended to subtract

⁸⁷ Some of Hejinian's own writing is subject to this same critique. See Jacob Edmond's article "The Closures of the Open Text: Lyn Hejinian's 'Paradise Found.'"

themselves from the socialist cultural imperative of writing for the masses, demanding the right to individualistic expression and independent thinking; second, they wanted to enact a collective voice to contribute to the emerging, though short-lived, civil society in the eighties, joining in debates about the country's further political and cultural development.⁸⁸ As suggested by Liu Zaifu's notion of subjectivity which served as a foundation for post-Mao literature, the depiction of individual experiences aims not so much to establish a concrete agent with unique perspectives as it does to promote humanistic and enlightenment values like dignity, free will, and human-centrism. Or in Liu's own words, "the realization of subjectivity [...] manifests itself as a humanism that promotes love to the entire human world."⁸⁹ Zhang Qinghua further argues that this notion of the self as a set of inviolable but abstract values is the key to the contradiction between literary intention and its actual execution in the cultural production of the eighties. Writers often employed language in paradigmatic, obscure, and esoteric ways reminiscent of high-modernist literature to depict cultures and societies; however, this ambiguous style fails to offer guidance to individuals who engage with their surroundings in particular moments through concrete deeds, thus falling short of the writers' initial intention of educating the public.⁹⁰ In Yang's poems in the 1980s and 1990s, we can identify the same tendency: what appears to be a deep exploration of his personal life ultimately effaces his individuality, instead foregrounding shared, abstract humanistic values. For instance, a line in his serial poem "Ritualization of the Soul" reads "Heart, a black cat, scratches the hope, whom do I encircle to cry?" ("心，一只黑猫，抓破希望，我环绕谁哀号？").⁹¹ Even though Yang's experience of bearing

⁸⁸ Such debates were so heated and popular that they amounted to the so-called "Cultural Fever." For an explanation of the development of this phenomenon, see Zhang Xudong's "On Some Motifs in the Chinese 'Cultural Fever' of the Late 1980s: Social Change, Ideology, and Theory."

⁸⁹ Original: "主体性的实现[...]把爱推向整个人间的人道精神。" See Liu Zaifu 刘再复, "Lun Wenxue de Zhutixing" 论文学的主体性 [On the Subjectivity of Literature], *Literary Review*, no. 6 (1985): 11.

⁹⁰ Zhang Qinghua 张清华, "Xinshiqi Wenxue de Wenhua Jingyu yu Celue" 新时期文学的文化境遇与策略 [Cultural Conditions and Strategies of Literature of the New Period], *Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy*, no. 2 (1995): 59–64.

⁹¹ Yang 杨, 大海停止之处, 22.

coffins and digging graves as a sent-down youth almost leads to a confessional voice in these growingly evocative images, the line ends with a self-disembodiment into a dispersive cry resounding in the universe for the entire human race.⁹²

If the individual and the collective could manifest each other, concentric structures⁹³ would provide a powerful symbol. In Zhang Qinghua's analysis of the contradiction and alliance between modernist techniques and enlightenment ideals in post-Mao literary movements, especially the Misty Poetry movement which Yang is often associated with, Zhang evokes concentric circles as follows:

[Chinese modernist movements] are very different from Western modernisms that show an obvious tendency toward extreme personalities and individualism. They strive to create a center that simultaneously resonates with even distant social consciousness, the vibrations of which startle the public, attract wide attention, and cause a sensation to perform its enlightening function. Many works have become the focus of public discourses, because the questions they raise are symptomatic of their times, and the emotions they convey reflect the shared thoughts of the largest public.⁹⁴

This reflection was written in 1995, after the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protests had wrecked many intellectuals' belief in and enthusiasm for the transformative potential of literature. The critic's rhetoric was driven by the contrast between a point ("center" and "focal point") and the expansive society taken in its entirety, as well as the causal relationship between the two ends. Notably, explaining the waning of Chinese modernism and postmodernism in the nineties, Zhang still grounds his argument in the figure of concentric circles, arguing that after the center constituted by

⁹² Despite the fact that his poetic voice becomes more skeptical of universalism and the sublime in recent years, this same trope still appears in *Narrative Poems*, where the poet's specific experience does not lead to a vivid image of the poet but to an empty vessel containing universal concerns about human existence as already discussed.

⁹³ In Gan Yang's famous essay "Some Problems in Cultural Discussion in the Eighties" ("八十年代文化讨论的几个问题"), the figure of concentric circles is employed to emphasize the imperative of reconstructing Chinese cultural tradition to serve contemporary needs. See Gan Yang 甘阳, "Bashi Niandai Wenhua Taolun de Jige Wenti" 八十年代文化讨论的几个问题 [Some Problems in Cultural Discussion in the Eighties] in *Bashi Niandai Wenhua Yishi* 八十年代文化意识 [Cultural Consciousness of the Eighties], ed. Gan Yang 甘阳 (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), 28–30. This fact reflects that the structure strikes many post-Mao intellectuals as provocative.

⁹⁴ Original: "[中国现代主义运动]又很不同于西方现代主义那种明显的个性极端主义、个体人本主义倾向,而是通过苦心营造一个与社会意识遥相呼应同步共在的中心,震动、惊醒并吸引了广泛的社会关注,产生出巨大的轰动效应,从而起到至关重要的传输启蒙功能的作用。许多作品曾成为社会舆论关注的焦点,所提出的问题曾经是时代典型的病症,所表达的情绪曾体现了最广大的群众的共同心声。" See Zhang 张, "新时期文学的文化境遇与策略," 62.

enlightenment spirit lost its totalizing force, literary approaches and concerns became too various to be summoned as a collective force. Literature was relegated “to the periphery of the society and the culture.”⁹⁵ While Zhang’s concentric expansion intends to illustrate the social implications of the form and style of post-Mao poetry, it is driven by a latent assumption threading together mainstream cultural movements in China throughout the twentieth century—including the New Cultural Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, leftist literary campaigns under Mao’s reign, as well as Scar Literature, Root-seeking Literature, and Misty Poetry in the late 1970s and 1980s that endeavored to criticize and even redeem the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Namely, as an effective means to fostering collective consciousness and rallying social power, literature can and should directly participate in contemporary politics. Thus, in Zhang’s analysis, literature’s distancing of itself from politics marks its decline. More importantly, he attributes its prosperity and decline in the post Mao period to writers’ willingness to act out literature’s enlightening potential, downplaying other external factors like the tightening cultural politics and the increasingly materialist social culture. In other words, Zhang’s concentric model of literary production manifests an excessive belief in the organizing capacity of the center, be it individual writers, literature with evident politics, or enlightenment values, without adequate attention to what Connolly, though in a very different context, describes as the “numerous crosscutting allegiances, connections, and modes of collaboration” within concentricity.⁹⁶

Yang’s centrifugal expansion, at least in his early theoretical writing, shares Zhang’s high demand on writers: “The poets’ individual voice will not effaced by the shared history. On the contrary, the question and anxiety brought by history will constitute the depth of each poet’s individual language and personality: it is a ‘self’ that investigates the universe and the history encapsulated within itself; it is an image that unprecedentedly cut across and change the order which is known as the Chinese ‘epic’”

⁹⁵ Original: “社会与文化的边缘区域。” See 张, 64.

⁹⁶ Connolly, 603.

“诗人各自的声音，并非被共同的历史所遮蔽。正相反，历史的焦虑与疑问，成为每个诗人的语言个性的纵深：是‘自我’，在考察被包容于一个人之内的大地和千年；是一个意象，空前地切入和改变了被称为中国‘史诗’的那个秩序”。⁹⁷ Taking the legitimization of poetic creativity as his priority, Yang never explicitly criticizes the multiple overgeneralizations (e.g., there exists an image that encapsulates all poetry and a mind that covers all cultures and times) and unjustified elevations (e.g., the poet is a prophetic and figure declaring unprecedented message) in this expansion from the personal to the traditional and from epoch to epic. Since it should be obvious to an erudite reader and prolific writer like Yang that his “unprecedented” framework for Chinese epic closely resembles T. S. Eliot’s top-down, traditionalist model for European cultures proposed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” more than half a century ago, the word “unprecedented” refers not so much to originality of his epic view than to the belief that epic efforts can triumphantly redeem individual dignity and cultural legacy from political atrocity.⁹⁸ However, Yang usually tones down this kind of transcendental aura, when he reflects on his own works and life. In discussing his essay collection *Speeches of a Ghost*, which consists of a series of self-interrogations written in the second person, he equates self-discovery with concentric contraction and self-generalization with concentric expansion:

连“我”都没有，仅仅是“你”。一本用第二人称写成的书，为什么不干脆是无人称？自己对自己里边的人说话。自己在自己内部旅行。“你”，就最不确定、最模糊，胆怯得像一个别处。你的手所指向的地方，总是空旷荒凉的。一次垂直坠落，摔入纸做的菲薄皮肤。死亡、病，不得不用一个肉体扎根。世界，借用一个独白：没有人远远不够，超过一个人同样远远不够。⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Yang 杨, Guihua·Zhili de Kongjian 鬼话·智力的空间 [Speeches of a Ghost: the Spatialization of Intelligence], 189.

⁹⁸ On T. S. Eliot's influence on theories and practices of the long poem in China in the 1980s, see Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis*, 197–9. Most importantly, while Eliot uses “tradition” to refute the romanticist ideal of individual genius, Yang uses “tradition” to suggest himself as well as his generation as the chosen ones to totalize the culture through a singular voice: “Tradition appoints specific poets as its representers and symbols in each epoch, and yes, we are already aware of this honor” (“传统在各个时代都将选择某些诗人作为自己的标志和象征，是的，我们已经意识到了这种光荣”). See Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 155.

⁹⁹ Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 7.

There is not even an “I,” only a “you.” A book written in the second person—why can’t it be written in the non-person? One talks to the person within oneself. One travels within oneself. “You,” as the least certain and the most obscure, is timid as if it is the foreign other. The direction pointed out by your finger is always empty and desolate. A vertical drop, unto the thin skin made by paper. Death and illness must be rooted in a physical body. The world borrows a monologue: No one is far from enough, and more than one is equally far from enough.

In this concentric pattern, various themes still narrow down into a vessel for universal experience, but unlike an empty ear that listens passively, the center is a frail body responsive to suffering. This body serves as a temporary (“borrowed”) and compromised vehicle balancing two kinds of insufficiency—the lack of a convincing object for empathy and the diffused intensity of such empathy. While this reading might seem overly apologetic given the fact that the speaker still sees himself as revelatory, it becomes more applicable if we observe how central motifs in Yang’s mother’s death expand to claim social significance in *Narrative Poems*.

At the beginning of the second volume of *Narrative Poems*, memories about Yang’s mother’s death are first expanded to oblique references to the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and further into metaphysical reflection on human mortality. Personal anecdotes flow into collective but strictly censored memories and further into existential conditions shared by all human beings. Compared to the poet’s theorization of concentric shapes which may resort to self-centeredness, this expansion is already ethically justified. For it aims to lend a partial voice to an event that cannot be directly discussed. Nevertheless, Yang meticulously reviews the potential and danger of this centrifugal expansion, reminding readers and himself that as an artificial framework in the first place, the concentric structure is more effective in exposing social, linguistics, and cultural constructs than essentialist, transcendental qualities. Whatever is placed at the center, the centrifugal expansion may trade in variegated feelings for some banal general truth or even staged remembrance.

Running over six pages, this section displays centrifugal dispersion on multiple dimensions including form, voice, emotions, and motifs. It alternates between free verse filled with fractured

syntax and compact four-line¹⁰⁰ stanzas with congruent thematic and emotional threads. With very few exceptions, each free stanza features an expansion from the pronoun “you” to “we,” where the poet’s insights obtained from self-alienation and self-interrogation test their generalizability. The quatrains are meta-reflections, as the poet assumes an external perspective to observe how he himself turns raw materials in real life into poetry. In this performative objectiveness, the poet refers to himself in the third-person singular. As the poem strives to socialize and expand its addressee from a self-absorbing poet to a collective group bounded by shared experience, lyric power seems to grow: the periodic return of free verse is gradually spread out, from every two quatrains to three and then to four. However, this impression of an increasingly organized poem is hindered by the fact that the section starts and ends with free verse. In particular, in the end, the free verse further disintegrates into fragmentary syntax and minimalist stanzas, where profound sadness about individual futility in front of sociopolitical changes is rendered in quotation marks without a clear source: “‘Tonight I cry for myself for you for departure’”(“‘今夜 我为自己 为你 为离开一哭’”).¹⁰¹ This expansion from the self to the imagined interlocutor and further to all mortal human beings can also be read as an inauthentic, mechanical progression that forces out a staged cry—the very opposite of the triumph of poetry.

Yang’s skepticism of centrifugal expansion is even more pronounced on the thematic level. According to our earlier discussion, when the poet employs centripetal images to identify the fundamental creative force of *Narrative Poems*, his writing often leans toward the idealistic and proclaims his faith in the power of writing. In contrast, when he starts to wonder whether his personal loss can be related to cultural memory, or more specifically, repressed cultural memory, the poet is full of uncertainty:

¹⁰⁰ These quatrains refer to the most classic form of Chinese poetry, which can be traced to the four-line strophe in the *Book of Poetry*.

¹⁰¹ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 55.

锈蚀血红的泥泞
 喷溅
 心中一枝梅花还是满街簇簇槐花？
 一张脸的茫茫
 挤出词语的缝隙
 旋入石头的漩涡
 当你走过不会绊住你的脚步
 当你突然记起 甚至有一缕幽香
 甜甜绞着喉咙
 季节平面复印一片片花瓣
 让母亲不知死在哪次
 清明雨声缝合丝绸的眉眼
 你的惊愕 “吓”地不再惊愕时
 复数的第一次偷听到唯一一次
 眼泪炎热而空洞
 我们走过不会绊住我们的脚步
 当 裤脚下轮轴辘辘滚动¹⁰²

The rusted, scarlet mud
 Splashed
 Is it stalks of plum blossoms or alleys of pagoda tree blossoms that remain in heart?
 A face that looks confused
 Squeezes out from the interstices of words
 Swirls itself into the vortex of stones
 When you pass by it will not trip you
 When you suddenly remember it there is even a faint fragrance
 Sweetly twisting your throat
 Seasonal cycles make flat copies of petals
 Until no one knows the season where mother died
 The rain of Qingming sews the eyelids together as if they are silk
 Your astonishment when you are no longer astonished after a light sound of “bu”¹⁰³
 can overhear only once for the first time in the plural form
 Tears are warm and empty
 When we pass by our steps will not be tripped
 When the wheels are turning under our pantlegs

¹⁰² Yang 杨, 48.

¹⁰³ This is not a usual onomatopoeia in Chinese. It seems to mimic the sound that one tries to make when being smothered; it also sounds like the negating word “不” in Chinese.

The first line recalls three motifs central to Yang's mother's passing: the bicycle that has grown rusty over the years, the blood that suggests the cycle of biological and poetic birth and death, and the mud splashed by the bicycle wheels turning perpetually in the poet's traumatic memory. With the forceful verb "splash" suggesting outward dispersion in the second line, these images drift into another narrative. Specifically, blood drops first turn into red plum blossoms in the winter of the mother's death, then into pagoda trees in white bloom along the streets (a famous summer view in Beijing bearing witness to the massacre during the Tiananmen Square protests), and further into human mortality and natural revival in the tenth line, whose self-verification through eternal self-duplication erases the suffering of individual people and the beauty of specific flowers. Similarly, in the first line, the poet is immersed in his tormented memory about the spinning wheels of his bicycle that fling mud into the air. By the sixth line, this image turns symbolic and obscure, commenting on how the progression of time and history remains indifferent to mortals' effort to withstand death and forgetfulness through words. By the end of the stanza, ambiguities accumulate: the rolling wheels either suggest the human race prevailing in the progression of history or lend a voice to the cruel repression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, when tanks entered the square.¹⁰⁴

Through these expansions, it almost seems as if Yang has realized his early idealistic dream of narrating the fate of the nation through a condensed, individualized voice. However, these efforts to extend and recontextualize personal symbols are constantly thwarted by other textual details in the stanza. The shift from the blooming of plum trees to that of pagoda trees is marked by a question mark, and the blossoms—despite their picturesque beauty on the surface and their grotesque violence deep down—are dismissed as uninspiring "copies." After all, only the shocking effect of the very first iteration is capable of being partially "overheard." Repetition leads neither to powerful emotional

¹⁰⁴ There are claims that tanks drove over unarmed protests. Although this image is often alluded to in art and literature commemorating the incident including Yang's *Narrative Poems*, no historical evidence can be found.

bonds nor transcendent knowledge. Rather, it leads to a sense of futility at best (as suggested by the prickling tears that remain in vain) if not total numbness (as suggested by the unconscious passers-by). Moreover, since plum blossoms and pagoda tree blossoms are classic poetic symbols for resilience and sorrow respectively, their relegation into mechanical repetitions indicates the insufficiency of poetry in creating and sustaining collective cultural memories. This insufficiency cannot be simply attributed to the government's strict censorship following the Tiananmen Square protests, which turned the incident into a literally unspeakable lacuna in both official and unofficial discourses. It is also the result of Yang's attempt to obliquely write the incident through his own anecdotes. In a quatrain later in the poem, the poet casts light on the ethical problems of generalizing individual perspectives into collective narratives:

引爆碧蓝海面上一团镁光
照耀那远眺 一架楼梯录制下
死者死去多年后才被还回的笑声
哀伤地埋入他异国的自我¹⁰⁵

Blast the magnesium light over the azure sea
Illuminate that look far into the distance a filming under the stairs
The laughter returned to the dead years after death
Is sadly buried into his diasporic self

Here, the poet depicts himself not as the spokesperson for the silenced victims or the imagined collective of countrymen. Rather, he sees himself as a voyeuristic spectator who observes the crackdown from a safe distance¹⁰⁶ and regards it as a cathartic opportunity to reinforce his self-concept as a non-conformist ("diasporic self"). Instead of connecting different individuals through shared pain, Yang is conscious of the untranslatability of suffering—for without direct participation, his intense language intending to match the atrocity may turn out to be willful, staged, and repeatable fantasies

¹⁰⁵ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 51.

¹⁰⁶ This detail also refers to the fact that Yang was a visiting scholar in Australia during the Tiananmen Square protests.

that elicit some sensual excitement by appropriating others' pain. In other words, Yang is uneasy about the potential peril of making poetry bear witness beyond one's own experience: other people's suffering is erased, exactly when they are put into poetry.

More appropriate forms of mourning and interpersonal connections arise, when centrifugal expansion reveals gaps and deformation in our efforts of connecting the individual with the public. Returning to the ninth line of the free verse stanza, we realize that the fragrance, whose meaning is about to be lost, takes on a mysteriously violent verb, “绞,” meaning “to grind” and “to twist”: the strong smell that thickens the air obliquely refers to the bodies crushed by tanks and the freedom of speech torn apart by the state apparatus. The governmentally enforced silence and forgetfulness through forbidding direct commemoration turns everything into possible indirect commemoration. Themes like the pagoda trees' blooming, the rain during the Qingming Festival for ancestral offerings and the celebration of the spring, and the impossibility of being genuinely shocked again set up a peaceful, idyllic scene, which imparts an intense sorrow that is common but not sharable. As collective trauma assumes the form of silent tears burning the eyes, the coercively removed referents of those floral and propulsive symbols liberate words to the extent that a deliberately porous centrifugal expansion can bear witness to history exactly through the impossibility of doing so.

An Ethic of Acknowledgment

To provide a provisional conclusion, both Hejinian and Yang employ concentric patterns as themes, formal regulations, and epistemic and emotional structures to realize their shared vision of approaching epics autobiographically, situating the formation of subjectivity and the quest for ethical applicability within the tension between the transcendental vision about self and poetry and the understanding of individuals' situatedness in social-historical conditions. Synchronically speaking, with recursive images and syntax interweaving memories from different time, space, and individuals, there emerge a seemingly endurable selfhood and a relatively stable reality, which can ground knowledge,

feeling, and identity. Diachronically speaking, an emphasis on how memories evolve in time alongside complex changes of the self, language, and societies, in contrast, reveals subjectivities as fragmentary constructs open to revision, the world as irrecoverably in flux, and poetry as often too frail to elevate us beyond the immediate existence. These alternatives collaboratively set forth poetic subjectivities that can account for particular perspectives and feelings. As various poetically constructed subjectivities ripple outward in the dynamism of language and societies, both poets propose that intersubjectivity, empathy, and understanding are revealed as much by shareable feelings and thoughts as divergent experience with collective memories, sociopolitical conditions, and the referential capacity of words.

In describing the centers for centripetal subjectivation and centrifugal expansion, this chapter usually resorts to disembodied terms like “subjectivity,” “voice,” “perspective,” and “self.” Gradually specified by deliberate formal, syntactic, and thematic patterning, these centers of activity receive and interpret miscellaneous happenings in a temporarily fitting style, so that readers may imagine specific sentences and stanzas as originated from a concrete mind. Besides emphasizing how these centers shape and are shaped by language, the abstract terminology intends to show how unusual *My Life* and *Narrative Poems* are as autobiographical long poems. In Hejinian’s case, the “I” in the poem is immersed in ceaseless self-reflections, self-revisions, and self-contradictions; these concrete yet fragmented snapshots of the self-consciousness, diffused in quotidian language and life, can hardly be reintegrated into a person with substantiated individuality, including qualities like an autonomous body, a relatively holistic and stable sense of the self, distinct wills, and capacity of taking actions. Nor does any embodied self arise in *Narrative Poems*, though for the opposite reason. In Yang’s intradiegetic self-reference where he treats himself as a character acting in his memories, the depiction is too alienated and objectified to distinguish himself from other characters; moreover, in his extradiegetic self-reference, he often treats himself as an ideal poet. The image of an omniscient mind deploying

materials throughout history to reveal essential truth is too transcendent to be identified with a real-life individual. If Hejinian's self is too concrete to lead up to a distinct individual, Yang's self is too abstract to be contained by a single body.

Given that both Hejinian and Yang consider their writing to be political acts, how should we interpret the political investment of these long poems when we cannot imagine their protagonists as embodied individuals capable of political will and actions? In other words, how shall we evaluate in ethical terms the centrifugal expansion of perceptions from a mind to other people and events, if we cannot ground this mind in a specific agent taking actions and bearing responsibilities accordingly? In fact, subjectivity is a prominent issue in the criticism on both poets. Most influentially, in various places, Charles Altieri has often argued that the deconstruction of the traditional Western notion of subjectivity—which is masculine, narcissist, and ego-centric—is practiced to the extent that subjectivity in contemporary art can no longer claim enough authority to effectuate moral and social interventions.¹⁰⁷ Altieri comments in particular that Hejinian “has considerable philosophical resonance but not much reach into the domains that [William Carlos] Williams wanted to open for constructivist art.”¹⁰⁸ David Kaufmann further unpacks what this overly philosophical subjectivity may mean in the context of *My Life*, arguing that what Hejinian presents is not “a single life” but “a template for autobiography in general,” since all lives can be deconstructed into similar patterns of recurrence and repetition.¹⁰⁹ My close analyses of the ninth section of *My Life* indicate that the long

¹⁰⁷ See, for instance, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989), “What is Living and What is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry” (1996), and “The Fate of the Imaginary in Twentieth-century American Poetry” (2005). While his other works tend to be critical of Hejinian's work and language poetry in general, the essay “What is Living and What is Dead in American Postmodernism” presents a very generous reading of Hejinian's *The Cell*. There, Altieri offers Hejinian's poetry as a fruitful exploration of the relationship between words and the world by sustaining a lyrical intelligence at places where postmodern theories fall into self-contradictions. Charles Altieri, “What Is Living and What Is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (July 1996): 782–7.

¹⁰⁸ C. Altieri, “The Fate of the Imaginary in Twentieth-Century American Poetry,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 86.

¹⁰⁹ David Kaufmann, “Subjectivity and Disappointment in Contemporary American Poetry,” *Ploughshares* 17, no. 4 (1991/1992): 239. Gregory B. Lee, *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Duke University Press, 1996), 118.

poem does address empirical details originating from specific time and space, as opposed to a complete absorption into metaphysics as Altieri suggests or into pure linguistic patterning as Kaufmann suggests. However, their diagnosis of the absence of an individual actively participating in the dynamics of the world through intentions and actions aligns with this chapter's discussion.

In Yang's case, most critics who object to his overly mighty poetic subjectivity use his poems in the 1980s and 1990s as evidence. *Narrative Poems* has attracted little critical attention since its publication in 2011. Even though *Narrative Poems* distinguishes itself from previous works by its awareness of the fallibility of language as well as gaps between poetry and the world, some of the criticisms are still applicable especially to those sections where Yang's voice soars into the sublime. For instance, Geremie Barmé and Gregory Lee argue that Yang's poems about other peripheral regions and marginalized cultures are written through a masculine voice and reinforce Han Chinese hegemony.¹¹⁰ While such criticism reveals the controversies over Yang's centrifugal expansion from self to culture, He Zhaotian contends that Yang's model is equally problematic in its expansion from the present moment to history. According to He, the poet's early poems overwhelm the present moment with the long, rugged past and the promise of the future, relegating the present to a mere transitional moment that inspires neither sufficient pathos nor lyrical enthusiasm. Both the poet and his readers are discouraged from studying their present experiences and conditions.¹¹¹ For all these critics, Yang's transcendent subjectivity brings an overly intense lyric ecstasy and thus represses cultural specificities, excluding careful reasoning, practical change here and now, and the lives of ordinary human beings.

¹¹⁰ Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (Columbia University Press, 1999), 275.

¹¹¹ He Zhaotian 贺照田, "Zuowei Wenti de Bashi Niandai Shishire zhong de Shuqing Lijie yu Shijian Lijie—Yi Haizi、Yang Lian、Jianghe wei Jujiao Taolun Zhongxin" 作为问题的八十年代史诗热中的抒情理解与时间理解——以海子、杨炼、江河为聚焦讨论中心 [Problems of Lyric Understanding and Temporal Understanding during the Epic Fever of the Eighties—A Discussion Focusing on Haizi, Yang Lian, Jianghe], *Wen Yi Zheng Ming*, no. 11 (2024): 152.

Defenders of Hejinian and Yang often refer the absence of a cogent, embodied, and active subject in their poems to indeterminacy. Namely, this decentered self can bring other kinds of agency into being. Given Hejinian's own emphasis on active and conscious readerly participation in her literary manifesto "The Rejection of Closure," which also serves as a justification of *My Life*, the miscellaneous meanings that refuse to be integrated into a whole force readers to make selections and assign different weights in order to make sense of the long poem.¹¹² In this process, we realize ourselves as subjects with certain interpretive habits, predilections, and ethics. Opposing Altieri's call for constitutive agency, Barrett Watten describes Hejinian's works as "anethics": glimpses of multiple possible and contradictory ways of being suggest a nonjudgemental authorial intention.¹¹³ A fragmented, inactive, and vague subject within the text implies an author with a clear intention of writing and skillful control of words outside the text. Driving the notion of indeterminacy even deeper, Patrick F. Durgin proposes¹¹⁴ that the impossibility of organizing the interweaving perspectives and intentions flowing around in Hejinian's poetry into an individual agent compels readers to conceive agency as taking shape in an intersubjective process of meaning-making that involves the author, the characters, the readers, and other contemporaneous writers. As for Yang's transcendent, timeless, and potentially imperialist voice, Jacob Edmond argues that Yang's poems can often be simultaneously read as grand narratives about the Chinese culture and concrete testimonies of his lived experience. That is to say, renouncing a concrete, embodied form, Yang's poetic voice negotiates between the personal and the impersonal, the local and the global, as well as the national and the international.

The defense through indeterminacy, though compelling, diminishes Hejinian's and Yang's ambition for poetry. The task of creating a distinct subject onto which readers may project their

¹¹² Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 44.

¹¹³ Smith and Hofer, eds., *Aerial 10*, 258–60.

¹¹⁴ Patrick F. Durgin's essay "Lyn Hejinian—Intention, Selection, and Fantastic Philosophy" relates Hejinian's evolving view on agency in poetry to literary and philosophical discussions on intention and motivation from Gertrude Stein to Hejinian's contemporaries. This is only a reductive presentation of the sophisticated essay. See Smith and Hofer, eds., *Aerial 10*, 197–222.

interpretation is outsourced from the poets to the readers. Yet Hejinian once declared that *My Life* and *Language* writing in general acts to warn readers off the unsophisticated ideological propaganda in quotidian language not to advocate for complete impartiality or nonintervention. Instead, as she says, “[a] central concern of writing that views such devices as socially material is not subjectivity but agency.”¹¹⁵ Even for Yang, who maintains that all poems should be written as “pure poetry” (“纯诗”) and justified by ornate formal designs, poetry does not just propose additional, tentative structures whose equivocal message helps us entertain different ways of observing and engaging with history and society.¹¹⁶ According to Yang, poetic forms are forceful, fundamental, and revelatory structures, which manifest different individuals’ changing experiences over time as the “condition” (“处境”) of human survival that holds true across all times.¹¹⁷ Given their belief in the capacity of poetry to model feelings, actions, and cognition, rather than granting readers complete interpretative freedom, both poets are more likely to employ subtle strategies and bring their ethical and political commitment to bear. As a result, since both long poems conceive subjectivities as defying specific loci, we need to inquire beyond indeterminacy: What exactly is rendered as indeterminacy? Why does it need to be conveyed as indeterminable?

In *My Life*, Hejinian is aware of readers’ possible confusion: “You are so generous, they told me, allowing everything its place, but what we wanted to hear was a story. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, reveling in education. What a situation. Whenever you’ve exhausted setting, topic, or tone, begin a new paragraph.”¹¹⁸ Our usual craving for stories is not “generous,” for our narrative impulse often distorts a series of unrelated parataxes into a gradual build-up toward an artificial climax. Thus, we represent not the actual status of the paratactic items but our wishful self-

¹¹⁵ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 162.

¹¹⁶ Yang 杨, 鬼话·智力的空间, 172.

¹¹⁷ Yang 杨, 174.

¹¹⁸ Hejinian, *My Life*, 50.

congratulation about our mastery over causal relationships, coherent morals, and storytelling techniques. “Allowing everything its place,” in contrast, is a deliberate diminishing of the narrator’s ego to recognize other things’ resistance to being pulled into our narrative. In Hejinian’s critical writing, this attitude is termed as “acknowledgment”:

Poetry comes to know that things are. But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather, acknowledgment—and that constitutes a sort of unknowing. To know that things are is not to know what they are, and to know that without what is to know otherness (i.e., the unknown and perhaps unknowable). Poetry undertakes acknowledgment as a preservation of otherness—a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context.¹¹⁹

The poet not only lets other things remain in their own place, but she also lets various versions of the self grounded in specific time and space retain their unknowability. Hejinian’s fragments of the self, or “situations” as she would say,¹²⁰ refuse to lead up to a whole and thereby sustain the distance between readers and herself. Unable to be pinned down as a credible person and unable to serve as the target of projection and identification, the depicted life cannot be absorbed by readers as occasions of emotional empathy or some paraphrasable knowledge. As empathetic occasions, the depicted life would be relegated to temporary emotional effects, and as conclusive knowledge, its otherness would be denied. Yet as a cluster of unassimilatable memories, the depicted life endures throughout and even beyond the long poem—since the poem is an ongoing process—by compelling readers constantly to acknowledge its unknowability. In the poet’s own words, “[t]his acknowledging is a process, not a definitive act; it is an inquiry, a thinking on.”¹²¹ Epistemic unknowability gains a social and political weight. As suggested by the phrase “thinking on,” this careful distancing also preserves the otherness

¹¹⁹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 2.

¹²⁰ “Situation” is a critical term in Hejinian’s essay “The Person and Description.” With the term, Hejinian imagines how real-life observations and verbal descriptions come into being. In both cases, “situation” marks a temporary effect of distinguishability, where a person or a particular combination of words stands out from their surroundings. However, “situation” is not a fixed image, but an understanding of the fact that this temporary manifestation is a result of the interaction between the observer and the observed and a corollary recognition that what is observed has other possibilities. As a result, “[d]escription in such a situation is simultaneously exploration, discovery, and communication.” See Hejinian, 204.

¹²¹ Hejinian, 2.

of the readers. In other words, Hejinian exemplifies a decentered self, which is nonlinearly and inconsistently revealed by its contingent encounters with unknown readers. It exercises its potential as much through exerting effects on the readers as through recognizing its inability or inappropriateness to exert potential effects.

If for Hejinian, what remains indeterminable is the occasions where the unknowability of the self and the other emerges to condition her self-expression, for Yang, it is the moment of asymmetrical conflation between a seemingly casual act and a piece of memory loaded with historical gravity. Such a moment of improper correspondence is already exemplified by the earlier discussion of the routine blossoming of pagoda trees and the repressed remembrance of the Tiananmen Square protests. In fact, the poet gives an explicit formulation of his indeterminacy in *Narrative Poems*: “When all nightmares even these lines unintentionally are epics” (“当所有噩梦 连这几行 不小心都是史诗”).¹²² Lacking a main sentence, this line is grammatically incomplete. It almost seems as if the poet makes a typo and writes “连成” (meaning “link to form” and pronounced as *lian cheng*) as “连这” (meaning “even these” and pronounced as *lian zhe*), turning the phrase from a testimony of the transformative power of poetry into a disposable filler. While the phrase in the middle temporarily relieves readers of the intense stimulations brought by “all nightmares,” it soon plunges us into an even more perilous situation, where the nightmares turn into historical facts. This line’s rapid shift in tone is a condensed expression of the fact that *Narrative Poems* achieves many of its most touching moments serendipitously.

Within this serendipity, Yang also identifies an acknowledgment, which, unlike Hejinian’s version, depends on the faith in mutual knowledge between the involved parties:

你的知音就在一行诗句中藏着
火 自焚的玫瑰 总定格

¹²² Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 24.

于将将烫伤时 将将在手边
嗅到历史的焦糊 烟袅袅拂过
擦拭一个人里无数人的天际
无数水面是一本书 玫瑰色
被天鹅溅落的脚蹼装订成暮色¹²³

Your confidant is hidden in a line
Fire the self-burning roses always staying at
The moment that one is just about to burn oneself just by the hand
Smelling the burnt history the smoke rolls up and sweeps through
Infinite people contained in the sky of one person
The surface of infinite water is a book rose-colored
Stapled into the twilight by the wet, palmated footprints of the swan

The embodied, singular perspective and the transcendent, all-encompassing perspective manifest each other. As individuals living in specific temporal spaces, readers are instructed to believe that they will find resonance in the vast literary legacy; as faceless constituents of human culture in general, “infinite people” are reassured that their traces can still appear through individuals that are alive. Even though this stanza seems like another unrestrained praise of poetic power as is typical of Yang’s writing, it stands out by its emphasis on and rationalization of the obvious asymmetry between the individual and the historical, the “one” and the “infinite.” While the faceless historical mass suffers the sharp pain of burning itself to be recognized, the living individuals have to read only to the degree that they are just about to feel hurt. The unequal risk taken by these two sides reveals that the objective of the poet’s centrifugal and centripetal writing is not a passing on of trauma or even a felt responsibility of bearing witness, remembrance, and empathy. The concentric circles seek to convey just the right amount of historical violence (the “rose-colored” blood) behind innocuous words (poems “by the hand”), inadvertent deeds (the intake of the smoke), and idyllic scenery (“twilight”) so that the living ones (including both the poet himself and the readers interpellated by the second-person pronoun)

¹²³ Yang 杨, 160.

can identify some historical wisdom and emotional resonance to carry on their current lives without being overwhelmed by the burden of history.

In Paul de Man's classic study of autobiography, "Autobiography as De-Facement," the critic argues that the genre creates a subject that reflects the author's thoughts and deeds to the extent of substituting the author and continuing to exist after his or her death through figuration, of which the main type is prosopopoeia. De Man problematizes this kind of autonomous subject because its independence is an erasure of its referent, denying the latter the most fundamental quality of existence, namely the capacity to die: "As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopoeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding."¹²⁴ Intriguingly, both Hejinian and Yang conclude (or temporarily conclude in Hejinian's case) their autobiographies with an emphasis of death to preserve the richness of their real lives. According to Hejinian, "[t]he fear of death is residue, its infinity overness, equivalence—an absolute. Reluctance such that it can't be filled."¹²⁵ Instead of letting her imagination cross the border of mortality, death is infinitely postponed by the poet's focus on its imminence. Death is an "overness" both as a physical termination and as an occasion that can be infinitely embellished by words and imagination. As the clear boundary drawn by Hejinian's concentric pattern acknowledges its incapacity to contain such overness, her poetry cannot create an autonomous figure or explicate a complete life. Thereby, the actual lived life continues to manifest potentials not yet stipulated by words.

In contrast, in *Narrative Poems*, Yang crosses the border of mortality. As the concrete individuals join the faceless mass after death, the previously partial acknowledgment is sublimated into total knowledge:

墨汁做的半人半鬼的空

¹²⁴ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 930.

¹²⁵ Hejinian, *My Life*, 165.

无论多远都让你们拥抱取暖
瘦瘦的火中 每首诗将将开屏
完成一只孔雀震颤的表情
[.....]
两次来到
洗劫后的洁净 月光的幽咽
缕缕幽香 让你听你在逍遥¹²⁶

The void made by ink is half humans and half ghosts
No matter how far away you are allowed to embrace and cuddle
In the thin fire every poem unfolds just right
To complete a peacock's quivering
[...]
Arriving twice at
The cleanness after the pillage the moonlight's whimper
The faint fragrance make you hear that you are free

The second-person singular perspective no longer vaguely senses the historical depth profiled behind everyday life. Instead, it becomes a half-fictional character that joins the intimate collective of the dead. This way of bringing the long poem to an end almost commits the kind of prosopopoeia that de Man criticizes, except that Yang only sets free the apparitional form—an effect achieved through the emphasis of the character “幽” meaning faintness and gloominess in words like “whimper” (“幽咽”) and “faint fragrance” (“幽香”). Visualizing the liberation from the mortal body as a dissemination that turns growingly immaterial—from the visible ink to the translucent moonlight to the invisible fragrance—the poet's centrifugal expansion turns back to affirm, rather than negate, bodily existence. As shown by the line “arriving twice at,” this imagined, unsubstantial afterlife is initiated through a revisit of death—namely the last moment of the substantial body—from an external perspective, creating a self-reflexivity that is possible only through the clear differentiation between the dead and the living. More importantly, fusing itself in the abstract notion of history, this afterlife exists to

¹²⁶ Yang 杨, 叙事诗, 161.

provide help to those who are still alive, manifesting its traces in reality only in order to enrich the latter's sense of life by making poetry possible ("every poem takes form just right"). Instead of creating credible literary subjects to deface the authors and readers, Hejinian and Yang employ defaced literary subjects to cast light on those mortal, fallible beings living in the actual reality, who strive for the meaning of their own existence as well as their co-existence with each other to endure and navigate the sociopolitical turmoil that diminishes every individual. Following the poets' negative approach to the epic that leaves room for logical gaps, asymmetrical poetic patterning, the failure of understanding, and weakened subjectivities reluctant to assume full agency, the centripetal contraction leads to a life that is immersed in these eventful eras despite their overwhelmingness, and the centrifugal expansion enables this life to venture beyond itself consciously and cautiously, while it preserves itself and others.

Coda: Recursivity in Digital Long Poems

This thesis presents recursive geometry as a heuristic structure for composing long poems, a descriptive and analytic resource for reading them, and a critical apparatus to understand our limits and potentials in contemporary cultural and political contexts. The scroll, through its accelerating transformation of circular momentum into translation momentum, acknowledges the difficulty for both writers and readers to sustain their attention throughout a book-length poem while guiding them to cope with this difficulty by treating inevitable moments of exhaustion as opportunities for improvisation and serendipity. The fold, with disconnections opening up to connections and vice versa, instills genuine feelings into miscellaneous and even unoriginal materials. It manifests lyric redemption as imminent in our return to, rather than the transcendence of, the quotidian life. The concentric shape, alternately and simultaneously embodying centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, reflects on how various intersecting structures jointly model a subjectivity that is not only rooted in but also heightened from the flux of reality, and how this linguistically constructed, decentered subjectivity can bear historical and social responsibilities. Recursivity's processual development and its periodic looping back upon itself foster a self-reflexive mindset that embeds the writing and reading of the long poem within our experience of the contemporary world. Our insistence on, frustration with, and maneuvering of recursive constraints instantiate our situatedness within languages and cultures, which condition our existence while inspiring us to negotiate with restrictions that make us feel belittled and incompetent, including, as we have discussed, the overwhelming flow of information, mortality, and political turmoil.

Recursivity has further applications in recent digital and automated poetry, which extends the significance of the three analyzed figures. In the technological context, scrolling suggests managing information in real-time, when information is presented or stored sequentially, as it is in cassette tapes and digital screens; folding means a hierarchical organization of files, so that one piece of information

will lead to further information; and concentricity finds an expression in iteration in programming and machine learning, for the reiterative application of specific algorithms is fundamental to the identification of patterns and structures within abundant information. Granted, readings throughout this thesis show that overflowing information is a central issue that needs to be addressed intelligently and creatively in order to establish the genre of the long poem within contemporary reality. But the problem becomes even more poignant in the digital context because the extensive employment of recursive structures shifts from a demand for attention and self-reflection into a normalization of inattention. Indeed, these new understandings propose the figures as effective ways to automate and streamline information extraction, so that, as Alan Liu describes it, “our craving for instant data binds us to an ever more expansive, yet also vanishingly thin, present.”¹

The digital era is particularly challenging for the long poem—a genre that justifies itself by asking for lasting and most likely nonutilitarian commitments—because it needs to cope with the increasingly popular assumption that partial attention, goal-driven but perfunctory engagements, and programmed self-reflections are not only the norm but also praiseworthy indications of efficiency and productivity. We see this *Zeitgeist* in phenomena like multi-tasking, hundreds of followers in our own social media accounts, and numerous performance indicators systematically quantifying our production. In interacting with a hypertechnologized culture, long poems are obliged to protect writers and readers from being recursively reduced to processable and even predictable data through reinstilling poetic imagination into digital infrastructures.

There are already many endeavors in this vein. Through the scrolling of tape cassettes, Kenneth Goldsmith recorded the daily one-minute weather reports over a year and transcribed them into a long poem *The Weather* (2005), dramatizing how framed attention accumulates into a continuous sense of the flow of time—an uncanny correspondence to the unfolding of Chinese scroll paintings—

¹ Alan Liu, *Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9.

—as shocks and surprises flickering in almost banal repetitions.² For the fold, in response to pain after the September 11 attacks, Robert Fitterman composed a long prose poem *This Window Makes Me Feel* (2018). He used “this feels” and “this makes me feel” as the basis of hundreds of Google Searches, whose results (most without direct relevance to the 9/11 bombing) were appropriated to complete the phrase in the title. With digital windows repetitively opened, emotions flood in from various sources through various voices to interrogate how we may situate concrete pain and personal yearning for comfort and empathy on platforms that render emotions fragmentary, anonymous, and even out of context. As for concentric shapes, we find Charles O. Hartman and Hugh Kenner’s long poem *Sentences* (1995). They processed an outdated grammatical exercise with a recursive program called TRAVESTY,³ and then the result was manually edited before being fed into another recursive program called DIASTEXT that automated Jackson Mac Low’s chance operation.⁴ With human beings and machines taking turns to modify a few sentences that sound rather dull due to specific pedagogical purposes, the result is a non-sense poem that attains significance through deconstructing semantic congruity into linguistic patterns. Lines like “The/ Analysis that/ Our hurricane./ / forsaken./ / little little little must little little lame.” reveal how vulnerability is not an analyzable question but individually felt effects, as people’s vain effort of analysis—through the concentric narrowing down of the hurricane by objective programs and human intelligence—stutters into a defeat.⁵

² Another intriguing digital writing concerning the scroll format is *1 the Road*, a novel by Ross Goodwin. Goodwin drove from New York to New Orleans with multiple sensors: a camera, a microphone, and a GPS receiver. The information they collected was fed into a recurrent neural network that had been trained by novels and poems. This writing process evokes Jack Kerouac’s scroll novel *On the Road*, the scroll metaphor for American highways in Gary Snyder’s long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, and the recursive and sequential processing in neural networks.

³ For the program’s initial publication, see Hugh Kenner and Joseph O’Rourke, “A Travesty Generator for Micros: Nonsense imitation can be disconcertingly recognizable,” *BYTE: A Small System Journal* 9, no. 12 (1984):129-131, 449-469.

⁴ DIASTEXT was first initiated by Hartman in 1989. Detailed information can be found in Charles O. Hartman, *Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry* (Wesleyan University Press, 2012).

⁵ Charles O. Hartman and Hugh Kenner, *Sentences* (Sun & Moon Press, 1995), 10.

All these examples demonstrate how recursive structures in poetry interact with but also distinguish themselves from recursive infrastructures in digital technologies, restating language's potential of serendipity, interpersonal connections, and self-reflection. Meanwhile, the digital era inspires new ways to imagine recursivity, as several projects combine multiple recursive figures. For instance, Canadian poet J. R. Carpenter created "...and by islands I mean paragraph" (2013), which is a webpage extending far beyond any browser windows.⁶ Upon a huge grid background which we need to scroll in every direction to read, we find a fictional map of islands indicated by dots and irregular shapes, numbers presumably denoting the coordinate, inconsistent orientational vectors, and occasional illustrations related to navigation. Some of the islands are accompanied by computer-generated text chunks drawn from international literary works about islands, with each click unfolding the current brief paragraph to additional paragraphs. Richard Kostelanetz created several lengthy word strings, in which every two consecutive words have two or three overlapping letters. For one of these strings called *Stringtwo* (1990), he first adapted it into a thirty-five-minute video, where letters continuously flow into and out of the screen, sometimes as a single thread and other time as an entangled mass, just like Ammons's tape piling up on the floor. In 2015, he further selected one-fourth of the string, bent it into a swirl, and presented it as a concentric concrete poem "String Two, IV (shrillcitron)." Moreover, Yang Lian divided the English translation of his concentric long poem *Where the Sea Stands Still* into chunks of varying lines and reconnected each excerpt to three other excerpts. Then, Canadian poet John Cayley programmed the resulting multi-dimensional, reticular system into an HTML hyperlink poem.⁷ After reading a text chunk in the middle of the screen, readers have four options to continue as they wish—one is the original poem, and the other three feature

⁶ The digital presentation can be found at J. R. Carpenter, "...And by Islands I Mean Paragraphs," ...and by islands I mean paragraphs, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://luckysoap.com/andbyislands/>. For more detailed discussions, see J. R. Carpenter, "Eight Short Talks about Islands ... and by Islands I Mean Paragraphs," *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* 7, no. 1 (September 1, 2014): 27–32.

⁷ Lian Yang and John Cayley, "Where the Sea Stands Still," trans. Brian Holton, *Where the Sea Stands Still*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://programmatology.shadoof.net/works/wsss/index.html>.

Yang's reorganization. They choose by clicking one of the four icons, each placed at an angle of the window. This collaboration, published in 1997 under the same title as the original poem, was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London right before Hong Kong's return from the United Kingdom to China. Readers' illusion of actively making choices while they are actually bound by chance and determinism reflects an interpretation of history at that special moment.

While careful readings of recursive structures in digital long poems will offer a direction for future research, for now, it suffices to propose that the transportability of scrolls, folds, and concentric shapes from traditional paper to digital platforms attests to their efficacy in serving as provisional paradigms for the long poem. More importantly, digital poets' revision and reassembly of them alert us to the fact that the genre of the long poem is facing new challenges and potentials, as concepts like continuity, fragmentation, structure, and scale become difficult to define within the surge of information. I would like to end this thesis by returning to its beginning, where I analyzed Ouyang Jianghe's "Phoenix" to show how the impoverished imagination may take flight again. At the end of 2023, Chinese artist Yue Luping inputted the entire poem "Phoenix" into ChatGPT and asked it to rewrite each line. In the uncanny new long poem entitled "Falcon" ("猎鹰"), ChatGPT draws on its knowledge about Ouyang and Xu Bing, parodies their previous works, and insinuates a judgment on contemporary art and poetry as preying on history and cultural legacy to mask its own unoriginality, as resorting to conceptual processes to conceal its inability to vitalize language and reality. Xu and Ouyang's deconstruction propels a return to the tangible quotidian that affirms life and reestablishes imagination. ChatGPT's deconstruction of the artist's and the poet's creations, whether fairly leveled or not, warns us that a complete offloading of human recursive thinking to technology will subjugate all lives and minds to its predictive power, turning imagination into mere hallucination:

比如，挖出艺术的火箭，
但又在 AI 这一边，把引擎熄灭。
编出一个系统，把天书的伪汉字

写成与非门二进制：字的仓库，搬运一空。
他建造了男主和女主，却谋杀了导演。
组装了故事，却把编剧送上断头台。
收割了后人泪，却连根拔起先贤祠。
这白夜的无限电影啊。这万古泡影。
这负债累累的手艺和注目礼。
猎鹰顿悟飞的真谛，却不飞了。⁸

For instance, he excavates the rocket of art,
But turns off its engine from the end of AI.
He contrives a system, turning pseudo-characters in *Book of the Sky*
Into NAND binary: the warehouse of characters is completely emptied.
He constructs heroes and heroines, but murders the director.
He assembles a story, but forces the playwright to the guillotine.
He reaps descendants' tears, but eradicates ancestral halls.
Oh, this infinite film of the white night. This hallucination since ancient times.
These loaned techniques and gazes of salute.
The falcon is enlightened to the truth of flying, but no longer flies.

⁸ Lines 1–4 refer to *Xu Bing Tianshu Rocket*, a collaboration between Xu and i-Space. They intended to launch a rocket whose body was covered by pseudo-characters in Xu's *Book of the Sky* into space. Even though the initial plan failed, the crushed rocket became a new scene of art according to Xu Bing's own account in "The Destiny of the First Art Rocket." Less explicit, lines 5–6 may refer to Ouyang's theater-inspired poems, especially "Hamlet" ("哈姆雷特"). Line 7 remarks on Ouyang's long prose poem "Hanging Coffin" ("悬棺"). Line 8 points readers to Xu and a group of computer scientists' *Artificial Intelligence Infinite Film (AI-IF) Project*, a real-time feature film production artificial intelligence system. Line 9 refers to Ouyang's self-selected poetry collection *Techniques and Gazes of Salute* published in Taiwan in 2013. For the complete poem written by ChatGPT, see Yue, Luping 岳路平, "Fenghuang bian Lieying: AI 'baogai' Ouyang Jianghe changshi Fenghuang" "《凤凰》变《猎鹰》：AI'爆改'欧阳江河长诗《凤凰》" [From "Phoenix" to "Falcon": AI's Radical Rewrite of Ouyang Jianghe's Long Poem "Phoenix"]. Weibo, November 25, 2023, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404972321336328379>.

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