



The Semiotics of Exile in Literature

HONG ZENG



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INTRODUCTION

This collection includes my own essays in comparative literature from 1997 to 2002. Thematically, these essays may be subsumed under the core theme of the semiotics of exile as reflected in various genres and discourses: photography, poetics, tragedy, prototype of artists, concept of time, and *écriture féminine*.

Exile, in the previous literary criticism, has been mostly a geographical concept: it is a synonym of the uprooted experience of living abroad, away from one's motherland. Most of these criticisms examine one specific ethnic group of immigrant writers. For example, German writers exiled in America or England after World War II, American writers' self-exile to the left bank of Paris after World War I, Polish women in Soviet Union, Spanish writers in Mexico. Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*,¹ and Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*² are two of the very few books that explore exile as a philosophical language reflected in the experience of multiple ethnic groups (mostly writers) exiled in different countries. However, they didn't examine the language of exile outside the experience of expatriation, nor in relation to genres and discourses to show how the experience of exile is central to these genres.

In this book, the sense of exile I explore is not only geographical dislocation but also cultural and psychological uprootedness. In other words, I attempt to define a universal language of exile—as has not been done in previous scholarship—reflected in various genres and discourses irrespective of nationality and time. It does not even have to do with the experience of expatriation. This book includes studies of writers who are expatriates (Peter Handke, Alfred Byron, James Joyce, and Gu Cheng), writers who become exiles in their country because of the vicissitude of history (Wang Anyi, Hai Zi), poets who are necessarily exiles in their poetic

experience (Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath), novelists who were labeled as romanticists but are indeed exiles from romantic ideal, (Byron and E. T. A. Hoffmann), writers about cosmic exile in time (Marcel Proust and Jorge Luis Borges), and female writers whose *écriture féminine* narrates the quintessential self-exile in female experience, expressed outside symbolic order (Marguerite Duras, Maria Luisa Bombal, and Toni Morrison). Just as Roland Barthes established a semiotics of photography and an empire of signs in Japanese culture and just as Julia Kristeva established a semiotics of desire in painting and literature, I attempt to define the semiotics of exile as an implication of disjointedness within signification, selfhood, narrative, time, and genre. Exile suggests longing for a lost center and a ~~vagabond~~ state. Reflected in the disjointedness of signification, it implies a deconstructive poetics with an absent center, floating signifier, simulacrum, and fragmentation that have singular affinity with postmodernism. Disjointedness within self implies a divided self, multiple personalities, masks, and doppelgangers. The disjointedness within narrative privileges fragmented text and narrative irony. Disjointedness within time implies fractured time and collage of times, as well as plural, tangential sequence. In terms of genre, the semiotics of exile implies inability to belong or categorize, thus has the propensity of upsetting genre. Utilizing Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, I also find the affinity between the semiotics of exile and the semiotics of photography, which according to Barthes, emblemizes exile, mourning and nostalgia.³

In Chapter 1, I examined the semiotics of exile in photography. Photography, according to Pirandello, is linked with the motif of exile. It signifies not only an estrangement between self and image under the spotlight but also the daily enlarged disparity between the perennial life preserved by the photograph and the reality of the corporeal being subject to the erosion of time.⁴ In the writings by Lu Xun and Roland Barthes, the spectacle of photography is tied with the "specter," the theater of the dead.⁵ In its insistence on the living reality of what has been dead, photography flouts the division of reality and illusion, death and living. Thus, in my view, this emblemizes the wedding of Eros and Mourning in the novel of nostalgia for a dying culture. The semiotics of photography has its characteristic trope of exile, mourning, cultural nostalgia, and loss of reality. In the two novels studied in this chapter, Wang Anyi's *Melody of Everlasting Regret*⁶ and Peter Handke's *Der kurze brief*

zum langen Abschied,⁷ photography is the central emblem of exile, death, impasse of the past, the divorce of body and image that results in the protagonists' lost sense of reality.

In Chapter 2, I studied the poetics of exile. Poetics of exile means estrangement from origin—disjointedness, disparity, decentralization, and marginality. In the five poets studied in this chapter, the poetics of exile is characterized by disparity and marginality in its various manifestations. In the Canto fifteen of *Don Juan*,⁸ whose protagonist features the self-fictionalized, exiled Byronic hero, the language of disparity is reflected in the playful disjointedness between form and matter, more specifically, between its rhyme scheme and its narrative content, as well as in the dual narrative voices of the narrator in his simultaneous indulgence and disparagement of the English aristocratic society. The poetics of disparity makes this romantic text take on a curious affinity with postmodern poetics of *différance* that can be compared with Barthes's account of the pleasure and the bliss of the text. In Sylvia Plath's poetry, the disparity is painted as in Edvard Munch's wood print in the clash of the symbolic implication of primal colors. In Emily Dickinson's poetry on death, as in Martin Heidegger's metaphysics, exile is the acute, liminal experience of self-estrangement and self-disintegration, for which death is the only adequate metaphor—the nothingness at the center of existence that gives rise to the experience of pure being. Hai Zi's poetry captures the tumultuous current of vagrancy, nostalgia, and lost love, and his yearning for a lost primal unity is constructed on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of Zagreus.⁹ Gu Cheng's exile from the Taoist paradise is implicated in the split voice of his last poetry, with an omniscient, posthumous self looking back with detachment at the delimited living self.¹⁰

In Chapter 3, I examined the semiotics of exile in tragedy. The sublimity of tragedy is engendered through the dual nature of tragic heroes. Tragic heroes are demigods—larger than human in their heroic encounter with an external power but at the same time damned by their human limitation. They suffer the primal contradictions. The confrontation with the alien power either elevates them to a higher status through self-sacrifice or reduces them to a creaturely status when the blockage cannot be overcome. The tragic heroes are almost always loners and exiles in their tragic obsession and knowledge. Tragedy, like the feeling of sublimity, is associated with the threatening and the unfamiliar. It flouts rather

than confirms our conventional beliefs. Therefore, tragedy is emblemized by a semiotics of disparity and disjointedness characterizing that of exile. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,¹¹ Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*,¹² and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*,¹³ exile is found in the reenactment of the Western tragic tradition in which tragic heroes are figured as ostracized loners caught in a boundary situation.

Chapter 4 examines the relationship between the semiotics of exile and female discourse. In the three pieces of female writings studied in this chapter, Bombal's "The Final Mist,"¹⁴ Duras's "Moderato Cantabile,"¹⁵ and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,¹⁶ the prohibited and marginalized female desire is suppressed into soliloquy: their whispering, unconscious, digressive style mirrors the language of vagrancy and delineates an acute sense of self-exile in female existence. Its decentralization (or avoidance of a center), unconsciousness, and hesitancy are reflected in a diachronically deferred and synchronically amplified narrative. Its semiotic flux, exiled from—and unbound by—the symbolic order of male discourse, also recalls the prelingual expression described by Kristeva's female semiotics¹⁷ and Cixous's female poetics.¹⁸ Such apparently disparate narrative at the depth, however, revolves implicitly around a hidden, unspeakable center—the prohibited desire whose force was intensified rather than assuaged by repression and silence and explodes finally into female mythos that fuses the subject and object, living and death, life and art.

Chapter 5 studies the relationship between exile and time. In the two writers studied in this chapter, Borges views man as banished spirit in the monstrous chaos of infinity; Proust depicts man's acute feeling of being exiled from his memory. Both writers are preoccupied by a cosmic exile in time that is ultimately redeemed by art—their construction of the fourth dimension in their literary creation can find analogy in the magic mirrors of M. C. Escher's painting.

Chapter 6 examines the prototype of the artist in exile. It studies the relationship between artistic creativity and exile and how the semiotics of exile is reflected in the artistic forms of the chosen text. Hoffman's "Der Sandmann" and "Rat Krespel" feature the protagonists as failed and exiled artists—exiled in the romantic sense of being alienated from the crowd due to their passionate obsession and eccentricity, and in the antiromantic sense of being

shut out ultimately from the romantic ideal of art. The semiotics of exile is reflected in the text of disparity—in its use of irony, the grotesque, and fragmentation and in the divided nature of the artist as both divinely and demoniacally possessed. Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* also depicts the protagonist—Stephen Daedalus—as an exiled artist.¹⁹ His self-exile from Ireland and its religion and politics is premise for his artistic creation. The semiotics of exile is reflected in its art of disparity (an image-charged narrative flow that may find analogy in the poetics of French symbolist poetry), in the medley of dissimilar images through symbolic reverberations, and in the divided nature of his muse in his poetry: the villanelle temptress who is both divine and demoniac.

Across different chapters, we can find repeated and overlapping motifs central to the language of exile: postmodernism with its disparity of signification; semiotics of photography; the technique and philosophy of irony, the grotesque, and fragmentation; split voice and personality; the use of mask and doppelganger; and the semiotic flux of female discourse exiled from symbolic order.

In this collection of essays, each individual essay represents an approach of comparison that has not yet been made in scholarship, or rarely made. For example, Plath and Munch; Wang Anyi and photography; Toni Morrison and Western tragic tradition; Proust, Borges, and Escher; Byron and Barthes's reading theories; Hai Zi and Nietzsche; Hoffmann's reaction against Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Schlegel's romantic premises; and the imagery in James Joyce and French symbolist poetry. Therefore, they made an original contribution to the criticism on the major Chinese, English, German and French writers. As a whole, they illustrate the diverse ways in which literature can be linked with art, science, and philosophy. Therefore, the book not only sheds a new light on the criticism of important individual authors but also illuminates and instructs in the methodologies of comparative literature as a discipline.

In summary, these essays as a whole examine the semiotics of exile with its mythmaking power in various aspects—the semantics of photography, the constituent value of tragedy, the concept of time, the prototype of artists, and the construction of female mythos. It's the first book that systematically explores the relationship between the semiotics of exile and genres, forms and discourses.

CHAPTER 1



SEMIOTICS OF EXILE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography, according to Pirandello, is linked with the motif of exile—first and foremost, it is the estrangement between self and image under the spotlight, then the daily enlarged disparity between the perennial life preserved by the photograph and the reality of the corporeal being subject to the erosion of time. According to both Lu Xun¹ and Roland Barthes,² the spectacle of photography is tied with the “specter,” the theater of the dead. In its insistence on the living reality of what has been dead, photography flouts the division of reality and illusion, death and living. Thus, in my view, this emblemizes the wedding of Eros and Mourning in the novel of nostalgia for a dying culture. Therefore, the semiotics of photography has its characteristic tropes of exile, mourning, cultural nostalgia, and loss of reality. In the two novels studied in this chapter, Wang Anyi’s *Melody of Everlasting Regret*³ features a protagonist who is a plaintive Shang Hai beauty in the 1930s that lost gradually her contact with reality in the contemporary world, when her accustomed cultural milieu faded away. In the other novel, Peter Handke’s *Der kurze brief zum langen Abschied*,⁴ the protagonist is a German exile in the United States, whose personal vision and family relationship are constantly distorted and harassed by the memory of the past—the images of explosion, fragmentation and death in the World War II. In both novels, photography is the central emblem of exile, death, impasse of the past, the divorce of body and image that results in the protagonists’ lost sense of reality.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN WANG ANYI'S MELODY OF EVERLASTING REGRET: EXILE, MOURNING, AND LYRICAL TIME

At the beginning of *Melody of Everlasting Regret*, Wang Anyi depicts the Shang Hai Lanes from a bird's eye's view: The sun bursts out above the roofs, casting zigzag, refracted light. It is a grandeur made of myriad fine crusts, giant power collected from endless patience.⁵

No description sums up Wang Anyi's thought and art better. If there is one feature distinguishing the narrative voice of Wang Anyi and Zhang Ailing, another woman writer drawing consistently on the faded glamour of the old Shang Hai society, it is that Zhang Ailing's voice is always in singular form, like a long-past story staged in the traditional opera arias, or sung out in unhurried reminiscence on the scant strings of the classical Chinese musical instrument *huqin*. But Wang Anyi's narrative voice, distinctively her own, is yet felt in plural form, like the converged multitude of chorus. Perhaps because of Zhang Ailing's singular voice, the passage of time in her novels is mostly seen in a linear continuum. The collectivity of Wang Anyi's narrative voice is reflected in her rendering of past time from the bird's eye view with its spatial simultaneity. In their retrospective storytelling, Zhang Ailing likes to encase her story in opera aria with its linear progression—an irretrievable, past time. *Love in a Fallen City*, for example, begins and ends with the idle play of opera on *huqin*, suggesting the central story has already become as distant and indistinct as that in the sung opera.⁶ In *Melody of Everlasting Regret*, Wang Anyi encases her story in pictorialism, whose spatial expression sums up many times at once.⁷ Partly owe to the singularity of her voice, beneath Zhang Ailing's plaintively bright color is all grieved aggression and haughty aloofness, as she expressed—life is a gorgeous robe, eaten away by worms. However, Wang Anyi, on account of the chorus nature of her voice, in its profound detachment (a bird's-eye view presupposes distance) underlines an immense accommodation. This accommodation is in proportion to the author's minute attention to the banal, earthbound lives. The choral transcending power is the sum of the crusts of mundane, weighed-down lives, which are the very opposite of transcendence. Zhang Ailing's many heroines reveal their basic simplicity against flashy luxury.

Wang Anyi's heroine, Wang Qiyao, a collective icon, contains in her placidity infinite grace.

Among the multitude voices in *Melody of Everlasting Regret*, photography, in its multifarious symbolism serves as a hidden, converging technique through which the motifs typical of novels of nostalgia—exile, mourning, and lyric time—are refracted. The novel starts with Wang Qiyao's initiating experience before the camera in the film company. After failing to be an actress, she was invited to pose for photography for the *Shang Hai Life* magazine, which made her famous and pushed her to the culminating event of her life: being chosen as the third beauty in the Shang Hai beauty contest, an event that triggers her doom. Her most persistent lover, Mr. Chen, is an enthusiastic photographer, and her intermittent connection with him covers the longest span of time in the novel.

The unease and disorientation Wang Qiyao felt before camera when she tried acting roles strikes resemblance to Pirandello's commentary:

The film actor feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises of his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence. . . . The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.⁸

The isolation of the photographed in the spotlight in front of the incomprehensible mechanism of camera figures the theme of exile: an estrangement from one's accustomed (social) milieu. Unlike many native soil writers, the exile that Wang Anyi depicts is not a geographical displacement, but a psychological one, as the exile Wang Qiyao experiences is more painful than the "imaginary nostalgia"⁹ of expatriates: in the inexplicable vicissitude of history, she becomes an exile in her own city, which is only a shell of the old one. At the end, with Wang Qiyao's death, the city is also envisioned as the wreckage of a sunken ship.¹⁰

In photography, the photographed is estranged not only from her milieu but also from herself. The enlarging gap between image and corporeality of the photographed informs the progression of

the novel. Photograph is the freezing form of life, which is absolved of its flux. As time goes on, there is an extending disparity between the preserved aura of the photograph and the real person's susceptibility to the eroding time. Therefore, photography is linked with anachronism and antiquity and is the reservoir of the destroyed past, like Wang Qiyao herself. Parallel to the estrangement between the photographed and the audience, the disparity between Wang Qiyao herself and her image in the eyes of her audience—her lovers, the audience of her beauty—determines her essential loneliness throughout her life. The loneliness was prefigured very early in the novel in Wang Qiyao's triumphant scene in the beauty contest. In spite of the rain of flowers showering upon her from the audience seats, Wang Qiyao is besieged with an eating loneliness so that she feels the wedding dress alone is what is close to her. The passivity of Wang Qiyao's character, in accordance with the passivity of the photographed before the mechanical contrivance of camera, makes her a mirror that reflects man's ideal of femininity and of an extinct past.

What Li Binliang, the iron, prominent official sees in Wang Qiyao is actually his female alter ego—the hidden helpless, weak part of himself in front of the crushing mechanism of the war-time history. This self-projection into femininity is hinted in Li's relish of Mei Lanfang's opera arias, the female role impersonated by man. The relish comes from Li's recognition that male actor, guised as female, understands the essence of a woman more than a woman does, thus staging the ideal instead of the actuality of femininity. What Ah Er, the small town youth, sees in the outcast Wang Qiyao is the faded glamour and bustle of an old city beyond his provincial background and the deposit incarnation of plaintive classical beauty, like Wang Zhaojun and Yang Gueifei, who embody the lyrical theme of exile and mourning. Kang Minxun discovers Wang Qiyao's concealed past through her early photographs and regards her as a relic from the last age that brings back his heart (191). When it comes to Lao Kena, the split between image and the corporeal Wang Qiyao has become so obvious that what Lao Kena embraces is no more than an excavated past in the abstract, while Wang Qiyao in corporeality is almost spurned by him in revulsion.

Wang Qiyao's gradual detachment from her self-image preserved in the aura of photography is unfolded through the progressive

deterioration of her self-control, which ends in the devastating indignity of her death. For the most part of the novel, Wang Qiyao's passivity bespeaks a positive character of poise, adaptability, and tried refinement preserved in the face of a tumultuous history. However, later, her emotional hunger and helpless situation become so acute that she not only bullies Sha Sa with false responsibility when her illegitimate child is fathered by another man but also offers gold to Lao Kena to beg him to keep her company. Her harsh unforgiveness toward Long Legs, who eventually murdered her, contrastingly different from her usual compassion and tolerance, makes her almost a hideous mock image of herself in that disastrous night, when she actually invites to be murdered at the hand of the one who has no original intention to do so. Her death image—phantasmogorically old, dried out, and ugly—marks the most devastating split from her photographed beauty and points in understatement to the tragic fate of nostalgia. Wang Anyi's lyricism and accommodation is counter pointed with a relentless realism that is paradoxically achieved through the hallucinatory image of death.

Thus the novel—through the enlarging gap between the photographed and her milieu, between the photographed and her audience-lovers, and between her actuality and her image—enacts in a frightening, understated way the process of estrangement, which is the essence of exile.

Photography is also intimately linked with death. The photographed is reduced to a flickering appearance formed in the dark box (a miniature coffin), deprived of corporeality, and is stilled. These effects are analogous to the effect of death. In Lu Xun's "On Photography," photography is associated with witchcraft that robs the photographed of his spiritual essence, so that the photographed, without his "vital breath," is also physically maimed.¹¹ According to Roland Barthes, photography's origin is traced back to theater (instead of painting, as we naturally believe) through a singular intermediary—death.¹² There is an original relation between the theater and the cult of the dead: the first actors separate themselves from the community by playing the role of the dead, which left its mark in the whitened bust of the totemic actor, men's painted faces in Chinese theater, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian Kathakali dancers, and the Japanese mask of the Noh performers. This is the same relationship in the photograph. However "lifelike" we strive

to make it, the frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mystical denial of an apprehension of death.¹³ Photography is a primitive theater, a kind of *tableau vivant* (living picture), a figuration of motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.¹⁴ The “spectacle” of theater and photography, etymologically means “specter,” or the return of the dead (CL, 9). In narrative terms, we might analogize the novel of nostalgia to the return of the dead and perceive a hidden parallelism between body and text—as I will exemplify later—in a novel where eroticism, entwined with mourning, becomes a characteristic trope of the novel of nostalgia.

Not accidentally, Wang Qiyao’s first acquaintance with camera and cinema operation and her *tableau vivant* (wearing a wedding dress) during the beauty contest are all heralded with death. We might regard the *tableau vivant* as a primitive theater linked with photography. The seamy side of death in the film prefigures the indignity of Wang Qiyao’s own death forty years later, which strikes an uncanny mixture of familiarity and strangeness. The first occasion in the film firm, under the lotus-shaped light, a woman lies in the bed illuminated by a special light. It suddenly occurs to Wang Qiyao that the woman is playing dead, although it is unclear whether it is a suicide or a murder. Although the film firm is noisy, the woman looks as if she were just sleeping on, perhaps for a thousand years (28). The novel ends with Wang Qiyao’s death forty years later, which rolls her back to this death scene, only this time the witness becomes the victim. The distinction of life and fiction collapsed. Men play a passive, predetermined role in the drama of life. The last hallucination haunting Wang Qiyao’s dying eye is still that waving lotus-shaped lamp. The scene is so uncannily familiar that she strains to recall it. Then she remembers the dead woman in the film firm forty years ago. Only this time the woman is herself, who died at another’s hand. Wang Qiyao realizes that in two hours, the crowd of pigeons will shoot into sky. The flowers on the opposite porch will open the theatric curtain of another flowery season (384).

In the first scene, the vague perception of predestination is conveyed through an uncanny sense of “*déjà vu*” or, as we may reword it, “recalling the future.” It seems to be obscurely connected with Buddhist cyclic time (the lotus-shaped lampshade is a hint), the memory of former lives that renders each turn of reincarnation weightless. The novel ends with the cycle of time—the seasonal