

Unreal Images: Bei Dao's Dialogue with the Real

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Abstract

Bei Dao's hermitic style of poetry has been baffling his critics ever since he started writing. While his earlier "Misty" poetry met with strong resistance from official Chinese critics, his continuing insistence on fragmented syntax and disjunctive imagery, while writing in exile, has earned him a few detractors in the West. Does Bei Dao resist reading? Can one make sense of his poetry? What is the relationship between meaning and interpretative certitude? These are some of the questions that the paper tries to address. With a careful reading of his selected poems, I will show how Bei Dao privileges ambiguity and uncertainty by focusing on the construction of unreal images, images that strikingly defy conventional rationality because they shy away from an expected correspondence to real and common life events. This "unreal" imagery, whose power comes from an imaginative reordering of the real, forms a key aspect of Bei Dao's poetics.

Keywords

Bei Dao, unreal imagery, analogy, insomnia, surrealism

Today to make an “image” is to make a theatre.

—Charles Simic (qtd. in Friebert 97)

The madder the image the better, the stranger the image the more wonderful. And if clams come to play accordions, rejoice in their music. . . .

—Russell Edson (qtd. in Friebert 110)

The image is that by which meaning emerges, and the word is that which elucidates the image. For exhausting meaning there is nothing like the image, and for exhausting the image there is nothing like the word.

—Wang Bi

Arguably the most eminent Chinese poet today, Bei Dao (北島) lives and writes in two worlds. In China, he is a legend and a literary giant of the 1980s whose path-breaking writings influenced a generation and sparked the democracy movement reforms that helped accelerate the country’s transformation, its new openness. In the West, he is a reminder of China’s repression and intolerance, a poetic enigma whose well-translated elliptical syntax and cryptic imagery represent a complex interior response to a hostile exterior world. Such different reactions to Bei Dao underscore the metamorphosis of the poet himself—from an uncompromising young rebel in pre-1989 China to a mellowing, meditative poetic voice in exile in the West. In both places, however, many have complained that Bei Dao’s poetry is “unreadable.” The label “Misty Poet” (朦朧詩人 *menglong shiren*) is his legacy in China and continues to define him while abroad. In recent years, there has been a growing number of critics who—for reasons that are very different from those of his official Chinese critics in earlier times—have expressed frustration with Bei Dao’s poetry, with how his enigmatic style, fractured syntax and disjunctive imagery have conspired to resist “reading” even by expert readers. For example, Michael Duke, an esteemed scholar of contemporary Chinese literature, has declared that Bei Dao’s poetry “as a whole did not make any sense” (202). The Taiwan writer-critic Lee Kuei-shien (李魁賢) offers a similar reaction: “. . . the more I read the less sense he makes to me. The knots of so many contradictions are beyond unraveling, and the more I try to interpret, the greater the apparent disarray” (2). If the “sense” that the two critics wish to make is a traditional thematic unity and interpretative certainty, Bei Dao’s poetry is bound to

cause disappointment. The impression that Bei Dao is not committed to “meaning,” this essay will argue, largely comes from his unique use of poetic imagery.

Since 1989 Bei Dao has been in exile in the West. He has lived in more than half a dozen countries and in twice as many cities. By his own account, in the first four years of exile he moved fifteen times (*Blue House* 213). Exile is a physical disorientation, but more importantly, it is a mental displacement; it is, as Edward Said observed, a constant self-awareness of one’s own inappropriateness:

The exile exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old; beset with half-involvements and half-detachments; nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another. Being skilled at survival becomes the main imperative, with the dangers of getting too comfortable and secure constituting a threat that is constantly to be guarded against. (“Intellectual Exile” Feature Page 16)

As tragic as it has been for Bei Dao’s personal and family life, exile may have been a blessing for his writing. Historically, exile and literature have always gone well together, particularly in the twentieth century. From the American expatriates in Paris of the 1920s to the Czechoslovakian writer Milan Kundera, there are numerous cases of writers who produced their best work while living abroad. Exile and intellectuals have become so prevalently connected that Said has even called exile the sad fate of freedom-bound intellectuals in modern times (*Representations* 46). According to critic Andrew Curr, modern English literature for the most part is sustained by the works of self-imposed exilic writers, such as T. S. Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, W. H. Auden and many others (32). When Gertrude Stein casually remarked that “a writer must have two countries: one that he belongs to, the other where he lives” (51), she might have summarized the belief and practice of the whole pre-war generation of English writers. This sentiment finds its echo in the contemporary Irish writer Edna O’Brien, who draws a psychological parallel between writing and exile: “Writing makes you lonely because you have to exile yourself. But deeper than that is an inborn native loneliness, a spiritual void that words, for some reason, help fill.”¹

¹ Leslie Garis, “Ireland’s Wayward Writer, Still Raising Eyebrows,” *New York Times* 23 Dec. 1999: E2.

Well versed in twentieth-century world poetry, Bei Dao has refused self-victimization and accepted exile as a condition for his writing from the outset. On many occasions he has talked about the beneficial impact that exile has had on his poetry, which has often surprised those interviewers on the lookout for self-pity and pessimism. Thus, when an interviewer asked, “Isn’t it difficult for a poet to write in exile, to change worlds, to be deprived of familiar sensations, smells, sounds, voices . . .?” Bei Dao replied, “It’s *good* [italics original]. Writing poetry is solitude” (Bei Dao and Clayton Eshleman, “Interview with Bei Dao.”) Bei Dao “embraces” exile not only for the unexpected freedom it brings, which was denied of him in China, but also for the promise it offers—the promise of writing without political interference, of pure language play for self-expression, of confirming a unique subjectivity in this increasingly alienating world. The fact that Bei Dao does not offer any external information about his poetic texts (such as date, place and chronology) indicates that he takes exile not as a temporary form of stimulation, but as a permanent inspiration. Exile, simply put, is what defines Bei Dao’s poetics.

Bei Dao’s response to exile, this essay will show, is his concentrated construction of unreal images. As the name suggests, Bei Dao’s unreal imagery bears little resemblance to the experiential world, which is to say that this imagery exists not at an empirical or observed level but as a purely mental and imaginary construction. This does not mean that the things presented in the images are necessarily fantastical or fictional, and more often than not it is the relationships between these things—which are the life of any poetic image—that challenge the reader’s practical knowledge and invoke a clear sense of “unreality.” Needless to say, the technique of unreal images is not Bei Dao’s invention; it is their dominant presence in his poetry that merits our attention. If “real images”—those that are copies of known reality—work through the power of identification, unreal images work through the power of our perception, which allows for an imaginative reordering of the real beyond conventional rationality, beyond the expected correspondence with experienced life events.

Any reader of Bei Dao’s poetry is likely to conclude that the poet is an “imagist.” Choose any poem and you will not fail to notice at least one fresh image that grabs your attention and invites you to ponder its meaning. And yet, what is poetry if not images?² “The image,” claimed C. Day Lewis many years ago, “is the

² I have no intention here of going into the messy business of defining image and its long and controversial history in Western and Chinese criticism. The best work on this subject, to my knowledge, is Pauline Yu’s *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*. Even though Yu’s concern is to argue for a supposedly fundamental difference between the Chinese and

constant in all poetry, and every poem is itself an image” (17). Even though one can point to Bei Dao’s intense word-images and his fixation on them as a primary form of self-expression, this would hardly distinguish him from many contemporary lyrical poets, say Gu Cheng (顧城), Ouyang Jianghe (歐陽江河) and Xi Chuan (西川) in China and Paul Célan, Ted Hughes and John Ashberry in the West. What characterizes Bei Dao as an imagist poet, I submit, is less the personal imprint he leaves on these images than the way he constructs them. Through a form of imaginative engineering and an intentional play on the tangential link between the images and physical reality, Bei Dao creates images that defy the laws of nature. In other words, his images are, to a large extent, intuitively and plausibly unreal.

Consider this image: “one wheel / seeks another to bear witness.” To say it is strange is an understatement. One just cannot put the two wheels together visually or conceptually, despite our familiarity with personification as a literary device. Why would a wheel seek out another wheel? What witness does it bear? Evidently, what is happening in the image is beyond the realm of reality; it refers to a world unto itself, a world of the poet’s own creation, a representation of his mental landscape. Images like this, more than anything else, have contributed to Bei Dao’s reputation as a “difficult” poet, for they resist reading by refusing the establishment of easy analogies. This does not mean, however, that one cannot read Bei Dao’s “unreal imagery.” There is no unreality that is not a reflection of reality, however tenuous and fragile the connections might sometimes be. To read Bei Dao’s unreal images, one still has to take the traditional approach to imagery, that is, to uncover the hidden analogy that all images embody and signify. It is just that Bei Dao’s analogies are often unconventional, private, unbound by rationality and unlimited in possibility.

Open Analogy

The most influential statement about the image ever uttered in the 20th century is this by Ezra Pound: “An ‘image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives us that scene of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest work of art” (4). Generally considered the fundamental tenet of Imagism, of which Pound is the greatest advocate, this statement is more about what image does than about how it works. It is a

Western aesthetic traditions regarding the use of imagery, her elucidation of the term and its changing meanings throughout the ages is first-rate scholarship. See Pauline Yu 3-43.

celebration of the power of the image without telling us from where that power comes. So how does the image work? The Latin root for the word “image” is from “imago” and “imitari,” which means approximation, copy, and reproduction. To say that the image is a copy of something other than itself is to put “image” squarely in the tradition of “mimesis.” Mimesis in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle assumes the existence of a higher and truer reality that transcends the experienced historical and physical reality; the latter is the copy or shadow of the former. In the discourse of this fundamental ontological dualism, the image is a shining light, a bridge from one realm to the other.

Since this “higher, truer reality” remains hidden from the eye, what it is has been debated throughout history. It could be the presence of God, a political dogma, an alluring ideology, a scientific principle, or many other things. Or it could be the Dao, the mysterious force of nature in the Chinese classical literary tradition. To access the omnipresent but invisible Dao, the earlier Chinese scholars developed an elaborate theory of the image—xiang (象), which manifests the will of the Dao. The xiang are found in a myriad of natural phenomena, from animal footprints and ripples on a pond to cloud formations and mountains patterns. In aesthetic theory and in poetic practice, however, the concept of “categorical correspondence” (ganlei 感類) grounds the classical Chinese image. For example, a dragon corresponds to a great man, a bolt of lightning to the presence of injustice, a fallen leaf to the transience of life, and so on. This is to say that the meaning of an image, once established, becomes a stable and transparent construct, as pointed out by Pauline Yu: “meaning is not attached externally and arbitrarily to an image but follows logically from the fact that objects and situations were believed traditionally to belong to one or more non-mutually-exclusive, *a priori*, and natural classes” (42).

It is safe to say that the classical Chinese poetic image rests upon a limited analogy that has been systematized and conventionalized through time.³ While such a limited analogy gives rise to remarkable continuity and prosperity in the Chinese poetic tradition, it has also become a point of contention in the history of modern Chinese poetry. As Michelle Yeh argues, in order to defend the necessity and legality of New Poetry, the early-twentieth-century Chinese poets strived to expand the horizon of analogy by “drawing analogy from afar” while rejecting “analogies drawn from things at hand” (62). The result was often the shattering of a familiar and desired harmony and resonance in the face of “the unexpected, shocking way

³ Interestingly, the late scholar of classical Chinese poetry James J. Y. Liu recognized the conflict between limited analogy and originality and felt it necessary to argue for a different criterion to evaluate the issue of originality in the classical Chinese context. See Liu 114-19.

the tenor and the vehicle are conjoined” (65). One early example of this experiment cited by Yeh is a poem written by Wang Jingzhi (汪靜之) in 1926, “Fate Is a Butcher”:

Fate is a butcher
as well as a cook;
He uses my life for charcoal and
my body for utensils.

He holds a glinting knife in one hand
and my soul in the other:
He cuts it up in thin slices
before he fries it.

Now and then he adds some fuel
to make fire burn fiercely:
He adds two spoons of soy sauce
and a little oil and salt, too.

When the soul is cooked, he’s hungry, too.
So he gobbles up my soul.
As he chews, he says, grinning:
“It sure tastes good!”⁴

The analogy is shocking, indeed, considering the time frame of the poem. The image of the butcher engaged in his morbid feast powerfully illustrates a tortured speaker on the brink of self-destruction. If the “butcher” is an image “drawn from afar,” it is because he has been outside the convention of image-making up until this point. That is to say, he was a non-category, poetically speaking. The meaning of the butcher’s eccentric behavior in the poem, however, hinges on his realistic appeal. Upon a closer look, we find that he merely simulates the craft of butchery that we know from real life, even though everything he does now demands a subliminal reading. In other words, Wang Jingzhi’s fresh image, as revolutionary as it was in his time, is still an image in which the operation of analogy stays solidly in the realm of reality. But it is a beginning, a harbinger of the

⁴ Wang Jingzhi (汪靜之), *Yusi* (語絲 Spinner of Words) 63 (25 January 1926); qtd. in Yeh 8, 66.

paradigmatic shift towards incongruent image constructions still unfolding in modern Chinese poetry. It is an origin point, if you will, of Bei Dao's unreal imagery.

Let us come back to the example of the two wheels, which appears in the poem entitled "Blue Wall":

road chases sky asking

 one wheel
 seeks another to bear witness:⁵
 the pelt of warmth
 poetry of lightning
 procreation and passion
 this very moment or whole vistas reduced
 dreamless

 are gasoline's thrills (*Landscape over Zero*)

The poem starts with an interesting proposition, one that appears to echo the familiar cosmic resonance in classical Chinese poetry. Even though Bei Dao does not specify the question being asked, the third stanza may provide some clues as to what this question concerns. These parallel images, though seemingly unrelated by a detectable logic, all indicate important moments in one's life. In other words, they are the reality to which the unreal image of the two wheels bears witness. The word "witness" suggests evidence and confirmation. How can something unreal prove the authenticity of the real? Maybe it cannot. Maybe Bei Dao's sense of the real is things as they are, not what we make them out to be; thus any attempt to intervene in their happening, like asking questions about their meaning, is to undermine the beauty and integrity of what it is. Prompted by an interviewer, Bei Dao has this to say about his image of the two wheels:

"One wheel / seeks another to bear witness" expresses my essential doubts. Isn't this world absurd enough? Most of the dissertations written in American universities are just wheels seeking other wheels to be their witnesses. What's more, as I see it, the fact that this world has to use a whole system of logic is a problem. (Bei Dao and Tan xiaodu [唐晓度])

⁵ The colon is omitted in David Hinton's translation, but it is present in the Chinese version.

Here we get a rare glimpse of the poet's inner mechanism. The unreal image is meant to be an assault on the absurd world, an expression of anti-logic, and more importantly, an instrument for irony and paradox. This image makes its impact through the operation of analogy, but the analogy has more to do with the difference, and less to do with the likeness, between the worlds of the real and unreal that it tries to invoke. Ultimately, what this image makes visible is not a figurative or symbolic relationship but a subjective knowledge and the experience of distancing oneself from a perceived reality.

The image of the wheel holds so much illuminating power for Bei Dao that it has become one of his keywords, repeated to bring the point home. In the line, "inertial wheel, ascetic snowmen" ("Autumn World in Turmoil," *Forms of Distance*) we see a contrast established to suggest the irony of redefining reality by over-interpretation. Then the metaphor of passion as wheel—"passion, just like a wheel / grows perfect whenever it's idle" ("For the Purpose of," *Landscape over Zero*)—expresses the Daoist ideal of wu-wei (無爲 non-action), the desire for a pure and pristine state of fulfillment free from interference. A moment of humility is seen in the following line: "it's true, I'm not worth mentioning / my story began on a wheel" ("Substitute-Teaching," *Unlock*). This time the reality—being dismissed from substitute teaching—is unpleasant and maybe unjust, and the image of the wheel works to lessen the sting of this reality by projecting an attitude of indifference and disengagement. In the following poem we find a clearer and more concrete presentation of this attitude:

in waking there is freedom
that contradiction among stars

doors resisting the years
silk carried screams away
I'm the identity you deny
lamp switched off in the heart

this fragile moment
hostile shores
wind folds up all the news
memory's become master

o vintage wine

changing color for clear expression
coal meets the miner's inevitable lamp
fire cannot bear witness to fire. ("Untitled," *Landscape over Zero*)

What emerges from the poem is a speaker who is suffering from a profound identity crisis. The lines "I'm the identity you deny / lamp switched off in the heart" are a clear reference to Bei Dao's forced state of exile, living between the impassable "hostile shores," a continuous "fragile moment" for the poet. To see a connection between the idea of freedom and "that contradiction among stars" perhaps reflects that very sense of fragility. The major part of the poem, however, is a discourse on aging and isolation, and the two mutually reinforcing feelings are powerfully illustrated in these two lines: "doors resisting the years / silk carried screams away." Aging is a losing battle for sure, but self-confinement in one's own house is a particularly tragic way of fighting this battle. The memory of the past, even in the form of fading screams, is still the speaker's best companion, a sad alternative to current news from home now unavailable. Until this point, the poem depicts, to a large extent, a version of reality that is concrete and tangible, a real experience of aging and isolation that are universally identifiable. There are certainly traces of absurdity in this version of reality—why would one not be able to cross the "hostile shores" of the Pacific in the days of modern communication, for example, but the absurdity is the result of conflicting rationalities rather than an expression of the unreal.

The last stanza changes all that, for it consists of a few unreal images that are only analogically related to the themes of aging and isolation. In the image of vintage wine Bei Dao beautifully makes visible aging as a desired quality and, in the image of coal, he de-links aging and isolation. We notice that both images radiate a celebratory tone that is in direct contrast to the depressing reality in the earlier parts of the poem. This celebratory tone, however, has all but disappeared in the poem's last line: "fire cannot bear witness to fire." This is an unreality created by negativity, which parallels to the reality of aging and isolation. This image also bears a remarkable similarity in terms of diction and structure to the image of the two wheels in "Blue Wall" that we discussed earlier. In a similar fashion, Bei Dao announces his stands of non-intervention and disengagement. While the image of the two wheels is thick with irony and sarcasm, the image of the fire sparkles with seriousness and indignation, but they both call for an acceptance of, or even a resignation to, reality as experienced—however absurd, unpleasant or mysterious it may be. Sylvia Plath, perhaps the most famous poet of personal suffering in the

twentieth century, once said: “I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying—like madness, being tortured...with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience” (qtd. in Lane 35). In the same vein, we can say that Bei Dao’s unreal imagery is his method of controlling his personal experience without turning into its victim, his strategy of getting intimate with his experience without being narcissistic, his way of engaging it while maintaining a necessary aesthetic distance.

The word “waking” in the first line of “Untitled” implies dreaming as a background for the poem. In fact, one can possibly read the whole poem as the waking recollection of a fresh dream. Interestingly, the poem “Blue Wall” also ends with a reference to dream: “dreamless / are gasoline’s thrills.” The only way to read these two lines is to read them ironically as self-negations—gasoline’s thrills are no thrill at all and that dreamlessness is a deprived state of existence, which is to say that dreaming is a preferred and desired alternative. Indeed, Bei Dao is so fond of writing about night and dream that hardly a poem goes by without a reference to them. The most interesting thing about the poet’s use of night and dream is how it provides a context in which his unreal imagery may function and thrive. This is the topic to which we now turn.

The Context of Night and Dream

Much of what happens for Bei Dao happens at night.⁶ That night is a special space and time is confirmed by a quick glance at his entire body of poetry. Two of his poetry collections are appropriately entitled *The August Sleepwalker* and *Midnight Singer*. References to night abound in all his poems, where the dark hours are presented as a time of blissful moments, a continuous festival. For example:

I open the door to await night. (“Purple,” *Landscape over Zero*)

firelight shamed o dark night alive forever (“Arrival,” *Landscape over Zero*)

at three in the morning I open a tin can
setting some fish on fire. (“This Day,” *Landscape over Zero*)

⁶ Interestingly, the term “night consciousness (黑夜意識 *heiye yishi*)” has been used by some Chinese critics to describe women’s poetry of the 1990s. See Zhai 446-47.

night is a whirlpool
 deep sleepers like clothes turning over
 in the washing machines. ("A Moment Against the Light," *Unlock*)

don't turn in lights on
 darkness is a door bringing the enlightened near
 ("Allegiance," *Forms of Distance*)

A Peking key
 opens the door of a Scandinavia night ("For Only a Second," *Old Snow*)

Bei Dao's fondness for the night may come from an almost natural affinity between the poet and wakefulness. The poet, awake while others being asleep, confronts his acute sense of solitude and isolation but also enjoys an intimate, enlightening encounter with his own consciousness. Walt Whitman once said that "night, sleep, death and the stars" are the themes a poet's soul loves best (qtd. in Spaar 134). At the end of Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," the old waiter (speaking for the author) thinks, "After all . . . it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it" (383). And Franz Kafka explains that sleeplessness is an integral part of his writing: "I believe this sleeplessness comes only because I write. If I can't pursue the stories through the nights, they break away and disappear."⁷ Thus an enforced wakefulness is thought to bring out a heightened state of alertness and energy, an occasion for creative productivity. It is little wonder, then, that many writers, ancient and modern, are chronic insomniacs, a group to which Bei Dao apparently belongs. In fact, he has written a poem proudly entitled "Insomnia":

you see yourself outside your window
 a lifetime's gleam in flux

gone blind out of jealousy
 stars sail against the wind
 beyond death's metaphor
 and unfold ethical landscapes

in what is called a place of wellsprings

⁷ Kafka's diaries; qtd. in Spaar 10.

night finally catches up to you
that army of insomnia
salutes the flag of solitude

a night watchman tossing and turning
lights up that terror-blossom
a cat leaps into endless night
the dream's tail flashing once. (from *Landscape over Zero*)

This poem almost can be read as an “authentic” representation of the experience of insomnia, an experience of disorientation and hallucination. In a moment of intense self-gazing, the speaker sees “a life’s gleam in flux,” which is punctuated by disjointed memories and unfocused ruminations. The images are unmistakably unreal, reflecting a hyperactive mind being chased by its own illusions. But that is precisely the fun of insomnia, which, despite its occasional form of “terror-blossom,” embraces night as a place of solitude, “a place of wellsprings.” The image of “wellsprings” is noteworthy for its metaphorical association with inspiration and creativity. It seems that Bei Dao, much like Kafka, has made night the source of writing. This may be why the poet often gives lavish praises to the hours of night, as in this stanza:

night's more eloquent than
all bad fortune
night under our feet
this lampshade over the poem
already shattered. (“Night,” *Landscape over Zero*)

Or in this one:

the wind lifts up a corner of the night
under the old-fashioned desk lamp
I consider the possibility of restructuring the galaxy
 (“Restructuring the Galaxy,” *Old Snow*)

The night as a time and place of possibilities underscores Bei Dao’s lyrical voice in the darkness. “The august sleepwalker / has seen the sun in the night,” Bei Dao writes in the title poem of *The August Sleepwalker*, which can serve to explain

what he has in mind for the night's possibilities. Evidently, these are the possibilities of unreal images, of an unimpeded presentation of pure consciousness, and of a re-ordering of one's visual and auditory perceptions. The night, as Bei Dao puts it, is a time when "the flame of truth gets crazy" ("Bright Mirror," *Landscape over Zero*), a place where "the hidden art of chess" ("For the Purpose of," *Landscape over Zero*) becomes detectable. The poem "Midnight Singer" (*Forms of Distance*) fully explores the possibilities of the night and discourses on the power of the song as a form of self-expression. Structurally duplicating the versification of a song with its refrain, the poem is composed of a series of similes that transport the song into new analogical terrain. The analogy itself, however, remains frustratingly unclear if we believe in simile's conventional reliance on similarity. For example, what is the similarity between "a song" and "a thief who's fled across rooftops?" Or "an ever hostile tree?" Or "a mirror that knows the body by heart?" Bei Dao simply links his tenor with his many vehicles using "is" without elaboration, and the "is" is repeated so as to include as many diverse images as possible, all of which purport to uncover an aspect of the hidden associations of the song for the speaker. Maybe the title "Midnight Singer" offers us some clues as to the unreal situation in question—a happening of the night or of dream. Maybe the question is not what a song *is* but how it *works* with our imagination.

Reading such images as "4 o'clock delirium" or "a steam locomotive / bursting into the church," one senses that singing a song for Bei Dao is more than a leisurely activity; it signifies a meditative and transformative exercise. That the song could be reconfigured through so many disparate images is a mere testimony to its power, an uninhibited and liberating power of self-celebration. The final stanza clearly and forcibly brings out the poem's metaphysical impulse:

a song
is the death of a singer
his death-night
pressed into black records
singing over and over and over

It is a familiar convention to compare a poet to a singer and a poem to a song. Thus the stanza exudes an unmistakable sense of self-referentiality and a generous tribute to the art of poetry. Even though the birth of a song means the death of a singer, this death is a desired and heroic sacrifice, a necessary condition for creative output; it marks the resurrection of the self in its disappearance. That this "death"

happens only at night and is shrouded in the color of black indicates the importance of the night to Bei Dao's writing of poetry. In a way, night serves as both the context and content of his unreal images.

In one of his most depressed moments, Tu Fu (杜甫) wrote a poem called "Night in a Room by the River." In the poem, Tu Fu transposes his experience of insomnia into a focused observation of tranquil natural images. Then at the end of the poem, he bemoans: "Sleepless, memories of war betray me: / I am powerless against the world." Evidently, the night as a place of escape could not pacify Tu Fu's disturbed conscience, but neither would he want it to. The night for Tu Fu, as an occasion for poetry, only serves to reinforce his sense of patriotism and social responsibility. "Powerless against the world" may be a feeling that Bei Dao can share, generally speaking, and he escapes into the night perhaps driven by an identical motivation. In fact, Bei Dao has a couplet that, in structure and mood, is very similar to Tu Fu's: "sleepless night / I surrender to the moonlight" ("Fifth Street," *Unlock*). However, Bei Dao's experience of the night, instead of reconfirming the sense of powerlessness, centers on the pursuit of power to restore a fragmented subjectivity in the form of poetic creation. The night is a place of escape, but it is also Bei Dao's private universe, an alternative to "the world." "Midnight Singer" is a good example of the poet's discourse on the alterity of the night; the poem "February" is another example:

night approaching perfection
I float amid languages
the brasses in death's music
full of ice

who's up over the crack in a day
sing, water turns bitter
bled flames pale
leaping like leopards toward stars
to dream
you need a form

in the cold morning
an awakened bird
comes closer to truth
as I and my poems sink together

February in the book:
certain movements and shadows. (*Landscape over Zero*)

“Float amid languages” may be a wakeful realization of Bei Dao’s struggle with languages, and particularly of his exilic condition as a poet, which is a consistent theme throughout his writings. This realization immediately intersects with the experience of the night, as if the perfection of the night brought out the perfection of floating—floating amid unreal images, that is to say. The second stanza provides a context for these images in the form of a dream. It would be futile to interpret the details of this dream in a Freudian sense, but suffice it to say that it simulates the experience of time and travel and indirectly approaches the pain of floating, which is how dreams approximate the real in general psychoanalytic terms.

Interestingly, Bei Dao also punctuates the dream with a studied proposition: “to dream / you need a form.” The form of a dream, Jacques Lacan would argue, is none other than language: recall his famous dictum that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” where language is a system of signifiers that form a closed, autonomous order (*Speech* 39). Lacan claims not just “it is the world of words which creates the world of things” but that “man speaks...because the symbol has made him man (*Speech* 39) While the symbol—acquired through his exposure to language—defines his subjectivity, it also rules over man and cripples him in its particular applications because the symbol—the Name-of-the-Father being its ultimate representation—both induces and frustrates his desire for psychological wholeness. This is why the Lacanian subjectivity is always in conflict, endlessly fragmentary: “It is the nature of desire to be radically torn. The very image of man brings in here a mediation which is always imaginary, always problematic, and that is therefore never completely fulfilled” (*The Seminar* 166). In this connection, Bei Dao’s proposition about the form of the dream is perhaps the embodiment of a split in subjectivity, reflecting both his reliance on and distrust of the dream as an instrument of self-expression, for dreams written into language are at their best a pale copy of the free movement of the unconscious. Deeply aware of his own paradox, Bei Dao in the third stanza turns to a sort of self-satire: here he suggests that an awakening bird knows more about truth than does the speaker and his poetry, which “sinks” to become “certain movements and shadows,” undifferentiated from the book, the repository of language and its order.

The invocation of the awakened bird, I suggest, is a reflection of Bei Dao’s own dual subjectivity, the split between his nighttime persona and his daytime persona. It is an image in which his waking conscious and his sleeping unconscious

converge. A frequent image in Bei Dao's poetry of the night, the bird may be the poet's wishful alter ego that must confront the arrival of the morning, that dreadful time between sleep and waking, between the symbolic order of the dream and the literal world of the real. If the awakened bird has come closer to truth, the "truth" may be no more than the inevitability of the morning, which marks the end of "the logic of night" ("Untitled," *Landscape over Zero*) and the beginning of the logic of day. Still, Bei Dao likes to relish the ambiguity of the morning as if to extend his dream:

morning touches
the secret thought of a walnut
above the passion of water
it's the loneliness of cloud waking. ("Untitled," *Landscape over Zero*)

Here Bei Dao takes the morning as a time of slow waking, of revelation of the most wondrous kind, the time of a sleepwalker who could insist upon sleepwalking. On the other hand, waking in the morning is described as a sort of blessed misfortune, with lines such as these from the poem entitled "Morning" (*Landscape over Zero*): "waking, there's salt in my mouth / just like the first taste of joy." No matter how far we stretch our imagination, the taste of salt is hardly a joyful feeling. Bei Dao's forced analogy suggests a reluctant acceptance of the inevitable, an effort to keep smiling when faced with the annoying interruption of his continuous dreams. In another poem, Bei Dao takes off his mask of irony and openly describes his deep disappointment with waking:

Words are the poison in a song

on the tract of the song's night road
police sirens savor the aftertaste of⁸
the alcohol of sleepwalkers
waking up, a headache
like the window's transparent speakers
from silence to a roar

learning to waste a life

⁸ This is a more literal translation than that of Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong's, which reads, "police sirens aftertaste."

I hover in the birdcalls
crying never

when the storms have filled up with gas
light rays snatch the letter
unfold it and tear it up. ("Morning Song," *Unlock*)

The poem can be read as a sequel to "Midnight Singer" but there is a marked difference in tone and attitude. It begins by taking the romance out of singing: "words are the poison in a song." A song can certainly be a tune without words, which might be the pursuit of the midnight singer, but such a song is already a deviation from the familiar, an expression of defiance of convention and conformity. Bei Dao's distrust of words has much to do with his view of language as a system of order and authority that regulates and normalizes writing as much as it enables it. In the case of a song, words are a reminder of the presence of the real in the same way that police sirens interrupt dreams. In this connection, the "morning song" is not a song at all; it is only a faint echo of the lost midnight singing. It is a self-willed hangover that connects the memory of the drunken songs with the experience of wakefulness. It is doubtful that the speaker truly thinks his waking life is a total waste. Even when he is "crying never," he hovers "in the birdcalls" and provides a vision of the light (in contrast to the darkness of the night) that is full of violence and destruction.

This violent vision underscores Bei Dao's perception of reality in the daylight as opposed to the unreality of the night. It is what he calls "the morning's story," which is narrated with clarity and conviction in this poem:

A word has abolished another word
a book has issued orders
to burn another book
a morning established by the violence of language
has changed the morning
of people's coughing
Maggots attack the kernel
the kernel comes from dull valleys
from among dull crowds
the government finds its spokesman
cats and mice

have similar expressions

On the road in the sky
the armed forester examines
the sun which rumbles past
over the asphalt lake
he hears the sound of disaster
the untrammelled sound of a great conflagration. ("The Morning's Story," *Old Snow*)

One is first struck by how real the poem sounds—its language and imagery are concrete, sensible, down to earth, closely mimicking the horror of waking, the reality of the day. "The Morning's Story" shows the horror of living in a society of mass control and manipulation and of experiencing the loss of freedom and self-identity in the face of this overwhelming, alienating power. This horror is a temporal occurrence, yet its "night" will never end, will never be escaped, for

tomorrow, no
tomorrow is not the other side of night
whoever has hopes is a criminal
let the story that took place at night
end in the night. ("Tomorrow, No," *The August Sleepwalker*)

Despite its unappealing pessimism, this early poem, which no doubt reflects Bei Dao's total despair as he confronts Mao's China, is a harbinger of his late embrace of the night as a poetic subject. The night constitutes for Bei Dao an unadulterated time and space where there can thrive the suppressed unconsciousness, a parallel poetic universe to the waking world of the daylight, a place in which the mere presence of unreality overrules the logic of reality. The night invites insomnia and dream, a fecund ground for a carnival of unreal images that dazzle the eyes and challenge the mind. Because of the centrality of such "unreal" images in his poetry, many a critic has called Bei Dao a "surrealist." There is little evidence that the poet would share the collectivist mentality and revolutionary zeal of the original French surrealists of the early 20th century; nor would he agree with their flagrant anti-intellectual impulse. André Breton famously declares in response to Paul Valéry: "*Le poème doit être une débâcle de l'intellect. Il ne peut être autre chose*" (A poem must be a debacle of the intellect. It cannot be anything but; qtd. in [Riffaterre](#) 8). The only common ground between Surrealism

and Bei Dao is a radical view of language and the appropriation of language for creative self-transformation. This is what the “historian of surrealism,” Maurice Nadeau, has to say about language and surrealism:

Starting from an abstract inquiry into the possibilities of language as a poetic instrument, surrealism first led to a total subjectivism, language appearing as an essentially personal property, which each man could use as he saw fit. The external world was denied for the sake of a world, which the individual found inside himself and sought to explore systematically: whence the importance given to the unconscious and to its manifestations, expressed in a new, liberated language. Arriving at an intense consciousness of his being, the surrealist set it in opposition to the world and sought to inflect the world to his desires. (219-20)

For Bei Dao, this “new, liberated language” is none other than a language of unreal images, of “total subjectivism” in which causality collapses and determinism disappears, giving way to free association and open analogy. Through this language, Bei Dao announces his opposition to the world and his distance from the “violence of language” that establishes the order and stability, the “reality” of this world. To give this language its most powerful articulation, Bei Dao delves into the dark corners of the night, the agitated (un)consciousness of insomnia and the wondrous world of dreams which present a most luxuriant context for the signifying operation of his unreal images. In this connection, one can say that Bei Dao is a “night person” and a “dreamer,” literally speaking. He writes, “at the entrance to night / [I] eased into a new identity” (“Untitled,” *Landscape over Zero*). These two lines, more than anything else he has written, summarize his fascination with the mystery of dream. It is a replay of Zhuan Zi’s (莊子) age-old quest for self-identity, for deliverance from the prosaic reality of daily living. In the wee hours of the night, Bei Dao has found inspiration and an unbounded sense of freedom that are dear to him both as a person and as a poet.

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[Received 2 September 2005; accepted 21 October 2005; revised 8 December 2005]