CHAPTER FIVE

MIND OVER MATTER, MATTER OVER MIND: XI CHUAN

Periodization entails simplification. A summary in three words and two decades—mind, mayhem and money, “the Eighties” and “the Nineties” and beyond—does no justice to the complex dynamics of the social, political and cultural context of contemporary Chinese poetry. It’s not as if the switch from high culture fever to all-pervading commercialization can simply be explained by pointing to June Fourth, or as if the transition from one era to the next took place instantly in the summer of 1989. Anecdotal evidence is provided by the spoken pun that told people to *wǎng qián kàn* or *xiàng qián kàn*. This can mean ‘look forward’ (往前看、向前看), as in political rhetoric, but also, written differently, ‘look to the money’ (往钱看、向钱看), and it had begun to circulate as early as the mid-1980s. June Fourth, then, was a catalyst of change rather than its root cause, as noted in the preceding chapters. Yet, from the periodizer’s point of view, catalysis was swift and powerful enough to make it likely that the contrast of the 1980s and the 1990s will go unchallenged for a while. Avant-garde poetry, for one thing, shows a contrast of extraverted collectivism in the 1980s and Individual Writing in the 1990s that is striking enough to make the advantages of periodization outweigh its drawbacks.

Since the 1990s, Xi Chuan (1963) has been one of the two most prominent poets writing inside China, the other being Yu Jian. Xi Chuan had been well known on the poetry scene ever since the mid-1980s, but his breakthrough came in 1992, when he published the poem series «Salute» (致敬). In section 1 of this chapter, after supplying some coordinates for situating Xi Chuan within the avant-garde at large, I review early and mid-1990s commentaries that proceed from an opposition of mind and money, pitting what they perceive as the Elevated spirituality of Xi Chuan’s poetry and his poethood against the vulgarity of Earthly trends in poetry and of an increasingly materialist society. In section 2, after noting that Xi Chuan’s 1990s writing

Figure 5.1. Xi Chuan, 2000 (photograph by Maghiel van Crevel)

is radically different from his early work, I present a close reading of «Salute» that questions this dichotomy of the spiritual and the material. While «Salute» appears to reaffirm Elevated visions of poetry's capacity for transcendence, it simultaneously displays a creative type of indeterminacy, which results in the subversion of Elevated notions of poet-*hood*, by stressing the poet's physical mortality. In section 3, I discuss later works by Xi Chuan that take us to other aspects of the concept of indeterminacy as theorized by Marjorie Perloff, specifically what she identifies as the tension between reference and the compositional game. I hold this tension to be a key feature of Xi Chuan's writing.

1. SPIRITUALITY VERSUS MATERIALISM AND THE BARBARIANS

Xi Chuan began to write during his student days in the early 1980s. He graduated from the Department of English at Peking University with a thesis on Ezra Pound's encounters with Chinese poetry, with attention to *mis*-understandings in that famous instance of cross-cultural literary production. Since the mid-1980s he has built a formidable record in both unofficial and official circuits, publishing mostly poetry but also essays and travel diaries, and translations of Borges and Pound among others. Following the publication of several long, innovative prose poems that uniquely define his style, he has participated in numerous international festivals and other literary programs from the mid-1990s onward. His work has been translated into many languages and he is by now a poet of international renown.¹

As noted in chapter Three, Xi Chuan was personally and poetically close to Haizi and Luo Yihe, when all three studied at PKU; and in the late 1980s, together with Chen Dongdong, Ouyang Jianghe and Haizi, he was a core member of a group of poets associated with the unofficial journal *Tendency* who consciously reacted against colloquializing and vulgarizing trends that had challenged Obscure Poetry's primacy within the avant-garde. This doesn't make Xi Chuan's early

¹ For Xi Chuan's individual books of poetry, including those not cited here, see Van Crevel 2008a. His work has appeared in scores of multiple-author anthologies. English translations include those in *Renditions* 37 (1992) and 51 (1999), Barnstone 1993, Zhao (Henry) & Cayley 1996, Wang Ping 1999, Zhao (Henry) *et al* 2000, *Seneca Review* xxxiii-2 (2003), Tao & Prince 2006, *The Drunken Boat* 6-I/II (2006, online), *Sentence* 5 (2007) and the DACHS poetry chapter.

work a return to Obscure Poetry anymore than Ouyang's, Chen's or Haizi's. Just like their work, Xi Chuan's poetry lacks the humanist, socio-political engagement of the Obscure poets. Like Chen's and Haizi's, his early work bespeaks a vision of poetry as a religious experience. As such, and on account of its generous use of imagery, it is inclined toward the Elevated rather than the Earthly, and clearly part of the cult of poetry. While it contains the occasional reference to Chinese history, Xi Chuan's poetry displays little kinship with Root-Seeking. Early labelings of his work include the illuminating category of the Xi Chuan Style (西川体), in the upbeat exercise in pigeonholing that is the *Overview of Chinese Modernist Poetry Groups 1986-1988* edited by Xu Jingya and company, Li Fukang and Eva Hung's 1992 classification of his poetry as "visionary," and Michelle Yeh's association of his work with Stream-of-Consciousness (意识流) poetry in the same year, following domestic critical discourse. Although Xi Chuan's poetry has transformed itself since its early days, the slogan of Intellectual Writing (知识分子写作), first aired at the 1987 edition of the *Poetry Monthly* Youth Poetry Conference (青春诗会) and embodied in *Tendency* in 1988, is still a defensible description of his art. This is perhaps even more so than when it was first coined, as long as we block out possible interference from the 1998-2000 Popular-Intellectual Polemic, in which the term was frequently turned into a travesty of its original usage. To clarify this claim, I quote from a broadside Xi Chuan delivered in 1995 against "pretty literature" (美文学), meaning writing that is characterized by frivolousness rather than authenticity:²

[Pretty literature is] opposed to creativity, imagination, irony, metaphor, the spirit of experiment and doubt, it is opposed to the difficulty of writing [写作的难度]....

And Xi Chuan is opposed to pretty literature. Authors' ideas about their own work don't automatically hold water, nor do they necessarily carry more weight than receptions by other readers—for it is only in the latter capacity that authors can speak of their work once it is written. But in this case the author's commentary tallies well with his poetry, as will hopefully be substantiated in the rest of this chapter.

² On *Tendency*, see Chen Dongdong 1995 and Xi Chuan 1997c: 293-294; on the cult of poetry, Yeh 1996a; on Wholism and *Han Poetry*, Day 2005a: ch 9; Xu Jingya et al 1988: 360-362; Li Fukang & Hung 1992: 97; Yeh 1992b: 394-395; Xi Chuan 1995: 64.

Image of a Poet in the Age of Money and Anti-Culture

Xi Chuan's image in the Chinese literary world is that of a modern-day man of letters (文人)—or, depending on who is talking, a bookworm: an erudite bibliophile whose interests extend beyond literature and art to history and philosophy. The above outline of his coordinates within the avant-garde may serve as background to some remarkable commentaries on his work in the early and mid-1990s. First, let's look at an exhortation by Yang Ke and Wen Yuanhui for poetry to fall in step with the materialist zeitgeist, on the assumption that resistance is futile:³

Postmodern commodity society has attacked the arts in a destructive manner. Since money's charms now delude people to unprecedented degrees, the humanist spirit communicated in poetry is obviously at odds with present-day material desires of the masses. Poetry's attention to lasting values appears as an attitude that is "divorced from reality," and is unable to satisfy consumer society's need for sensory delight . . . If today's poets are not to feel shame in the face of posterity, a joint effort by this generation is needed, so as to make numerous words presently lacking in emotional flavor—such as *commodities, business, oil, steel, police, politics, tax invoice, instructions, software* and so on—finally embody the cultural connotations of this new age . . . The purest poetry is a poetry that pays attention to the reality of subsistence, that doesn't flee from the dual violence of society and commodities, that punctures fictions and illusions of "letting poetry return to poetry itself"—for beyond subsistence, no poetry exists.

Other critics writing around the same time are less impressed with the new gold rush and don't share Yang and Wen's belief that poets should catch up with the times. Instead, they reassert what they see as the unique value of poetry vis-à-vis materialism, specifically of a noble, spiritual type of poethood epitomized by Xi Chuan. Their outlook exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of the field of cultural production as the economic world reversed, and specifically what Hans Bertens sums up as a vision of poetry—also found in other literary histories than the Chinese—as a line of defense against mundane vulgarity, and things like rapid social and technological change. It also implies defensive moral judgment, sometimes of an idolizing kind. The implied request of the reader to take sides on issues of morality reflects the continuing

³ Yang Ke & Wen 1996: 76-77.

relevance of traditional Chinese views of literature as well as orthodox Maoist poetics, summed up in the time-honored expression that “the text is like the person” (文如其人); in other cultural contexts, judgment of the author’s personality might fall outside the scope of textual criticism. Dwelling on Xi Chuan’s work up to 1994, Yang Changzheng writes:⁴

Xi Chuan’s disposition has always been both gentle and tenacious. How much wisdom and soul does it take to sustain such gentleness and tenacity in this mortal life with all its disasters, its unpredictable changes and its endless temptations? Gazing at the starry sky, Xi Chuan says that he doesn’t want to press himself into being a holy man, but that only true writing can give him peace of mind. Xi Chuan realizes that of money one can make a thousand and thousands more, and then a million and millions more, but that works of literature must be written with single words, one by one.

Liu Na makes the following claim, in a dense review article that is part of a section devoted to Xi Chuan’s work in a 1994 issue of *Poetry Exploration*:⁵

In an age when commodity prices are going up and spiritual culture is devaluating, Xi Chuan and some of his poetry friends [诗友] stand guard over the classical spirit of poetry, protecting with dignity the seriousness of art.

In a 1997 issue of *Literary Criticism* (文学评论), Wu Sijing makes an especially resounding statement, extending textual analysis to the author’s personality as do Yang and Liu:⁶

Naturally, it is not only old poets who hold their own in the midst of loneliness. In the face of surging commercialization and the temptations of money, not a few young poets have also displayed personal integrity . . . Xi Chuan is a graduate of the Department of English at PKU and the great majority of his classmates have gone abroad, but he has stayed in China, for poetry’s sake. He first worked for *Globe Magazine* [环球杂志]. In the general fever of literati “going to sea” [to do business], he too left *Globe*—not for a high-paid, luxurious job at a foreign company, but to teach at a much poorer institute for the arts so as to have ample time for reading and writing, and the opportunity to engage in a mutually beneficial exchange of views with young artists studying there.

⁴ Bourdieu 1993: *passim* in parts I-II, Bertens 2001: ch 1, Yang Changzheng 1994: 48.

⁵ Liu Na 1994: 82.

⁶ Wu Sijing 1997: 80.

The word translated as *poor* is 清贫, explained in the *Dictionary of Modern Chinese* (现代汉语词典) as “poor (formerly often used to describe scholars),” and rendered in John DeFrancis’ *ABC Chinese-English Dictionary* as “poor but honest.” The *New Age Chinese-English Dictionary* (新时代汉语大词典) example sentence says it all: “Father and son maintained their personal integrity despite reduced circumstances.”⁷ Paradoxically, then, the moneyfication of society at large would have meant reduced circumstances for poets.

In these passages, poet-scholar Xi Chuan is invoked to ward off demons of material greed. But it isn’t only money that he is pitted against by literary critics. Within the avant-garde, some view him as a defender of “culture” against the barbarism of trends like “non-culture” (非文化) and “anti-culture” (反文化), referring to mid-1980s trends that made themselves heard through unofficial journals such as *Them*, *Macho Men* and *Not-Not*. Writing in 1994, Lan Dizhi concedes to the barbarians that “one’s culture can indeed turn into a heavy burden,” but proceeds to make his loyalties to “culture” abundantly clear:⁸

However, pray do not misunderstand me, this is certainly not to say that it is best for a poet not to be cultured, it is certainly not to say that for writing poetry one can do without reading, and it is certainly not to say that the glory of poetry can be established in a cultural desert. It seems to me that the case of Xi Chuan reminds us of the need to view the issue in its full complexity. For Xi Chuan is an ardent lover of books and an ardent lover of culture, and has received high-level and profound cultural training, but his accomplishments in writing poetry are recognized by all.

The *but* in the final sentence signals the relevance of the Elevated-Earthly divide, and specifically the anti-intellectual hues of the Earthly discourse that Lan attacks. Lan praises Xi Chuan for continuing to employ original imagery, unfashionable among the barbarians:

“No Imagery” has been among the pursuits of this new generation of poets for a long time. They feel no interest in any imagery whatsoever, pursuing instead the flow of language, of poetry, of rhythm, pursuing the original state of language and a new type of sentence. Face to face with this current, [Xi Chuan] has by no means taken to disliking and avoid-

⁷ Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan 1996, DeFrancis 1996, Wu Jingrong & Cheng 2000.

⁸ On “non-cultural” and “anti-cultural” features of *Them* and *Not-Not*, see Wang Guangming 1993: 216-224. Lan 1994: 85, 89.

ing imagery. All this goes to show that he has an independent mind and great courage.

Lan's representation of Xi Chuan's poethood is that of a beacon in dark times, much like Yang Changzheng's characterization of the poet as "a fortress on the contemporary poetry scene." Cui Weiping had earlier voiced similar sentiments when she wrote, in 1992:⁹

Among modern writings full of hullabaloo, strangeness, loss and the feeling of being torn, Xi Chuan is miraculously neither torn nor confused, and in fact exudes qualities of harmony, contemplation and light.

After these quotations, it should come as no surprise that in the mid-1990s, as Xi Chuan was coming into this stride amid contested notions of poetry against a backdrop of rapid social change, some appraisals of his work contain explicit acts of canonization of both text and author. Liu Na's essay opens with this candidly idolizing abstract:¹⁰

Xi Chuan is one of the most serious and determined among those writing poetry in China since the mid-1980s.

Xi Chuan's poetry has become a contemporary Chinese literary phenomenon that cannot be overlooked.

Xi Chuan's poetry is in the first stages of acquiring normative significance.

2. A DIFFERENT VOICE: POETRY RISING, POETS FALLING

The above commentaries show how acutely the tension between the spiritual and the material was felt by the critics concerned. Yet, it is surprising that their reviews aren't more cognizant of spectacular developments in Xi Chuan's writing since the early 1990s, that occurred amid far-reaching changes in contemporary Chinese poetry at large.

From Faith and Structure to Doubt and Deconstruction

To bring out the contrast with Xi Chuan's early work, let's first consider «In Hairag, Gazing at the Starry Sky» (在哈尔盖仰望星空), written in 1985 and revised in 1987 and 1988. Yang Changzheng alludes

⁹ Yang Changzheng 1994: 47, Cui 1992: 120.

¹⁰ Liu Na 1994: 75.

to this poem in his depiction of Xi Chuan as a noble, cultured spirit withstanding money's temptations, cited above.¹¹

«*In Hairag, Gazing at the Starry Sky*»

*There are mysteries that are beyond your control
you can merely play the part of an onlooker
letting their mysterious force
emit its signals from afar
radiate light, pierce your heart
just like tonight, in Hairag
far from the cities, in this desolate
place, on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau
outside a railway station the size of a broad bean
I look up and gaze at the starry sky
no sound now from the River of Stars, birds are scattered
grass is growing madly toward the stars
horses forget what it means to fly
the wind blows through this spacious night as it blows through me
the wind blows through the future as it blows through the past
I am becoming someone, becoming some
plain little oil-lamp-lit room
and the ice-cold roof of that plain little room
turns into a sacrificial altar under the feet of myriad stars
I am like a child receiving holy communion
mustered up its courage but holding its breath*

For all the calm, contemplative elegance of this text, one is struck by its conventionality, and by the absence of any element of surprise. «*In Hairag*» is a formally unremarkable poem in free verse, with irregular rhyme in the original. The mysteries (the night sky, and Time) are clichés that put urban, human life in predictably humbling perspective. This romanticism of the natural world extends to the plain little oil-lamp-lit room, and culminates in the innocent speaker's (*I am like a child*) initiation in a religion of the universe. We may view the speaker-protagonist as a poet, and the poet's inspired writings as offerings to a Muse that is this universe—and even if we don't, the poem's spiritual conviction stands unchallenged, as does its faith in structure rather than

¹¹ Xi Chuan 1997a: 181-182.

arbitrariness or chaos. By contrast, as we will see below, starting in the early 1990s Xi Chuan's poetry frequently replaces faith and structure with doubt and deconstruction. After a quiet spell, he reemerges as a different voice, recognizable yet transformed. What happened?

The preceding chapters have shown that the year 1989, meaning June Fourth and its aftermath, was a turning point for the life of the mind in China. The violent drama in Beijing and other cities put an end to what had been culturally the most liberal and exciting years in the history of the People's Republic. This left large parts of the intelligentsia bitterly disappointed if not downright cynical. It led many who had immersed themselves in the late 1980s cultural carnival to give up their literary aspirations or put them to commercial use—even though in retrospect, it turns out that poets' visibility in the 1980s had been an anomaly and that more and better poetry has arguably been written in the 1990s and beyond. In Xi Chuan's case the social trauma and disillusionment of June Fourth had been preceded on a private level by the deaths of Haizi and Luo Yihe in March and May, both of them his close friends. This would have made the rest of the deaths-in-poetry discussed in chapter Three—including the 1991 suicide of Ge Mai, yet another friend and fellow poet from PKU—especially uncanny and traumatizing, a supposition which draws support from Xi Chuan's public comments on those turbulent years.¹²

Declarations of authorial intent and autobiographical detail aren't automatically "true," but that doesn't mean we should turn a blind eye to what authors—again, as readers of their own work—have to say about their state of mind and how they believe it informs their writing. The gist of Xi Chuan's statements on the shocking experiences of 1989 and the following years can be summed up in two words: grief and soberness. The latter may be especially pertinent to the change he has identified in his creative writing. The early Xi Chuan was a staunch advocate of "pure poetry" (纯诗). Notably, in 1980s PRC discourse the notion of pure poetry was less to do with things like the self-referential nature of literary language—as in *poésie pure*—than with the unequivocal, logical and lofty character of a world constructed in literary texts that rejected all concern with mundane affairs. In 1980s China there was room for such pure poetry to make sense, ethically

¹² E.g. Xi Chuan 1991a, 1994a and 1997b: 6; Xi Chuan 1997c: 294-295, Maas 1995.

and aesthetically, especially in the more cultish quarters of the poetry scene, even if it harbored little dramatic tension. From 1989 on, however, the deaths around Xi Chuan, both public and private, made him feel that life didn't work in unequivocal, logical and lofty ways. Purity became an increasingly hollow, deceptive concept to him, harmful to the authenticity and the vitality of literary works. Unwavering in his dedication to literature, he became less sure of what poetry was or should be, other than that it was imperative for his writing to establish some relationship with a "reality" on which pure poetry would turn its back.

Whatever the cause of the changes in Xi Chuan's writing at the turn of the decade, «Salute» and his later prose poems of the 1990s make it impossible to characterize his voice as unequivocally dignified, courageous, serious, determined, normative and so on, to use some of the vocabulary employed by the critics cited above—or, as unequivocally Elevated. Similarly, it becomes difficult to represent his poethood as an emblem of reliability any longer, as a familiar stronghold in times of norms and values changing in unsettling fashion and at unsettling speed. Such representations sociopoliticize his art to an unwarranted degree, as regards both its presumed intent and its presumed effect. In addition to the continuing influence of premodern and modern Chinese literary orthodoxies, they reflect the critics' own uneasiness vis-à-vis contemporary social trends as much as anything else.

In fact, to stick with the metaphors used by Lan, Cui and Yang, starting in the early 1990s the beacon may mark a dangerous reef instead of a safe haven and cracks cut through the walls of the fortress as a part of its very design. From this point onward Xi Chuan's writing derives much of its power from the alternation and the coexistence of opposites, and it displays a capacity for dilemma, contradiction, paradox and indeed impossibility that is hard to reconcile with Cui's observation of harmony and the absence of confusion in his work.¹³ This doesn't hinge on either "transparent" or "obscure" imagery but emerges as a general mood that subverts clarity, certainty and straightforward direction in most if not all of the text's dimensions. I refer to this mood as the quality of indeterminacy, and will connect this to Perloff's use of that concept toward the end of this chapter.

¹³ Cf Wang Guangming 1999 and 2003: 626-628.

Indeterminacy operates at critical junctures in «Salute». Recalling the discussion of exile poetry in chapter Four, this is not to say that the following analysis aspires to do anything like framing the series in its entirety. It adopts one possible perspective, to respond to the views of the critics cited earlier and offer other avenues into Xi Chuan's work.

The publication history of «Salute» runs from *The Nineties* (九十年代), one of the small-scale, unofficial poetry journals out of Sichuan that showed the poetry scene's resilience during the cultural purge after June Fourth, to the large-scale, official all-genre journal *Flower City* (花城), and from Xi Chuan's individual poetry collections to authoritative multiple-author anthologies, both of the contemporary era and of the entire twentieth century. Some textual differences between these editions are clearly misprints. Others must be the result of Xi Chuan changing his mind from one edition to the next, or from editorial intervention. My analysis is based on the text published in *The Nineties*, with corrections and changes made by Xi Chuan in November 1993—that is, the latest authorized version before the publication of his 1997 collection *This Is the Idea* (大意如此), which follows the said corrections and changes with very few exceptions. There are minor discrepancies with the *Flower City* text, the most widely available source of the Chinese original, and I will note those which are of interest. I quote extensively from all constituent poems in the series. An English translation of the full text is found in *Renditions* 51 (1999).¹⁴

«Salute»: Form

«Salute» consists of eight sizable constituent poems, each a very full page in length, with numbered headings and individual titles: «One: Night» (一、夜), «Two: Salute» (二、致敬), «Three: Abode» (三、居室), «Four: The Monster» (四、巨兽), «Five: Maxims» (五、箴言), «Six: Ghosts» (六、幽灵), «Seven: Fourteen Dreams» (七、十四个梦) and «Eight: Winter» (八、冬). Xi Chuan has said that the series is neither a poem nor a prose poem nor a narrative text. While its author is unwilling to categorize «Salute»—although he did once call it a long

¹⁴ *The Nineties*, 1992: 94-106, *Flower City* 1994-1: 88-96, Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993: 236-243, Xie Mian & Meng 1996: 545-549, Xi Chuan 1997c: 159-174, *Renditions* 51 (1999): 87-102.

poem (长诗)—there are good reasons for calling it a prose poem.¹⁵ We will return to this point in chapter Six.

Xi Chuan's poetry stands out by its sound. In written form, his texts contain many things one will immediately see and indeed hear during a silent reading, such as parallelism and rhyme, and Xi Chuan is an expert reciter with a growing list of high-profile public readings to his name. While «Salute» has no strict metrical patterns, it does have a great deal of rhythm and it abounds with internal rhyme. Here is an example, in transcription:

*Duō xiǎng jiàohǎn, dàn yào jìnliàng bǎ shēngyīn yādī, bù néng xiàng mànà,
ér yīng xiàng qídǎo, bù néng xiàng dàpào de hōngmíng, ér yīng xiàng fēng de
hūxiào.*

(多想叫喊, 但要尽量把声音压低, 不能像漫骂, 而应像祈祷, 不能像大炮的轰鸣, 而应像风的呼啸.)

Rhythm is more subjectively perceived than meter or rhyme, and for its realization more dependent on who is reading. In Xi Chuan's recitation of «Salute», rhythm can intersubjectively be seen to operate on the levels of both sentence and stanza.¹⁶

Within each stanza, both the written sentence (ending in a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark) and its component phrases (separated by dashes, semi-colons, colons, commas) operate as rhythmic units. The line is irrelevant in this respect. I focus on rhythmic effects on the levels of phrase length and sentence length as well as repetition and parallelism. Take the first stanza of «The Monster»:

[1] The monster—I have seen it. The monster has bristly hair and razor-sharp teeth, it is close to going blind. The monster breathes its husky breath and shouts of misfortune, but its feet move without a sound. [2] The monster has no sense of humor, like someone trying hard to cover up humble origins, like someone destroyed by a calling; it has no cradle offering memories, no goal offering direction, not enough lies to defend itself. [3] It beats on tree trunks, it collects infants; it lives like a rock, it dies like an avalanche.

Repetition and parallelism feature throughout, punctuating and structuring long, dense stretches of text. In part 1, phrases and sentences

¹⁵ Yang Changzheng 1994: 48, Xi Chuan 1997c: 295.

¹⁶ 1995 Rotterdam Poetry International festival.

become progressively longer. Length adds to the text's momentum, and part 1 serves as a springboard for part 2: the phrases in this sentence are longer than those in part 1, and the sentence as a whole is so long as to leave the reader out of breath. In part 3, the speaker relieves some of the pressure, reverting to shorter phrases and a shorter sentence. This generates a jagged rhythm, coming to a halt in *avalanche* at the end of the stanza.

Dividing the first stanza into three parts accords with its content. Part 1 describes the monster as seen by the speaker; in part 2, the speaker dwells on the monster's character; and part 3 tells us what the monster does and relates this to the natural world. The mutual reinforcement of form and content doesn't end here. The first, long stanza is abruptly followed by a single-line stanza, which also heralds a surprising jump in the poem's content:

The crow seeks allies among scarecrows.

Rhythm on the sentence level in «Salute» is hard to overlook. As for rhythm on the stanza level, the above example—a long stanza followed by a short—is typical of patterns that are discernible in the greater part of the series. In each of its eight poems long (l) and short (s) stanzas alternate. If long means having three or more lines in the original, «Salute» can be charted like this:¹⁷

1	l l s s l l s s l s s l s
2	l s s l s s l s s l s s
3	s s s l s s l s s s s s s
4	l s l s l s l s l s
5	s s s l s s s l s s s l s s s
6	l l s s l s s l s s
7	s s s s s s s s l s l s s s
8	l l l s s l l l s s

The short stanzas are interruptions of a veritable outpouring of words, which builds up speed in the space provided by the long ones. The first, second, fourth, fifth and eighth poems make effective use of this

¹⁷ The third short stanza in the fifth poem is part of the text printed in Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993 and among Xi Chuan's corrections to the text printed in *The Nines*.

mechanism. The alternation of long and short works best if no two long stanzas are adjacent, while the short ones in between are not so many as to make the text lose its flow.

In «Salute», rhythm on the stanza level compensates for the absence of poetic-formal regularities such as division in lines and number of lines per stanza, but this mechanism doesn't operate consistently throughout the text. In the realm of form, then, indeterminacy is easy to detect. In his other major poems of the 1990s and beyond Xi Chuan has continued to experiment in this respect.

Content: General Remarks

Form and content are harder to distinguish than their frequent appearances in literary criticism and other languages suggest. Does the typography of a poem in the shape of a swastika come under form or content? Equating the two renders both concepts meaningless. Perhaps this is what the adage "form is content" is meant to do: blot out an artificial distinction. But it is art that we are dealing with, and while neither form nor content exists without the other, this doesn't make them the same thing. Common sense and everyday usage justify their distinction, as long as they constitute a closed circuit. They are the two ends of a scale, and if the transition between them is gradual, as in the first stanza of «The Monster», form and content can amplify one another, and form can act as an icon for content rather than its stylization, as in the case of the swastika. When form contributes directly on the level of content, it can indeed be seen to acquire necessity.

Let's now turn to questions located at the content end of the scale. «Salute» taps semantic reservoirs that also inform other poetry by Xi Chuan. After briefly touching on imagery, diction, atmosphere, speaker and protagonist, we will look at one semantic domain of special importance, that of poetry itself.

«Salute» is full of imagery. To regard words as images and images as metaphors implies that literal, surface meanings don't say all there is to be said. It presupposes the desire or indeed the urge to interpret, and not to take the text at face value. Some texts stimulate these things more than others. Not everything that appears as imagined, however, necessarily represents—or signifies, or "hides"—something else, to be *dis*-covered by the reader. The sheer presence of the image can make the search for such true identities misguided, especially if the text ema-

nates a palpable joy of language, as does «Salute». Also, an image doesn't have to mean the same thing throughout an oeuvre, perhaps not even throughout a poem as long as «Salute», whose component parts can be read by themselves. In the rest of this section and the beginning of the next, I give in to the urge to interpret. I then complement this approach by returning to the surface of Xi Chuan's poetry, which turns out to be an important motive of the interpretive energy that his work releases in the reader—and that it frustrates at the same time.

Diction in «Salute» is generally at a far remove from the colloquial. Xi Chuan's language is highly aestheticized, often literary and ornate, using arcane and archaic expressions. At the same time—and here, again, there is an appreciable difference with his early work—this literariness is interspersed with samples from other linguistic registers, such as the language of Communist Party bureaucracy and everyday speech. Thus, irony undermines seriousness and solemnity, though not to the point of making the stylistic structure collapse altogether. It will become clear that as such, Xi Chuan's language is frequently an icon for his subject matter.

Large parts of «Salute» take place in a dreamlike atmosphere, far from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, evoking an Old World of myth and fairytale. Terrible and wonderful things happen there, but as a whole the series doesn't demand strong emotional involvement on the part of the reader. This aspect of Xi Chuan's work has led some critics to work from binary oppositions of mind versus heart, and of rational and moral contemplation versus mad passion.¹⁸ In the case of «Salute», perhaps this is so because the text is not laid out as a pressing reality, but as an expertly performed show of make-believe. The speaker drifts in and out of the poem's stories, shifting back and forth between being a protagonist and an omniscient narrator. When the speaker is also a (male) protagonist—the only one that is constantly present—he comes across as an outsider who scarcely interferes with his surroundings and delivers surprised reports on his own and others' adventures. All sorts of things are done to him but he is not victimized. He is naive, not pretentious or ambitious, but he has a clever and independent mind. In the face of adversity he shows dignity, resilience, and humor. Explicitly conscious of the literary text in its capacity as

¹⁸ Yang Changzheng 1994: 47, Liu Na 1994: 82.

a discursive framework, he creates a certain distance between himself and the reader, as an expression of humility vis-à-vis a wondrous existence—or, again, as an expression of doubt and of the desire to question the seemingly self-evident.

«Salute» ventures into various semantic domains. A rewarding reading is one with an eye on the domain of poetry itself, and of poetics: one which takes «Salute» as poetry about poetry, while noting other types of subject matter as well. To some extent, the series does uphold the opposition of the spirituality of poetry to material wealth asserted by critics such as Yang, Liu and Wu. It does so in a paradoxical way, by incorporating the issue into its subject matter. But especially with regard to the status of poetry and poets amid realities of everyday life, it turns out that things are much less straightforward than that—or, that they are much more indeterminate.

Content: A Close Reading

My point of departure is the title of the series. At first glance, the second poem has special status because it is also called «Salute», and the title word occurs in the tenth stanza:

A man goes deep into the mountains and miraculously survives. In winter he hoards cabbage, in summer he makes ice. He says: "One who will let nothing move him is not real, neither where he comes from nor in his present life." Therefore we crowd around the peach blossom to sharpen our sense of smell. Face to face with the peach blossom and other things of beauty, one who knows not how to doff his hat in salute is not our comrade.

This mountain hermit flaunts all sorts of rules. He has retreated from human society and he is given to normally impossible undertakings (making ice in summer). Combined with the rest of the stanza, this brings to mind a romantic image of the poet—denoting an abstraction of poethood, as distinct from historical persons—to whose imagination great powers are ascribed. He calls the capacity to feel a criterion for authenticity. *We* are his disciples, who do their best to learn how to feel beauty, to have objects of beauty trigger their emotions. To be literally of one mind (同志, ‘comrade’) with us – with the debunking of Communist ideology, this expression is also an instance of self-mocking irony—one must salute beauty. I take this to refer to the act of writing poetry, in a reading inspired by the poem series itself and enhanced

by the echo of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* (Une saison en enfer).¹⁹ If *we*, poets, live for beauty by writing poetry in order to feel and to express feeling, the poem's last two stanzas make sense:

But we hope not for an outcome in which souls are made to lie idle and words blackmailed.

Poetry guides the dead and the next generation.

Other passages in the series confirm these hints at a high-blown, cultish poetics, even if they regularly do so in tongue-in-cheek fashion. This happens, for example, when the poet's receptiveness to signals from a Muse-like, supernatural source is outlined in the seventh stanza of «Night»:

I have brought you a searchlight, there must be fairy maidens flying over your head at night.

I and *you* can be read as two sides of the same person, one a rational daytime creature and the other the nighttime poet. While the poet is prompted by an external inspiration (fairy maidens), raw materials are provided by his own experience, converted to memories. From the fifth stanza of «Night», and the eighth of «Salute»:

Memory can create brand-new things

and

Memory: my textbook.

As for spectacular products of the poet's imagination, the impossible is frequently possible in «Salute». The following passage, from the fourth stanza of the series' eponymous second poem, invites quotation all the more because it expresses the wish to provoke feelings in steel, conventionally symbolizing a type of heartlessness that comes with strength:²⁰

To want to scream, to force the steel to shed a tear, to force the mice used to living in secret to line up and appear before me.

¹⁹ Coelho 1995: 132.

²⁰ The text published in *Flower City* has *sound an echo* for *shed a tear*; the latter occurs in Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993 and is one of Xi Chuan's corrections to the text in *The Nineties*.

If the scream miraculously provoking feelings is poetry, the next sentence—earlier cited in transcription for its acoustic qualities—may describe *this* poet's style:

To want to scream, but in the softest possible voice, not like curses but like prayers, not like the roar of cannon but like the whistle of the wind.

Throughout the series, there is a close association of poetry and night. At night, fairy maidens will hover over one's head. And two stanzas before that:

A youth is singing in the basement, surpassing himself . . . It's night, needless to say.

The penultimate stanza of «Night» connects the night, emotion and writing, and contrasts them with the daytime:

How powerless the heart when lights go out, when street sweepers get up, when crows take off into the sunlight shining on this city, proud to have their sumptuous wings no longer confused with nighttime writing.

The quotations from «Night» clarify why this poem, written later than the others, ended up being the first poem of the series.²¹ It sets the stage, like a preface to a book, written after the main text is completed. The self-referential nature of poetry is asserted in the closing stanza of «Night», immediately after the night has ended and the day begun:

The bugle blows, dust trembles: the first note always sounds bad!

The last phrase, taken as a comment on the poem it concludes, shows the speaker attempting to distance himself from—or, “indetermining” his relationship to—the literary text of which he must remain part, again drawing attention to his consciousness of that text as a discursive framework.

More examples of the association of poetry, or writing, and night are found elsewhere in the series. Toward the end of «Abode», we read:

The lilac in the ink well is slowly turning blue. It hopes to remember this night, it would do anything to remember this night, but that is impossible.

²¹ See the dates provided for the individual poems in Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993: 236-243.

and in the first stanza of “Winter”:

a spare-time writer stops writing and starts to prepare food for the birds of dawn.

In the sixth stanza of «Winter», *I* wakes up at night, when the fire in the stove goes out. *I* gets up, pokes the ashes and makes the fire flare up once more:

For the one just now dreaming of wolves, my lighting the fire means rescue.

In the scheme of things that emerges from this reading it comes as no surprise that poetry and dreams also belong together, and fire can be added to the list because the moment of waking up coincides with its extinction. Rekindled, it saves the dreamer-poet. Again, the speaker and the dreamer in this passage are different identities of the same person, to whose duality we will return later.

The dreamer takes us to the seventh poem, «Fourteen Dreams». Indeed, «Fourteen Dreams» strengthens the connection of poetry on the one hand, and receptiveness, emotion, imagination, night, dream, on the other—within a reading of the series in its entirety as poetry about poetry, that is, for «Fourteen Dreams» itself never makes this explicit. But eleven of its fourteen stanzas begin with the words *I dream*, and one with *In my dream*, and there are good grounds for identifying the speaker in this series with the poet or someone close to the poet.

«Fourteen Dreams» also draws attention to another, central component of the multifarious subject matter in «Salute». That is, the intrusion of death, as the crudest of everyday realities, into the unworldly realm of poetry. If one expects to see stylized versions of death anywhere at all, poetry and discourse on poetry would be a good place to start looking. Against the backdrop of the Chinese avant-garde, one recalls the mythification of Haizi, and the glorification of his suicide. By the seventh and eighth stanzas, however, halfway through «Fourteen Dreams», death is anchored in a very real, less than glorious reality that is embodied precisely by Xi Chuan’s erstwhile fellow poets and friends:

I dream of Haizi, grinning at me and denying his death.

I dream of Luo Yihe, luring me into a garage, its floor covered in oil stains. In a corner stands a single bed with white sheets. That is where he sleeps, every night.

Xi Chuan has named Haizi's and Luo Yihe's sudden deaths as part of the forces that reshaped his worldview and his poetics between the spring of 1989 and the early 1990s. This is confirmed by their appearance in «Fourteen Dreams» and by other scenes in «Salute» and elsewhere in Xi Chuan's 1990s work. In the passage quoted above the speaker wards off the reality of Haizi's death through dream and poetry, if only momentarily—but to no avail, for the fact of the matter is that Haizi is dead, and Xi Chuan has publicly reflected on Haizi's death more than once. In that sense, «Salute» occupies a transitional position between Xi Chuan's first commemorative essay, which was written soon after Haizi's death and effectively launched the Haizi myth, and his demythifying intervention called “Afterword to Death” some four years later, both reviewed in chapter Three.

Three stanzas down there is a morbid ambiguity in «Fourteen Dreams»:

I dream of a child [孩子 háizi] falling from a high-rise. Without wings.

As noted earlier, the Chinese word meaning ‘child’ resonates in the name Haizi, and Xi Chuan has related an anecdote of someone playing on their homophony; and the *háizi* in the tenth stanza dies a violent death. Finally, there would be no need to assert that this *háizi* has no wings unless there exists, somewhere, the outlandish assumption that he *has* wings. They must be the wings of the imagination, or Heine's wings of song (*Auf Flügeln des Gesanges...*), or those said to be confused with nocturnal writing earlier in «Salute». They fail, however, to make this *háizi* transcend gravity or an ordinary human death, whether such transcendence would take place through poetry or through an *extraordinary* human death, that is: through suicide.

With hindsight the references to Haizi and Luo Yihe affect the meaning of remarks on death in the first, second, and sixth poems of the series. In «Night», the speaker says:

For the soul that cannot sleep, there is no poetry. One needs to stay awake and be on guard, but in the face of death one cannot ponder.

Certainly in a Chinese cultural context, a soul that cannot sleep could be that of someone who died an untimely death, as Haizi and Luo Yihe did. After the reality of death has made its way into Xi Chuan's poetry, it overrules their identity as poets. They are doomed to wakefulness,

but even the rationality that being awake would normally bring is denied them. Death leaves them empty-handed altogether.

In the seventh stanza of «Salute», we read:

On this endless road, there is no asking where the journey leads. When the moth flies into the flame, that is no time to talk of eternity and it is hard to find proof of a man's moral flawlessness.

If the road stands for a life of writing—we have seen that Haizi, for one, was by all accounts a dedicated poet, to the point of being obsessed—the traveler is not to wonder about a destination while alive. Read thus, this statement calls for soberness on the poet's part. It takes exception to a view of creative writing as defying mortality, or claiming eternity for the oeuvre that will outlive its author. Here, let me stress once more that such views were widespread on the late 1980s and early 1990s Chinese poetry scene, and remind the reader of Haizi's «Ancestral Land (Or: With a Dream for a Horse)».

Again, in «Salute» aspects of such a romantic poetics of transcendence are shoved aside by death, specifically the compulsive self-destruction of a moth, emblem of transience. And although Xi Chuan's moth kills itself, everyone else is said to be implicated. This thought is made explicit in the third stanza of «Ghosts»:

The death of others makes us guilty.

The greater part of «Ghosts» is about the relationship between the living and the dead. The speaker finds fault with the living for their inability to deal with death, and for their lack of consideration for the ghosts of the dead. In the fifth stanza he defies the taboo of indecent deaths, a decent death presumably being that of old age:

There is to be no death by lightning, no death by drowning, no death by poison, no death in battle, no death by disease, no death by accident, no death by unending laughter or unending crying or gluttonous eating and gluttonous drinking or an unstoppable flow of words until one's strength is exhausted. Well—how then is one to die? Noble death, ugly corpses; a death without a corpse is impossible.

This instance of iconicity—the first sentence is itself an unstoppable flow of words—demonstrates that people's attempts to domesticate death are in vain, as are the poet's attempts to romanticize it. Xi Chuan's irony extends to this somber area in the eighth stanza of «Ghosts»:

How will the ghosts appear? Unless hats can be transformed into hat ghosts and clothes be transformed into clothes ghosts, flesh-turned-ghost must be naked, but the appearance of naked ghosts is not in keeping with our current morality.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker again sets himself apart from other living human beings, and affirms his affinity with the ghosts of the dead in a playful encounter with them:

In the dark, someone reaches out a finger and taps me on the nose.

To return to my reading of «Salute» as poetry about poetry: the poem suggests that poetry is powerless in the face of death, although more negotiable aspects of reality will leave it in peace. Whereas examples of this type of indeterminacy—not poetry *or* reality, but poetry *and* reality—are scattered across the series, poetry does remain exempt from many rules of daytime life, accepting a socially “marginal” status in return. In «Night» for instance, the youth singing to his heart’s content doesn’t do so for a paying audience but in the basement, unseen and unheard. In «Salute», this statement:

Illusions depend on capital for their preservation

may first appear to forge an unexpected bond between dreams and money, but it is followed in the same poem by the instrumental passage on the mountain dweller who calls the capacity to feel a criterion for authenticity. According to this authority the realm of poetry is real, not its unfeeling counterpart. In other words, illusions are associated with material wealth. Incompatibility of material wealth with emotional and spiritual wealth, hammered home by the critics quoted earlier, also comes to mind when in «Maxims» the speaker admonishes a general audience:²²

don’t sleep with your wife in your arms while dreaming of high profits; don’t light lamps during the day, don’t do business with the night.

Finally, the opposition of poetry and the truths of daytime life finds good-humored, ironic and equivocal expression in this scene from «Winter», the last poem in the series:

²² The last phrase of this passage (*don’t do any business with the night*) occurs in Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993 and is among Xi Chuan’s corrections to the text in *The Nine-ties*.

The taxi covered in snow is pure white, like a polar bear. Its engine doesn't work, its body temperature is dropping to zero. But I can't stand watching it give up, so I write "I love you" on one of its windows. As my finger moves across the glass, it makes a happy, squeaking sound, just like the forehead of a girl expecting a kiss will start to glow.

The speaker literally writes the life back into a victim of the cold with what must be one of the most fundamental and hackneyed phrases from his art.

I have twice referred to the speaker's dual personality. This is illustrated by the following quotations from the first, fourth, and sixth stanzas of «Abode»:

What I will not allow has happened: I am slowly changing into someone else. I must call out three times, I must call myself back . . .

The world in the mirror is my world's equal but its opposite, too: if it isn't hell, it must be heaven. A man exactly like me, but my opposite too, lives in that world . . .

This often happens: Liu Jun makes a phone call to find another Liu Jun. As if I am talking to myself, cradling the phone.

Liu Jun is Xi Chuan's official name. He could have used his pen name, as he did for Haizi, but he did not. Perhaps he thought it unbecoming or distracting, or he saw no need for a general readership to connect the above scenes with their author. Be that as it may, by using his own name he makes them autobiographical, no matter how many Liu Juns exist in historical reality. In the context of «Salute», which depicts poetry in opposition to daytime life, this splitting of a personality on the phone to itself refers to a double identity of poet and daytime person.

I have not yet quoted from «The Monster», the fourth and longest poem in the series, with a dominant "monster" protagonist at its center. To read that conspicuous presence as a metaphor is thrilling, and it is a radical instance of the decision to interpret. The reading of «Salute» that has emerged in the preceding pages, however, offers good grounds for doing so. Moreover, toward the end of the poem, the monster is called a "metaphor of a monster" (比喻的巨兽).

«The Monster» is perhaps the strongest poem in the series. A story well told and delineated in form and content, it exemplifies the ability of effective imagery—and of expertly manipulated language—to gen-

erate a presence all its own, without constantly raising questions of the type What does this really mean? I quote this poem in full to illustrate this point, and to provide a substantial example of what I have called a joy of language. At the same time I will in fact interpret the poem, as before: without attempting full coverage of the text, and with a focus that is directed by my reading of the series as poetry about poetry.

«Four: *The Monster*»

The monster—I have seen it. The monster has bristly hair and razor-sharp teeth, it is close to going blind. The monster breathes its husky breath and shouts of misfortune, but its feet move without a sound. The monster has no sense of humor, like someone trying hard to cover up humble origins, like someone destroyed by a calling; it has no cradle offering memories, no goal offering direction, not enough lies to defend itself. It beats on tree trunks, it collects infants; it lives like a rock, it dies like an avalanche.

The crow seeks allies among scarecrows.

The monster hates my hairdo, hates my smell, hates my regret and my overcautious ways. In short, it hates my habit of dressing up happiness in pearls and jade. It bursts through my door, tells me to stand in a corner, will not let me explain and falls through my chair, shatters my mirror, rips my curtains and all protective screens around my private soul. I beg it: “When I am thirsty, don’t take away my teacup!” Right then and there it digs out water from a spring: that must be its answer.

A ton of parrots, a ton of parrot talk!

For the tiger we say “tiger,” for the donkey we say “donkey.” But how do you address the monster? It has no name, so its flesh melts into its shadow, so you cannot call out to it, so you cannot determine its place in the sun nor foretell the good or ill luck it may bring. It should be given a name, like “sorrow” or “shyness,” it should be given a pond to drink from, it should be given a roof over its head for shelter from the rain. A monster with no name is scary.

A thrush bumps off all the king’s men!

The monster is exposed to temptations too, but not those of the palace, not those of female beauty and not those of sumptuous candle-lit banquets. It is coming toward us, but surely there is nothing about us to make its mouth water? Surely it will not try to suck emptiness from our bodies? What kind of temptation is that!

Sideways through a shadowy passageway, the monster collides head-on with a glint of steel, and that smallest of injuries teaches it to moan—to moan, to live, not to know what faith is. But as soon as it calms down, it hears the sesame stalks budding once again, it smells the Chinese rose's fragrance once again.

Across a thousand mountains flies the wild goose, too timid to speak of itself.

This metaphor of a monster goes down the mountainside, picks flowers, sees the reflection of its face in the river, in its heart of hearts feels unsure who that is; then it swims across, goes ashore, looks back at the haze above the water, finds nothing, understands nothing; then it charges into the city, follows the trail of a girl, comes by a piece of meat, spends the night under eaves, dreams of a village, of a companion; then it sleepwalks fifty miles, knows no fear, wakes up in the morning sun, discovers it has returned to its earlier place of departure: still that thick bed of leaves, hidden underneath the leaves the dagger still—what is about to happen here?

Dove in the sand, you are awakened by the shimmer of blood: the time to fly has come!

I take the monster to be a metaphor for poetry in a broad sense, including all aspects of artistic creation. The *I* in the poem's opening line is one side of the dual personality identified above. Accordingly, as the poem proceeds, his relationship with the monster proves to be ambiguous. The statement:

The monster—I have seen it

implies that the monster isn't visible to all. In a romanticist poetics, the attributes ascribed to the monster in the rest of the stanza are familiar traits of poetry too, which rub off on the poet: dangerous, proud of a calling but destroyed by it, and truthful (not enough lies to defend itself). Thus, from the start, the monster fits in well with the dreamlike, romantic world of poetry. In the fourth stanza, among the things the monster hates are regret, overcautious ways, and façades drawn up around one's heart and heartfelt feelings: it advocates the unbridled expression of individual emotion. Curtains and protective screens around the soul are part of the speaker's appearance in daytime life. Two stanzas down, there are evident associations with poetry again, as that which cannot be named and defies straightforward expression and control. The speaker suggests "sorrow" as one possible name, in-

voking truisms to the effect that good poetry is more likely to have suffering than happiness as its source. The stanza's closing sentence:²³

A monster with no name is scary

takes the reader back from romantic poetry at large to its concrete manifestation in this poem. The temptations to which the monster is said *not* to be exposed point to poetry's social "marginality": that is, as measured against political power, sexuality, and material wealth (the palace, female beauty, sumptuous banquets). After the now explicitly metaphorical monster's wild ride through the ninth stanza, the text ends at daybreak, just as in «Night», the first poem of the series. The day begins with a hidden dagger, a promise of violence, and the shimmer of blood that awakens the dove in the sand comes to stand for the colors of sunrise. In another similarity with «Night», the last line of «The Monster» is a reference not to an abstraction called poetry, but to this poem itself. When the dove flies off, the poem is over.

The dove is the last of a series of birds interrupting the monster in the short stanzas that alternate with the long ones, in another example of form acting as an icon for content. The short, airy stanzas feature birds, while the long, heavy stanzas are the domain of the monster itself, of human beings, of the tiger and the donkey, all earthbound and unable to fly. If the birds are not poetry itself, they may be messengers from the realm of poetry or its overseers. There is evidence to that effect elsewhere in «Salute» and in other poems by Xi Chuan, and in his explicit poetics.²⁴

My reading of the monster as a metaphor for poetry is motivated by its immediate surroundings, the other seven poems in «Salute». Especially if the fourth poem stands by itself, as it has at various times in its publication history, the monster has broader resonances. It can be seen as an anarchic, uncontrollable force of an emotional or imaginative nature, further interpretation depending on what individual readers bring to the text. To cite three examples, the monster could represent the artist's inspiration—as Xi Chuan has suggested—or

²³ This statement, added by Xi Chuan to the text in *The Nineties*, also occurs in Wan Xia & Xiaoxiao 1993; there, it is followed by the phrase *it is a force we can't control*.

²⁴ See, for instance, «Birds» (鸟, in Xi Chuan 1999a: 89-90), and the opening and closing stanzas of «Near View and Far View» (近景和远景, in Xi Chuan 1997c: 217-236); and chapter Ten of this study.

social rebellion, or the power of fate. Cui Weiping has invoked the monster to illustrate her observation that Xi Chuan's later work no longer claims to know how things will end and hints at forces that lie beyond our grasp.²⁵ In this respect, the terms in which she comments on Xi Chuan's work are akin to the notion of indeterminacy, even if the monster is a less indeterminate presence than the romantic poet embodied by Haizi.

At first sight, then, a reading of «Salute» as poetry about poetry yields a romantic opposition of poetry and everyday reality, reaffirming views of Xi Chuan's poethood held by several critics. Poetry, in close association with night and dreams, provides a prideful alternative to daytime life. The value of emotion, imagination and spirituality is set off against the limitations of rationality and despicable materialism. Thus, the poem's time and place of origin brings to mind social change in China, specifically on the poetry scene and in the intellectual-cultural climate at large, in the rapid transition from the Eighties to the Nineties, with those two decades representing not just periods in time but distinct, incompatible mindsets. But as we read on and reread, it transpires that things are not as clear-cut as that. There is one aspect of reality from which poetry offers no escape, manifest in the appearances of Haizi and Luo Yihe: death, oblivious to any order of things but its own. Death will invade the realm of poetry and kill poets, no matter how immortal their poetry. In the words of Joseph Brodsky:²⁶

*With neither grimace nor maliciousness
death chooses from its bulging catalogue
the poet, not his words, however strong,
but just—unfailingy—the poet's self.*

«Salute» owes much of its charm to its speaker-cum-protagonist, apt at putting both reality and poetry in perspective. While recognizing the compulsory, universal truth of death, he reserves the right to create an optional, personal truth in art. He is better at questioning answers than at answering questions. Especially in his indeterminate portrayal of poethood and related matters, this character is a worthy companion to tragic heroes, low-key demystifiers, loud taboo-slayers and vulgarizers and other voices that operate in the avant-garde's texts. The poem's

²⁵ Xi Chuan 1995: 66, Cui 1992: 122-123.

²⁶ Brodsky 1973: 99; translation by George Kline.

power, within a framework of modern Chinese poetry and beyond, lies in meticulous and confident wording, in the balanced combination of divergent registers and subject matter, and in the dramatic tension between disrespect for inflated notions of poethood on the one hand, and poetry's miraculous survival on the other.

3. WORDS CAPTURING IMAGES, IMAGES CAPTURING WORDS

Since «Salute», Xi Chuan has produced several other long poem series, including «Misfortune» (厄运, 1996) and «What the Eagle Says» (鹰的话语, 1998).²⁷ Both share with «Salute» an experimental, explorative feel and the quality of indeterminacy in various dimensions of the text, from typography to sound to linguistic register and so on. There are interfaces between the three texts on the level of subject matter, too. All are concerned with issues of identity, relations of self and other, transformation and metamorphosis—and with images of poetry and poethood.

Xi Chuan's poetry is of the kind that stimulates the urge to interpret. Giving in is easy, so to speak. Below, I give in once again, this time to several passages from «What the Eagle Says». This leads toward some thoughts on the limits of interpretation that are inspired by the surface of his poetry rather than its “deep meaning,” and by the interaction of these two levels of the poetic experience.

Some More Deep Meaning

Just like «Salute», «What the Eagle Says» has eight constituent poems; for an English translation of the full text, the reader is referred to the *Seneca Review* xxxiii-2 (2003). Each poem's stanzas are numbered, for a total of ninety-nine in the entire series. The eight titles are worth joint citation, as a nutshell characterization of Xi Chuan's style in the late 1990s:

- «One: Of Thinking, As Harmful As It Is Fearful»
- «Two: Of Loneliness, That Is Desire Unsatisfied»
- «Three: Of False Causality and Real Coincidence in the Dark Room»
- «Four: Of Dreary Good and Contentious Evil»

²⁷ Xi Chuan 1997c: 175-198 and 1999b.

«Five: Of My Intimate Experience of Things»

«Six: Of Fighting, Tearing and Biting, and Death»

«Seven: Of the Appearance of Truth»

«Eight: Of My Meaningless Life»

《一、关于思想既有害又可怕》

《二、关于孤独即欲望得不到满足》

《三、关于黑暗房间里的假因果真偶然》

《四、关于呆头呆脑的善与惹是生非的恶》

《五、关于我对事物的亲密感受》

《六、关于格斗、撕咬和死亡》

《七、关于真实的呈现》

《八、关于我的无意义的生活》

«What the Eagle Says» contains many moment of metamorphosis. Take this stanza in «Of My Intimate Experience of Things»:

56/ Thereupon I shun my flesh and turn into a drop of perfume, actually drowning an ant. Thereupon I turn into an ant drilling my way into an elephant's brain, upsetting it so that it stamps all four of its legs. Thereupon I turn into an elephant, my entire body exuding a great stench. Thereupon I turn into a great stench, and those who cover their noses when they smell me are men. Thereupon I turn into a man, and a plaything of fate.

But metamorphosis doesn't quite cover what is going on here. *I* appears to be a mental-linguistic agency, autonomous but without a home of its own. Roaming from one body to another, animate or inanimate, *I* can occupy divergent points of view:

58/ Thereupon I turn into my posterity and let the rain test if I am waterproof. Thereupon I turn into rain, and splash upon the bald head of an intellectual. Thereupon I turn into the intellectual, detesting the world and its ways, and I pick up a stone from the ground and hurl it at the oppressor. Thereupon I turn into stone and oppressor at the same time: when I am hit by me, that sets both of my brains roaring.

In addition to metamorphosis, then, we may speak of metaphor, in its literal meaning of transfer. Apparently, it is not just *I* that is capable of transfer, but others as well. In «Of Fighting, Tearing and Biting, and Death», we read:

64/ . . . I need but feign to be an eagle, and a man will feign to be me.

In the final stanza of «Of My Meaningless Life» and of the series as whole, the poem intimates that the chain or the poetic spell of metamorphosis and metaphor can be broken, with the same sort of literary self-consciousness we have encountered in «Salute»:

99/ So please allow me to stay in your house for an hour, because an eagle plans to reside in a chamber of my heart for a week. If you accept me, I will gladly turn into the image you hope for, but not for too long, or my true features will be thoroughly laid bare.

These are some of the things we learn about the speaker-protagonist. What of the eagle itself? The poem's title suggests humanization, for 话语 'what . . . says' is inseparably linked to human language, and cannot be used in phrases like *The cat says miaow*. In the poem, the eagle doesn't say a thing, but in Chinese, as in English, *what the eagle says* can also mean 'what the phenomenon or the story of the eagle has to tell us,' or indeed 'how one could speak of the eagle.' This ambiguity extends to the eagle as it appears in the body of the poem, reaffirming clichés only to subvert them. In «Of Thinking, As Harmful As It Is Fearful», the eagle is *a sign that doesn't carry the weight of thinking*, evoking a conventional vision of animal instinct, determined of itself and untroubled by existential doubt. Soon thereafter, however, the eagle is called shy. For all its unlikeliness, this all too human imperfection somehow endears the animal to the reader. As such, it is akin to the monster in «Salute», when the latter is said to have no sense of humor and hate the speaker's hairdo.

Moving on from there, we find a regular alternation of a sovereign, clichéd eagle, abstracted into eaglehood, and an individual animal. The cliché *flies on high, flying of itself, like its own shadow*. It even becomes a point of calibration in the universe, for when *it spreads its wings . . . it is the earth begins to fly*. Our shy eagle of flesh and blood, however, neglects to eat and is too weak to get off the ground. It dies—the cliché is of course immortal—and falls prey to maggots, and its feathers end up *in the living room of a white-collared beauty*. In the context of present-day China, this may well bring to mind the new rich, unimpressed by eaglehood but happy to pay for a stuffed eagle as a piece of interior design. Although there is nothing like one-to-one overlap here, the distinction between abstract eaglehood and the eagle of flesh and blood leads to an association with that between transcendent poetry and mortal poets in «Salute».

Thus, the dismantling of the Elevated image by vulgar, material reality takes us back to the earlier series, where Haizi falls to his death from a high-rise and we read that *the death of others makes us guilty*. In «What the Eagle Says», Xi Chuan expands this observation to include the animals:

. . . not metaphysical death but death of the flesh: wounds festering, the body rigid. That is death of the flesh, and we partake in it.

Subsequently, in a poetical statement—the naming of things in order to neutralize them—we read that *if I describe an eagle, this is in order to cut off its head*. The same stanza contemplates the possibility of the eagle's biblical rebirth, thus reverting to cliché once again. Any temporary death of eaglehood would be strictly metaphysical, and only have a use for festering wounds and so on as stage props.

But in the end, metaphysics lose and what weighs heaviest is feathers, festers, the identification of man and beast and their mutual metamorphosis or trading of places. The eighth and final poem in the series «Of My Meaningless Life», begins as follows:

88/ Among men there are men who are not men, just like among eagles there are eagles that are not eagles: there are eagles that are forced to pace up and down the alleyways, and there are men who are forced to fly through the air.

Some eagles are really men, and some men eagles. This must be why in «Of Fighting, Tearing and Biting, and Death», *I* cautions that *one shouldn't be too quick to put eagle meat on the menu*. That to be an eagle is not nearly as exciting as the cliché would have it is another one of Xi Chuan's inferences from the blurring of the boundaries between man and beast. For if man doesn't revel in his walking, why should the eagle revel in its soaring?

Back to the Surface

I have said that Xi Chuan's poetry makes it easy to give in to the urge to interpret. The actual process of interpretation, however, is difficult—that is, if one expects anything like complete coverage of the text, or coherence in an all-encompassing symbolic structure, or even the identification of one particular, exclusive deep meaning for central images such as the monster or the eagle. Thus, while this poetry invites

interpretation, at the same time, it actively resists any interpretation that leads to semantic closure. How does this work?

«What the Eagle Says» frequently strikes an expository pose. It does so through the deliberate, aestheticized repetition of sentence patterns, a mechanism we find in «Salute» as well. From «Maxims»:

A book will change me, if I want to take it in; a girl will change me, if I want to sing her praises; a road will change me, if I walk it to the end; a coin will change me, if I want to own it. If I change someone else who lives beside me, I change myself: my single conscience makes the both of us suffer, my single selfishness makes the both of us blush.

This mechanism occurs more frequently as Xi Chuan's poetry develops through the 1990s, in texts such as the above-mentioned «Misfortune» and especially in «What the Eagle Says». ²⁸ We have seen several examples, but there are more, such as this stanza from «On Loneliness, That Is Desire Unsatisfied», which lays out nothing less than an itinerary through life:

25/ Shall we not read the map? At sorrow lies the first crossroads, with a road to song and a road to bewilderment; at bewilderment the second crossroads, with a road to pleasure and a road to nothingness; at nothingness the third crossroads, with a road to death and a road to insight; at insight the fourth crossroads, with a road to madness and a road to silence.

Intra-sentence and inter-sentence patterns such as these remind one of ancient philosophical-literary texts from East and West, such as Zhuangzi and Heraclitus, suitable for analogy and contrast, mirror image and opposition; and they prompt the reader to engage in a cognitive discourse with the text. And true enough, Xi Chuan's poetry has thought-provoking, serious things to say about thought-provoking, serious subject matter such as that identified above—identity, self and other and so on—and about the human condition. Crucially, however, upon closer inspection the semantics of his poetry often stray from the rules of expository and other logics, celebrating ambiguity, paradox and indeed contradiction instead. Inasmuch as it is philosophically inclined, his poetry turns out to be *pseudo*-philosophy (伪哲学), in the author's words—which, yet again, present a defensible descrip-

²⁸ For Andrea Lingenfelter's English translation of excerpts from «Misfortune», see *Sentence* 5 (2007).

tion of his art.²⁹ His poetry's resistance to interpretation, then, stems from the primacy of the poem's actual *texture*, that is: the materiality, including the musicality, of its language. Summed up in a reversal of the conventional expression that the words of a poem serve to capture images, what happens here may well be described as images attempting to capture words.

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The concept of indeterminacy as I have used it, especially in section 2, denotes a general mood that subverts clarity, certainty and straightforward direction in most if not all of the text's dimensions. This largely overlaps with the scope Marjorie Perloff assigns to it in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Notably, Perloff points out that indeterminacy is not the same thing as vagueness, or the multiplicity of meanings one may read into a single poem, or an assumption that any poem can be made to mean anything—and hence, one might add, to mean nothing at all. Perloff's employment of the concept hinges on the fact that while the surface of a particular type of (post)modern poetry—John Ashbery's, for example—“endlessly generates the impulse that makes the reader yearn for completion and understanding” and invites one to probe its depths, doing so will not lead to the ability to determine any stable deep meaning. Using Roger Cardinal's imaginative terminology, she shows how the language of such poetry always seems to be on the point of revealing its secrets but at the same time re-*veils* them, in simultaneous disclosure and concealment. According to Cardinal, “to read such a text is like being given a key only to find that the locks have been changed.” In a chapter on Gertrude Stein, Perloff observes that indeterminacy comes about through “repetition and variation, sameness and difference, a rhetorical pattern of great intricacy,” and that this pattern is “set up so as to create semantic gaps.” This analysis very much applies to the aestheticized quality of Xi Chuan's writing. Xi Chuan's particular performance of what Perloff summarizes as tension between reference and the compositional game, or between a pointing system and a self-ordering system, is a

²⁹ Xi Chuan 1997c: 5; cf Xi Chuan 2001: 224, entry 19.

key feature of this poetry and its unique contribution to modern Chinese literature.³⁰

On the metatextual level of critical discourse, my reading of «Salute» shows that representations of Xi Chuan's poetry in the money-fied 1990s as asserting a unidirectional prevalence of mind over matter or Elevated over Earthly are incomplete at best. His poetry can equally be seen to show up the prevalence of matter over mind, in the deaths of poets and otherwise. These two expressions also apply on the level of our immediate engagement with his work: mind over matter in that interpreting this poetry more or less contentwise can be extremely rewarding, and matter over mind in that the formed materiality of his language takes the lead in this poetry's realization. This duality is one of the ways in which the synergy of form and content that is typical of poetry can make itself felt.

³⁰ Perloff 1999: 27-32, 72, 84, 97, 98, 261-263 *et passim*.