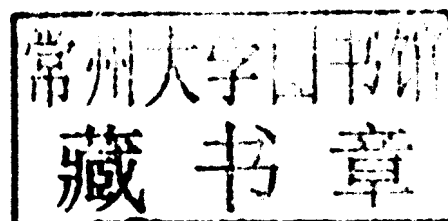# *Poetry*

CRITICISM

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 130

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Poetry
Criticism

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Preface

*P*oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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■ The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

■ The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

■ Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

■ Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 79-88. Print.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

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Bei Dao
1949-

Born Zhan Zhenkai. Chinese poet and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

The foremost dissident poet of modern China, Dao was the leader of the Misty Poetry movement—sometimes referred to as the shadows poetry movement—a group of writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s who opposed the restrictions associated with China's Cultural Revolution. His most famous poem, "The Answer," written in 1976 during the Tiananmen protests, is said to have expressed the sentiments of China's disillusioned young people at that time. In 1989 the poem again seemed to speak to the pro-democracy movement as it appeared on posters in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Dao has lived in exile since 1989, when he was barred from returning to China after attending a literary conference in Germany.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dao, whose pseudonym means "Northern Island," was born in Beijing on August 2, 1949, the first of three children. His father was an administrator and pro-democracy organizer and his mother was a doctor. Dao was educated at Beijing's Fourth Middle School until the 1966 Cultural Revolution ended his education. For a brief period, he was a Red Guard, but he became disenchanted with the Revolution's agenda and was sent to Hebel Province where he worked as a construction worker from 1970 to 1977. In 1978, he returned to Beijing and, along with fellow dissident Mang Ke, founded a pro-democracy literary magazine, *Jintian,* which translates to *Today.* They published only nine issues from December 1978 until September 1980, when they were shut down by the government, but during that time the journal publicized the Misty Poetry movement. Bei Dao was in Germany at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations and subsequent massacre of the protestors by the government. He was not allowed to return to China and his wife and daughter were not permitted to join him in exile for several years. Since then, he has lived and taught in England, Scandinavia, and the United States, and continues to write. His awards include the PEN Freedom-to-Write Award, the Tucholsky Prize

from Swedish PEN, and a Guggenheim Fellowship; he has been nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Bei Dao now serves as Professor of Humanities at Chinese University of Hong Kong.

MAJOR WORKS

Although Dao began writing in 1970, some of his early work is now lost, and the remainder was informally circulated; his first published poetry appeared in 1972. He writes primarily in free verse and is especially known for his skillful use of symbolism. Early in his career he experimented with "sectional poetry," described by one of his translators, Bonnie McDougall (see Further Reading), as "a collection of short poems on one theme grouped under a common title," but he later abandoned the form. His poem "The Answer" appeared in March, 1979, in *Today,* marking the official beginning of the Misty Poetry movement, which offered a new style of poetry whose structure and imagery—usually featuring shadows, mists, and darkness—were a departure from traditional Chinese poetry. McDougall reports that it was called shadow poetry because it was considered incomprehensible. "Most of the poems are printed without punctuation," she explains, plus "the syntax is often unclear, and the connections between image and idea or between one image and another are often not stated but left implicit."

Dao's writings have appeared in a number of journals and anthologies and have been translated into twenty-five languages. Seven volumes of poetry have been translated into English, including *Notes from the City of the Sun* (1983), *The August Sleepwalker* (1990), *Old Snow* (1991), and *Forms of Distance* (1994). His most recent collection, *At the Sky's Edge: Poems, 1991-1996,* appeared in 2001. In addition to his poetry, two essay collections—*Blue House* (2000) and *Midnight's Gate* (2005)—have been translated into English as well as a collection of his stories, *Waves* (1990).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although it has not been easily documented, Dao is reputed to be the best poet in his native China since the establishment of the republic in 1949. McDougall reports that he is particularly popular among the young people and students of China, and that his work is still being published in national and local literary magazines. Dian Li also notes that Dao's early poems

"found an audience among disillusioned young readers, mainly college and high school students." Li contends that "for these readers, the charm of Bei Dao's poetry was that it offered a poetic hero as a much-needed alternative to the socialist heroes that had saturated China through the machinery of propaganda."

Dao's prominence in the Misty Poetry movement has been lauded by some critics as a boldly subversive activity against the oppressions of the Chinese government. McDougall contends that his style is based on contemporary Chinese poetry "radically transformed by his own sensitivity and intelligence as well as his determination to defy the limitations hitherto placed on its further development." Li, however, believes that by the time of the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Dao was no longer defying those limits as he "was no longer enthusiastic about political activism" and was, in fact, creating "increasingly pessimistic poetry." Nonetheless, according to Li, "the hunger-striking students were selective readers who simply bypassed the message of skepticism and even cynicism and picked up only the call to arms."

Li, in a different essay, explores the difficulties involved in translating Dao's work—particularly given his extensive use of metaphors. She believes that "the most challenging and also the most rewarding part of reading Bei Dao's poetry consists of chewing on his abundant metaphors and images that relentlessly and ceaselessly assault our perception of reality." Since the appreciation of metaphors is so dependent on shared experiences and associations, it is hardly surprising that Dao's style would present special difficulties for translators. David Damrosch also addresses the issue of translation by refuting critic Steven Owen's claims that "'world literature' is little more than a watered-down Western literature" and that the poetry of Dao is "second-hand American modernism, given momentary currency thanks to its author's close involvement in dissident activities leading up to the Tiananmen Square massacre." Damrosch points out the errors of this approach to the literature of other cultures and contends that "if we do want to see the work of world literature as a window on different parts of the world, we must take into account the way its images have been multiply refracted in the process of transculturation."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Notes from the City of the Sun [trans. by Bonnie S. Mc-Dougall] 1983

The August Sleepwalker [trans. by Bonnie S. McDougall] 1990
Old Snow [trans. by Bonnie S. McDougall and Chen Maiping] 1991
Forms of Distance [trans. by David Hinton] 1994
Landscape Over Zero [trans. by David Hinton and Yanbing Chen] 1996
Unlock Poems by Bei Dao [trans. by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong] 2000
At the Sky's Edge: Poems, 1991-1996 [trans. by David Hinton] 2001

Other Major Works

Waves (short stories) 1990
Blue House (essays) 2000
Midnight's Gate (essays) 2005

CRITICISM

Dian Li (essay date fall 1996)

SOURCE: Li, Dian. "Ideology and Conflicts in Bei Dao's Poetry." *Modern Chinese Literature* 9, no. 2 (fall 1996): 369-85.

[*In the following essay, Li examines the contradictions and ambiguities in Bei Dao's oppositional poetry.*]

1.

That political criticism is a viable paradigm in literary theory is no longer in question, at least not in the minds of many practitioners in this field who have presented interesting results.[1] Michel Foucault was the first to expose the hidden relationship between power and knowledge and thus offered an effective analytical tool for all socially-oriented criticism. By relentlessly denaturalizing the "unstable affair" of literature, Terry Eagleton demonstrates eloquently the ideological inclination of each and every school of literary theory of our time, from structuralism and semiotics to psychoanalysis and post-structuralism (1983:12). "Always historicize!" Frederic Jameson warns us, and then sets an example of treating culture as the collective unconscious derived from modes of production (1981:9). Considering the fact that both Eagleton and Jameson are well-known neo-Marxists, it comes as no surprise that political criticism in its present form carries a clear Marxist overtone, which has been tested mainly on the twin institutions of liberal humanism and modern capitalism. The focus of study in this

paper—Bei Dao's . . . poetry and its context of social-ist China—however, bespeaks a different orientation in the spectrum of political criticism, which is to say, the content and meaning of Bei Dao's politics stand apart from those of Western Marxists in terms of their proclaimed ends. Therefore, in my discussion of the ideological conflicts at play in Bei Dao and his poetry I shall be acutely aware that the political paradigm as known in the West is applied in a vastly different social context.

China's "uniqueness," so to speak, does not mean that China lives outside the order of the postcolonial world. Rather, it means that modern China has run a course that postcoloniality has precluded in many parts of the colonial world, namely, a successful socialist nation-building guided by Maoist ideology up to the 1980s. Even though the "authenticity" of Marxism in China, or of "Marxism with Chinese Characteristics," as the Maoists would like it to be called, remains a debatable point,[2] there is no denying that events in China have proceeded somewhat more smoothly than in many Third World countries in Africa and Latin America that are just as deeply embedded in a colonial past. So much so that, in the 1960s and early 1970s, disenfranchised Western intellectuals, notably French intellectuals such as feminist Julia Kristeva, and to a certain degree the post-structuralist Roland Barthes, found for a short time a ready shelter in Maoism. This list, interestingly enough, also includes Michel Foucault who, as Stanley Rosen observes, "lapsed into a flirtation with Maoism during his later years" (1987:6).

In functional terms, some political criticism aims at exposing the ideological structure that sustains the production and consumption of a certain kind of writing called literature. It is in this sense that Eagleton claims political criticism is not just another "alternative," but that all criticism is political in nature (1983:195). However, political criticism does not necessarily equate with political activism, for if a "politicizing" act has to be done, it is done in criticism by navigating its way only through the medium of literature, a signifying system that depends on a manufactured tension between its signifiers and its referents. Even if literature can be construed as a site for a battle of ideologemes, the interest of political criticism is more in uncovering what constitutes the battle than in how it has been meaningfully fought. This is an important point to bear in mind for our discussion of Bei Dao's poetry. Not that there is an impossible line between political criticism and political activism—a distinction generically unsustainable. Rather, as I shall demonstrate shortly, an overt activistic focus in the early phase of Bei Dao's poetry eventually ends up collapsing towards the dominant ideology it sets out to oppose in the first place.

Ideology, be it understood in the context of either Foucault's "discursive practice" or Althusser's "lived relation," is still a notably fuzzy business. Hiding behind its façade of invisibility and unrepresentability, it exists by making itself felt in every corner of society, from *realpolitik* to the last thread of our quotidian life. It is a truism that ideology tends to dominate, but the operation of its dominance depends on a simultaneous operation that Ross Chambers calls "ideological split":

> An ideology is not a doctrine to be accepted or not accepted but a discursive proposition that positions subjects in relations of power (power being itself a differential phenomenon, existing only through being unevenly distributed). Ideology necessarily produces these subjects relationally, and it is in the differences between them that the potential for ideological split resides, these subjects being differently positioned regarding the system that produces them.
>
> (quoted in Beebee 1994:15)

While Chambers views ideology as power relations between subjects in society, Thomas Beebee locates the manifestation of ideology in textuality and the generic clashes that make it possible:

> Ideology is the magnetic force that simultaneously holds a society together by allowing it to communicate with itself in shorthand and pushes society apart by conflicting with people's realities. It is only in the deformations and contradictions of writing and thinking that we can recognize ideology; genre is one of these observable deformations, a pattern in the iron filings of cultural products that reveals the force of ideology.
>
> (1994:18)

In light of the above theories on ideology, it should be no problem for us to dismiss the myth of an air-tight control of Maoist discourse on socialist China, a position held by some American political scientists of China studies until recent times.[3] It is then safe to say that in China system-induced "noises" are always a reality, a presence that is both within and without the unprecedentedly oppressive Maoist discourse. One of the loudest of these noises is, of course, the so-called "Misty Poetry" movement led by Bei Dao in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The historical and social conditions in which the "Misty Poetry" movement took shape and its thematic variations as an emerging literary genre have been well documented by scholars in the West.[4] On the theoretical level, Bei Dao and his poetry also offer a lively example of an important point implicitly postulated in Ross Chambers's writing on ideology and society: The complicity of a dominant ideology and its subordinates in the life of an ideological split is a structural presence. Positioned on both sides of such a split, the dominant and the subordinates can only be relative as well as mutually constitutive,

that is to say, the possibility of their collapsing towards each other is not only real but a condition for their separate identities as well. This formation, devoid of such stark terms as "positive" and "negative," represents a departure from a familiar and quick emotional verdict on the working strategies in the context of an ideological opposition. While the theory may seem to blunt the thrust of the ideological struggle, it will be more adept at describing the dialectic complexity of this struggle and particularly helpful in uncovering a utopian slide so often seen in literatures of opposition. In this light, it comes as no surprise that Bei Dao, while "doing battle" with the Maoist discourse by means of poetry, has demonstrated a significant degree of ideological ambiguity and contradiction.

2.

Bei Dao has the fortune—or misfortune—of sharing his year of birth (1949) with the People's Republic of China, the founding of which was hailed as one of the most celebrated triumphs for world communism in this century. The tumultuous political and social history of China since that year has just begun to reveal its ugly face to the world, although it is doubtful that the true extent of human sacrifice to satisfy a megalomaniac will ever be known.[5] But the most striking feature of ideological control during the Maoist era was its relentless suppression of any form of expression in arts and literature that might undermine the iron filings of socialist realism. It is worth noting that it was at the end of the Cultural Revolution, a time of unprecedented strangulation of Chinese intellectuals, that Bei Dao started to write poetry. At the time, writing, especially writing to oppose the "correct" genre of writing supported by a merciless state apparatus, was not an easy task. There were the watchful eyes of Party foot-soldiers in the neighborhood and the uninvited company of the police—with a real threat of imprisonment. But eventually, what counted was Bei Dao's persistence. By 1978, with the help of a few friends, Bei Dao started a crude, stencil-printed literary journal called *Jintian* . . . [*Today*], the first ever "unofficial" publication of its kind in the People's Republic of China. Although it was shut down in a little over one year, it helped to spread a school of poetry that was later to be labeled with malice by official critics as "Misty Poetry."[6] If measured only by its claimed distance from socialist realistic poetry of the time, "Misty Poetry" was truly the most subversive form of expression that the PRC had ever witnessed.

Needless to say, the "claimed distance" could not and indeed did not go very far if "Misty Poetry" intended to remain a meaningful "noise" against socialist realism. In "To Our Reader" printed in *Jintian*'s inaugural issue, Bei Dao outlined the journal's mission:

> History has finally presented us an opportunity, enabling our generation to sing aloud songs that have been deeply buried in our hearts for ten years, for which we will no longer suffer from the punishment of The Thunder. . . . [This is] the beginning of a new era, which will affirm the meaning of everyone's existence and further people's understanding of the spirit of freedom. This change of era for our ancient motherland also will affirm China's status among all nations.

> (1, translation mine)

Except for a sly call for individuality and freedom, the passage emits very recognizable traces of socialist realism: poetry for a higher use, collective consciousness and patriotism, and unconditional optimism. It was within this framework of ambiguous complicity with the official discourse that Bei Dao in his first phase created many "unofficial" poems, which found an audience among disillusioned young readers, mainly college and high school students. For these readers, the charm of Bei Dao's poetry was that it offered a poetic hero as a much-needed alternative to the socialist heroes that had saturated China through the machinery of propaganda. This poetic image of a hero, largely identified with Bei Dao himself, however, was just as idealistic and utopian. Take, for example, Bei Dao's most famous poem during this phase, **"The Answer"**:

> Debasement is the password of the base,
> Nobility the epitaph of the noble.
> See how the gilded sky is covered
> With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.
>   . . . . .
>
> I came into this world
> Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,
> To proclaim before the judgment
> The voice that has been judged:
>
> Let me tell you, world,
> I-do-not-believe!
> If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
> Count me as number one thousand and one.
>   . . . . .
>
> If the sea is destined to breach the dikes
> Let all the brackish water pour into my heart;
> If the land is destined to rise
> Let humanity choose a peak for existence again.
>
> A new conjunction and glimmering stars
> Adorn the unobstructed sky now:
> They are the pictographs from five thousands years,
> They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

> (*August Sleepwalker* 33)

The poem, as one critic pointed out, attests to an emerging "national poetry, not one of nationalism, but one in which the poet becomes a ritual sacrifice in the midst of cataclysm, purifying the corrupt nation

through the sacrifice of his own body" (Barnstone 17). "I-do-not-believe," as a highlighted marker for the poem's message of protest against the prevalent positivism and idolatry, is probably the most eloquent utterance of the decade after Mao's death. In the meantime, a heroic mode can hardly be missed: a hero who transcends time and space, brave enough to take death's challenge and benevolent enough to suffer for all humanity. If we read this poem together with a series of poems dedicated to Yu Luoke . . . , a martyr who was executed simply for a few words of dissent at the height of the Cultural Revolution, we get a better sense of how this image of a hero was constructed. One of them, **"Declaration,"** begins: "I am no hero / In an age without heroes / I just want to be a man" (*August Sleepwalker* 62), but this wish "to be a man" is quickly contrasted with Yu Luoke's heroic death, "I will not kneel on the ground / Allowing the executioners to look tall / To obstruct the wind of freedom."[7] The image of "a blood-red dawn" in the last line reiterates the theme of sacrifice in **"The Answer."** It seems clear to me that Bei Dao's poetry in this phase cannot escape this paradox: to be a man means to combat the abundance of "false heroes" that permeate the literature of socialist realism, but this can only be accomplished by an imagination in terms of excessive heroism, that is, by constructing a hero that is just as "false" as the "false heroes."

This process of collapsing would appear to be inevitable if Bei Dao took his poetry on a mission of political activism, for which a subject's self-consciousness as a strategic vantage point is necessarily bound with the construction of "impersonal personality," to borrow T. S. Eliot's famous phrase. This grandiose sense of poetry typical of Bei Dao's early phase as well as of other "Misty" poets is best captured in a poem dedicated to Bei Dao by Mang Ke . . . , a co-founder of *Jintian*: "I'm a poet, / I'm the shadow of rebellion. / Let it be torn to shreds, / But its blood falling will reflect light. I'm a poet, / I'm blood-stained paper. / Let it pass from hands to hands, / Let heart firmly connect heart. . . ." (translation mine). It goes without saying that the mission that Bei Dao entrusted to his poetry for good historical reasons struck a harmonious chord with a generation of young Chinese desperately in need of alternative heroes. It is a known fact that Bei Dao's *Jintian* group contributed a great deal, if only indirectly, to Beijing's Democracy Wall movement in 1979, but thanks to Deng Xiaoping, a new autocrat who claimed to be steering the country towards openness and reform, Democracy Wall fell quickly, leaving Bei Dao little time to attend to the wounds of his defeated heroes. But the song of the Muse must go on.

3.

Bei Dao's poetry in the wake of the abortive Democracy Wall Movement embarked on a subtly different course in which political engagement gave way to quotidian topics, elegant heroic utterance to endearing personal voices, and a reserved optimism to a profound skepticism. Take, for example, **"All,"** one of Bei Dao's widely read poems[*]:

> All is fate
> all is cloud
> all is a beginning without an end
> all is search that dies at birth
> all joy lacks smiles
> all sorrow lacks tears
> all language is repetition
> all contact a first encounter
> all love is in the heart
> all past is in a dream
> all hope comes with footnotes
> all faith comes with groans
> all explosions have a momentary lull
> all deaths have a lingering echo.

(August Sleepwalker 35)

The poem's message of determinism and futility is inescapable. This being so, it does not indicate Bei Dao's abandonment of his vantage point of ideological opposition. Rather, he was simply announcing his commitment to the creation of a new poetic discourse that aimed at smashing the remnant of Maoism's yoke on artistic expression. Bei Dao began to play with an expansive range of topics and motifs which had been either stereotyped or forbidden and to engage in an unyielding exploration of new imagistic possibilities in contrast to clichés and stock expressions. This was done with a clear self-consciousness of futility: a rebellious dance within the confines of **"The Boundary":**

> I want to go to the other bank
>
> The river water alters the sky's color
> and alters me
> I am in the current
> my shadow stands by the river bank
> like a tree struck by lightning
>
> I want to go to the other bank
>
> In the trees on the other bank
> a solitary startled wood pigeon
> flies towards me

(August Sleepwalker 69)

A light touch of optimism typical of Bei Dao's earlier poems is reserved for the use of the Buddhist trope, "the other bank," which signifies the realm of Nirvana, or freedom from rebirth. But it remains elusive even in repetition, unattainable to the shifting shadow that constitutes the speaker.

In an article dealing with nationalism and Irish literature, Eagleton spells out the problematic nature of the metaphysics of nationalism: it rests on the notion of the subject that preexists its own process of materialization and forgets that "the expression and formulation of needs are always dialogical affairs, that needs and desire are always in some sense received back from an 'other'" (1990:29). On the other hand, in order for this dialogism to take place, the repression has to be removed as much as necessary, and he continues: "A radical politics can prescribe what must be done for this to occur; but it cannot prescribe the content of what will then be lived, for the content, as Marx says, goes beyond the phrase. All radical politics are thus in a profound sense formalistic" (ibid.). To put it differently, while "Misty Poetry" did not, and could not, for that matter, prescribe the content of an alternative reality, it created in its very unfamiliar form of utterance a space to wreak havoc on the only known reality. The radical implication of Bei Dao's experiment in poetry was best found in the strong reaction from the party bureaucrats of cultural and ideological affairs, which culminated in a full-scale campaign against "Misty Poetry" in the early 1980s. Bei Dao and his "Misty Poetry" faced various attacks (McDougall 1983; Goodman), the most incisive of which proved to be an attack on his denigration of the notion of transparency on which socialist "reality" was predicated. By inscribing a multiplicity of meanings in his opaque text, Bei Dao shifted the interpretive authority from the Party critic to the reader. "Poetry of obscurity!" the Party critic cried. It is for this reason that Bei Dao's otherwise negligible poem **"Life"** raised the ire of Ai Qing . . . , a godfather-like figure of socialist poetry. The poem has only two words: "A Net." Ai Qing claimed that, first of all, it was absurd for the poem to have a longer title than the poem itself," and the image of net was useless since it did not capture any identifiable meanings at any moment. The debate here, of course, is about more than evaluating a minor poem. Speaking from a position of power, Ai Qing attempts to buttress the generic stability necessary to uphold the dominant ideology with which Bei Dao had determined not to conform.

If interpretive multiplicity was indeed the vehicle for Bei Dao's ideological opposition, it translated well to his readers during the ensuing years. The orchestrated crusade against Bei Dao and "Misty Poetry" proved to be a total failure because, instead of suppressing the dissemination of "Misty Poetry," it helped to raise its popularity across college campuses. The subversive power of Bei Dao's poetry fully demonstrated itself when the student protesters marched into Tian'anmen Square in the spring of 1989 chanting Bei Dao's verses (mostly from his first phase, though). It remains doubt-ful, however, that to be "used" this way was Bei Dao's original intention. In the late 1980s, Bei Dao was no longer enthusiastic about political activism. Besides his increasingly pessimistic poetry during this phase, one can also find "external" evidence for his disinterest in activism in his noticeable silence in response to the debate about "Misty Poetry" and his absence from any civic organizations of democratic orientation. But the hunger-striking students were selective readers who simply bypassed the message of skepticism and even cynicism and picked up only the calls to arms. The literary discourse in China by then had reached the point where the interpretation of Bei Dao's multiplicity did not belong to Bei Dao, and the ideological battle that Bei Dao had started earlier, which he was still carrying on in a sense, had acquired a life of its own. The dominant ideology was, of course, very aware of Bei Dao's symbolic role in the student movement. That is why Bei Dao was among the first of Chinese intellectuals forced into exile before the bloodstains on Tian'anmen Square were washed away.

4.

The uncharted water of an exile's life presents for Bei Dao a new challenge that is just as repressive as, if not more so than, the ideological containment he experienced in China. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's cruelty and mercilessness televised throughout the world, Bei Dao has become a live emblem of freedom and democracy. The poet's exile has raised the Western reader's interest in his poetry and at the same time provided grounds for a sympathetic reading of political suffering and victimization,[10] which are actually encouraged by informed critics.[11] Bei Dao's rising international fame as a "political poet" from China, however, belies the complexity of his writing in this phase in which an impersonal heroic voice has yielded to private or existential concerns, a trend that, we may recall, was already evident in many of his second-phase poems. Bei Dao stills writes as diligently as always and publishes volume after volume of poetry in English translation, but the reading of his poems now produces a quite different experience from the reading of his earlier poems. One may attribute this to the maturity of the poet or to the more direct exposure to foreign artistic inspirations, but doubtlessly what underlies his transformation is the indelible mark of the experience of exile on his life and his writing.

In 1989, when asked about the difficulty facing exiled Chinese writers in the West, Bei Dao responded: "Cultural shock, language inefficiency and removal from the experienced world—these are excruciating challenges. I know from the very beginning that this is a battle that I will never win. But I have no other

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