CHAPTER EIGHT

NARRATIVE RHYTHM, SOUND AND SENSE: SUN WENBO

As a distinguishing characteristic of poetry, the synergy of form and content has come up more than once in the preceding chapters. It features again in this chapter, now with attention to narrativity (叙事性) in the work of Sun Wenbo (1956). Critical discourse to date presents narrativity as an important trend in Chinese avant-garde poetry in the 1990s, contrasting it with lyrical trends in the 1980s, but it has focused on content and had little time for form.

A native of Chengdu, Sun began to write in the early 1980s and was recognized as a distinct voice within the avant-garde in the early 1990s. Since the mid-1990s he has spent most of his time in Beijing. His track record includes many journal and book publications, frequent citation in domestic criticism and invited readings abroad. He is one of those whose work has been anthologized in the *Blue Star Poetry Treasure House* series, discussed in chapter Seven. Invariably associated with Xiao Kaiyu's and Zhang Shuguang's poetry but also akin to that of Wang Jiaxin, Sun's work is characterized by a relative paucity of imagery, a thoughtful mood and a forceful, flowing tone. On the scale from Elevated to Earthly, Sun, Xiao and Zhang display a greater affinity with the former than with the latter, although all three make room for "realist" representations of the quotidian in their writing.

Their style has been invoked by critics such as Hong Zicheng, Cheng Guangwei, Li Shaojun, Tang Xiaodu, Luo Zhenya and Wei Tianwu—and by poet Xiao Kaiyu in his capacity as a critic—to help identify a so-called Poetry of the Nineties, a contested notion briefly mentioned in chapter Two. Aside from its particular, controversial usage in the Popular-Intellectual Polemic, which we will examine in chapter Twelve, an oft-cited feature of Poetry of the Nineties is that of narrativity. The concept of narrativity has been stretched to fit a mixed bag of texts, but one can see how it applies to the poetry of Sun, Xiao and Zhang, and how it led to their labeling as Narrative poets in the mid-1990s, with Zhang generally recognized as having pioneered the

Figure 8.1. Sun Wenbo, 2000 (photograph by Maghiel van Crevel)

narrative style in the late 1980s. As is true of the other angles adopted in the case studies in this book—exile, indeterminacy, objectification and so on—this chapter's focus is not meant to reduce the poetry under scrutiny to one-dimensionality. On that note, John Crespi comes to Sun's poetry and that of Yu Jian from the opposite direction, by asking how poetry provides *non*-narrative ways of remembering the Cultural Revolution—non-narrative when compared to the typically narrative genres of fiction, memoir and film, that is.¹

It is perhaps unsurprising that critics have discussed narrativity in the oeuvres of Sun, Xiao and Zhang with near-exclusive reference to content. In a narrow, common sense, narration means the construction or the telling of stories. This easily leads to association with paraphraseable aspects of the literary work rather than things like the materiality of the poem's language. As such, the concept of narration is wont to direct the reader toward content—again, in a narrow, common sense—rather than to form, and in practice toward the poem's plot, to consider “what the poem says” or “what happens in the poem.” Moreover, Xiao Kaiyu, metatextually the most vocal of the Narrative poets, has encouraged such thinking in his explicit poetics. While the trend from what to how identified in chapter One has had its advocates throughout the avant-garde textscape ever since the balance shifted from the message to the medium in the mid-1980s, Xiao holds that contemporary Chinese poetry's predicament is in fact summed up in the question of what to write (写什么), and that this takes precedence over the question of how to write (怎么写).²

To be sure, there is a clear content side to the narrativity of Sun's, Xiao's and Zhang's poetry. Yet, it is high time for attention to the possibility that the narrative character of their work, defined as its resemblance to the telling of a story, is also realized by something else than paraphraseable content. *How* is this poetry narrative? This question is prompted by Sun Wenbo's «The Program» (节目单, 1994), a long

¹ Most published sources cite 1959 as Sun's year of birth. This inaccuracy stems from biographical notes accompanying his poetry in the Hong Kong newspaper *Thumb* (大拇指) of 15 July 1986 (see Sun 2001b). Sun 2001a, Xiao Kaiyu 2004 and Zhang Shuguang 1998 are substantial collections of Sun's, Xiao's and Zhang's work; see Van Crevel 2008a for others. Hong 1998, Cheng Guangwei 1997a, 1997b and 1998b; Li Shaojun 1998, Tang 1999, Wang Guangming 2003: 632-636, Luo Zhenya 2005: 172-188, Wei 2006: ch 5, Xiao Kaiyu 1997a and 1997b. Crespi 2007a.

² Xiao Kaiyu 1997b: 97. For an outline of Xiao's, Sun's and Zhang's views on narrativity, see Cao 2002: 299-303.

poem that is representative of Sun's writing at its strongest. «Sequel to the Program» (续节目单, 1999), for instance, fails to meet the standard set by its predecessor in terms of narrative complexity, interpretive space and acoustic quality.³

As a preliminary to the analysis, section 1 draws attention to the phenomenon of content bias. Section 2 submits that while «The Program» derives content narrativity from the sophistication of its plot, it simultaneously realizes poetry's lyrical potential through its use of apostrophe. In section 3 I argue that crucially, narrativity in «The Program» is not just of the content kind but is generated in synergy with the poem's sound and its visual appearance on the printed page. This happens on two levels: that of objectifiable formal features and that of rhythm, less objectifiable but no less relevant. Section 4 shows how the notion of narrativity employed in 1990s criticism can be seen to reinforce content bias as it has been conditioned by the particular context of modern Chinese poetry at large.

1. CONTENT BIAS

As noted in chapter Five, the inseparability of form and content doesn't justify their equation, nor does it detract from the usefulness of their distinction for examining poetry. As Veronica Forrest-Thomson writes in *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*:⁴

Too many literary theorists have taken [the observation that form must support content] to mean that form and content are fused in such a way as to make it impossible for us to distinguish levels in a poem or to find it good on one level though ill on another. If form must support content, it is no less necessary . . . that content should support form . . . [Form and content] must be different, distinguishable, in order that their relations may be judged.

Among the countless definitions of poetry, of special interest to us here are those that address the dynamic relation of form and content, of sound and sense. One such definition is proposed by Derek Attridge, with characteristic attention to what he calls the physical stuff of language:⁵

³ Sun 2001a: 219-222 and 256-259.

⁴ Forrest-Thomson 1978: 121.

⁵ Attridge 1981: 228, 244.

Poetry represents not a minimization of the arbitrariness obtaining between signifier and signified, as a semantically oriented approach to verse would imply, but an enforcement and exploitation of it: our rush for meaning is impeded, and we are obliged to acknowledge the independence and value of the linguistic properties we are usually so eager to leave behind.

The work of Amittai Aviram addresses similar issues, albeit from a very different perspective: one that is particularly useful for the present analysis, as we shall see below. Aviram defines poetry thus:⁶

A poem . . . is an utterance designed to draw the reader's or listener's attention simultaneously in the opposed directions of mere sound and meaning, and thus to afford a sustained feeling of tension.

Sections 2 and 3 of this chapter travel in these opposed directions, section 2 in that of meaning and section 3 in that of sound—and of vision.

As Aviram points out, while rhythm is central to the poetic experience, it is often neglected in criticism. For one thing, this is because it is far from evident how rhythm can be verbalized. More generally, disregard for rhythm and other elusive formal qualities of the poem can be traced to insufficient sensitivity and indeed indolence in poetry reading, acquired in the referentially driven culture of schools and universities, and to the phenomenon of content bias at large. By content bias I mean disproportionate attention to paraphraseable parts of the poem, to what may appear to be a straightforward, semantic message that can be re-told with impunity.⁷ By way of an example, let me recall that a content-biased translation of Yu Jian's lines 打开烟盒 打开嘴巴 // 打开灯 would read *open our cigarette cases open our mouths // turn on the light*, instead of *open our cigarette cases open our mouths // open the window*. My rendition of 灯 'lamp' as *window* stems from the conviction that in this case, retaining the repetition of 打开 'open' in three grammatical phrases in current English usage is infinitely more important to the realization of the text qua poetry than any semantic "faithfulness" on the level of single lexical items. If this comes across as form bias, let me reiterate that I subscribe to the position that in poetry, form is of the essence. This doesn't mean that every question we ask

⁶ Aviram 1994: 51.

⁷ Aviram 1994: 54-57 *et passim*. On content bias, cf Frye 1973: 77, Forrest-Thomson 1978, Attridge 1981, and Zhang Longxi 1992: 179.

of poetry must be to do with form, but it does mean that we should realize which of our questions require answers that give pride of place to issues of form.

For formal poetry, the adverse effects of content bias are obvious. Content bias would, for instance, reduce Li Bai's time-honored if over-exposed «Thoughts on a Quiet Night» (静夜思) to a Tang-dynasty description of a traveler's melancholy. If this poem's semantics are less than spectacular, violated as they are by their extraction from its formal levels of operation, this only helps to prove the point. By way of another Chinese example, this one from the early modern era, Wen Yiduo's «Dead Water» (死水) would amount to no more than national-allegorical musings on stagnancy and rot, in disregard of the dramatic tension generated by the contrast with the poem's well-formed appearance. Such informationalization of literature begs the question of form. Why did these poets go to the trouble of coining metrical phrases of equal length containing rhyme, parallelism and so on, to begin with? Or, conversely, can the content of their work be considered without taking into account its emphatic formal qualities—does it even *exist* without these qualities? In one of Forrest-Thomson's illustrations of a reprehensible type of criticism that she calls “bad naturalization,” why didn't Eliot just say “Life seemed so futile” instead of writing «The Waste Land»? Moving closer to our own time and faced with contemporary Chinese poetry's overwhelming inclination toward free verse, «The Program» being a case in point, we may invoke Eliot the critic to caution that no verse is free for the one who wants to do a good job.⁸

Content bias is partly explained by the fact that semantic paraphrase provides a seemingly easy and unconstrained way of talking *about* poetry, an activity that becomes notoriously difficult as soon as it ventures beyond the safe confines of mere rewording. Forrest-Thomson makes a frontal assault on content bias, in her attempt⁹

to talk about the most distinctive yet elusive features of poetry: all the rhythmic, phonetic, verbal, and logical devices which we may group together under the heading of poetic artifice.

She takes the issue further by claiming that it is precisely those aspects of poetry that are most difficult to talk about that most clearly mark

⁸ Forrest-Thomson 1978: xi, 133 *et passim*. Eliot 1990: 37.

⁹ Forrest-Thomson 1978: ix.

it as poetry—and by proceeding to write an inspiring study that reaffirms the value of the second voice, in the words of Tonnus Oosterhoff, cited in chapter One. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic literary scholarship, insofar as it is of a translatory nature in the broadest sense, and certainly as a part of Area Studies—talking in language X about poetry in language Y, talking in culture X about poetry in culture Y—is especially prone to content bias, but intra-cultural and intra-linguistic scholarship by no means guarantee due regard for form either.

For modern Chinese poetry, content bias is aggravated by the interference of history and politics in Chinese cultural life. The twentieth century brought social upheaval, ranging from war and revolution to starvation and the horrors of totalitarian rule. Coupled with the socio-political engagement of the traditional Chinese poet and the importance that Chinese rulers have attached to literature through the ages, be it as censors or as sponsors, this situation has reinforced visions of the literary work as the reflection if not the logical product of circumstance—and hence, as eminently paraphraseable. Consequently, domestic and foreign commentary have often treated modern Chinese poetry as rhetorically frilled social documentation, as noted in chapter Four in connection with the exile scene. Examples include Donald Finkel's and Tony Barnstone's anthologies of poetry from the PRC in English translation. Their content bias is visible in what I would like to call, after Forrest-Thomson, bad historicization of the literary text. This is particularly disturbing because they address a general audience that has no access to the original texts, contexts and metatexts, and comes away thinking of modern Chinese poetry, including the contemporary avant-garde, as primarily political in nature. There are of course counter-examples, especially in research on formal poetry, such as Cyril Birch's study of meter in Xu Zhimo and Lloyd Haft's work on the Chinese sonnet; and with regard to free verse, Peter Hoffmann's monograph on Gu Cheng. In all, however, especially research on modern Chinese free verse requires a continuing attention to the interdependence of form and content. It is in this area that the present chapter hopes to make a contribution, in line with some of the others in this study.¹⁰

¹⁰ Finkel 1991, Barnstone 1993, Birch 1960, Haft 2000, Hoffmann 1993.

2. «THE PROGRAM»: CONTENT AND PLOT

An aside on terminology is in order here with regard to four related words used in this chapter: *content*, *plot*, *sense* and *meaning*. Content is, according to Jaap Oversteegen, the subject matter present in a given form, or the poem's more or less paraphraseable aspects, with the constellation of its constituents intact, in the linear order of reading.¹¹ The poem's plot is the same thing after it has been paraphrased, rearranged in the analysis and so on, and with less attention to its amplification by formal aspects. Sense is one half of the duad sound and sense, an elegant characterization of what the complex thing that is poetry has to offer, and a subset of form and content, for there is more to form than sound. In this chapter, especially in the latter half of section 3, the large and potentially vague notion of meaning functions specifically as part of Aviram's contrast of meaning and sound, cited above, and largely overlaps with content. More broadly, meaning denotes content *after* interpretation—and at that stage, it has also taken form into account.

Like many of Sun Wenbo's poems, «The Program» is a sizable text: 72 lines, neatly divided into nine numbered stanzas-*cum*-episodes. The translation below is more rigidly “faithful” to the original than its literary rendition, published elsewhere.¹² My concern has been to ensure that each line contains the same word groups as its Chinese source, if possible in the same order, to let the text unfold to its Anglophone reader in similar fashion to the original. This is to do with the paramount importance of the line as an organizational unit in Sun Wenbo's work, on which I will elaborate later.

«The Program»

1

*Leafing through the beautifully printed program, you see
a fiction of night: with a moon like a face ravaged by cholera.
He sits on a stone bench in the garden. Grief over the loss of his father
stirs his soul as would cheap liquor. You see
his depressed stare at the withered chrysanthemum.
When the orchestra strikes up, he starts, on the stage,*

¹¹ Oversteegen 1983: 29-31.

¹² HEAT 1997-5: 144-149, *The Drunken Boat* 6-I/II (2006, online).

to walk back and forth. He sees you. You and he know that to define positions for the actors and the audience means: confusion.

2

One step, just one step, and you have crossed the audience's line. You have even seized the main character's role. You have taken his position now, and set foot on an avenger's road. Compared to him, you know better who the enemy is, you would almost madly shout the enemy's name. You, brandishing the sword that was once his, on the stage dash toward the highest point. You are directing the extras, wanting them to bring the enemy before you, right there you want to chop off his head.

3

Does he tolerate your behavior? He seems so dejected! He has quietly withdrawn to a corner of the stage, his hands restlessly tugging the edge of the curtain. And the rest of the plot, how should it be handled? How will a larger scene combine with this scene to form a full-fledged act? He doesn't know now. How can the time of two hours be whiled away in only half an hour? And there should be schemes yet, and conspiracies, betrayal, and someone's love.

4

Thereupon, time quivers in the crowd's eyes: clouds rush like mad dogs over the crowd's heads; rivers fall, revealing glossy cobbles; bats at dusk swoop to and fro 'round humming electricity lines. Thereupon, you start stating details from a book: a sentence read out loud, downcast retroflex sounds. They turn into a play within a play, on death, on a tale come back to life from death. Thereupon,

5

the crowd sees a shocking episode: on a street corner, in a busy inn, a bunch of blind-drunken soldiers are loudly talking smut. Between two of them a quarrel arises, over comments made about a woman. This leads to knives being drawn, to the inn being smashed up as they fight. In this madness, all those present lunge into tangled warfare. And people die. Just how satisfying is this smell of blood? The audience is watching, wide-eyed and trembling with fear.

6

And the sentimental are now sobbing. And a bereft woman has now fainted in her seat. Time seems to glide to one side now. You seem to walk into another life now.

“Daytime cities, let them vanish like froth.

Rise, rise. But not rise like steam, no, rise like a rocket, screaming and in flames.”

You are satisfied with those sobbing; as for the ones that have fainted, them you curse: you frail souls, what good is it that you exist?

7

Well what about him? He has left, in a gloomy state of mind. He has entered an out-of-the-way side street of reality. Under pale yellow streetlights, he walks with lowered head. Above his head, the wind makes noises, like a thief jiggling the edge of a roof. He knows that to quit this time means to quit forever. A man, how could he spend a lifetime inside a play? Props for wine will not resemble wine for long. As he turns and strides into a small wine shop, he shouts: waiter, bring out the wine.

8

Oh, but you're drunk with being on stage. You're like the crown prince who sees the throne unoccupied. At this moment, what your eyes see is a scene happier than paradise: all of the extras are like stage props in your hand. You fiddle with them, as if fiddling with pencils. Chairs and tables talking? You make the chairs and tables talk. Can walls and trees walk about? You make them look like leopards on stage, and walk about. “The stage in its greatness is a gorgeous dream.”

9

But you, how will you make the final curtain fall? One climax after another has not just spurred feverish waves in the hearts of the audience, but also pushed you to the center of excitement. In their eyes, all you see is the glint and flash of knives and swords. The music keeps working to construct a splendid future. Bread-like swollen desire makes you reach out your hand time and again. You have forgotten yourself, and forgotten him. You have become a usurper. You now think that whatever you lay hands on is just that.

«The Program» comes to us in the words of an omniscient speaker, whose critical distance from the poem's protagonists is clearest at the midpoint (stanza 5: line 7, *Just how satisfying is this smell of blood?*) and in the poem's final three lines (*You have forgotten yourself, and forgotten him . . . You now think that whatever you lay hands on is just that*). There are two main protagonists: *you* and *he*. On level one in the diagram overleaf, *you* reads the program of a theater play featuring *he*. Subsequently, on level two, *you* enters into the play and into interaction with *he*, forcibly taking his place (1:7 and 2). Within the play embedded in «The Program», *you* creates (4:5-7) another play (4:8 and 5:1-7). Within this innermost text on level three, the encounter and the struggle on levels one and two between *you* and *he* find a parallel in a fight between two soldiers. This could generate a reading of their blind drunkenness and talking smut on the stage as metaphors for theatrical and hence for literary usage, backed up by the observation in stanza 8 that *you* is drunk with being on stage. More pertinent to the present interpretation is the expansion of the said parallel by the audience's (*all those present*) engagement with the actors (the two soldiers). This is precisely what has happened in stanzas 1 and 4, with *you* initially as part of the audience. After the pivotal interjection of the play-within-the-play in stanza 5—halfway through the text, at its core—it is also what continues to happen in stanza 6. But now *you* is an actor, and indeed the director and judge of both play and audience.

In the diagram, italicized words are literal quotes from the poem. The outer circle contains «The Program», the middle circle contains the play embedded in the poem, and the inner circle contains the play-within-the-play, created by *you* in the process of usurping *him* and becoming *he*. Arrows indicate (inter-)action that results in a change of status or identity; double lines, projection from one level onto another.

As we read on in the poem's time toward its final lines, we are on our way back from the inner to the outer shells. This movement doesn't stop at the text's boundaries. *You* is severed from previous identities of *you* and *he* and their relationship, and what *you* has usurped (9:8) is arguably *he*. *You*, who started out as an audience, has become *he*. *He*, who started out as an actor, is thrown off the stage into reality, which might also mean that he is pushed over the poem's edge. At the same time, the poem suggests that—from outside its textual boundaries—

Figure 8.2. «The Program»: Content and Plot

you, reader of «The Program», take the place of *you*, protagonist and reader of *the beautifully printed program* (1:1), and are drawn into an eerie if not grotesque and violent event. The play-within-the-play and its aftermath, for example, show that terrible things befall the audience. When the poem is next read, the process starts anew. The reader will become *you*, *you* will become *he*, and *he* will be ousted. Notably, in a *side street of reality*, *he* might become *you*, the poem's next reader. «The Program»—or, the program—continues endlessly and relentlessly, going around in circles, cyclical and resonating in itself as poetry does.

The namelessness of the oft-repeated personal pronouns suggests that they represent ineluctable, inherently repetitive patterns of social interaction rather than moments that involve individual choice. This impression is reinforced by emphatic repetition on the level of form,

as we shall see below. It is as if these mechanisms become operational as soon as the next person—including an “innocent” reader—appears and is slotted in. In the abstract, then, «The Program» is also about interpersonal, social roles and their transgression and rotation (crossing the audience’s line, taking somebody else’s position, entering another life, entering reality): from reader to protagonist, audience to actor, actor A to actor B, inside the play to outside—and possibly back in again. These roles include the categories of subject and object, with *he* the subject acting upon *you* the object, and *you* the subject making *he* the object of the audience’s gaze.

But there is another dimension to the interpretation of the poem’s protagonists. Throughout stanza 1 and in the poem’s closing sentence, the second-person protagonist *you* suggests identification with the reader-narratee. This highlights the sophistication of the poem’s plot and its content narrativity. Most occurrences of *you*, however, are manifestations of apostrophe, a mechanism whose centrality in the lyrical-poetic experience has been established by Jonathan Culler. That is, they address a second person that is *not* the reader, with the poet “turning his back on his listeners”—reflecting the Greek etymology of *apostrophe*—and being “not heard but overheard,” in the words of Northrop Frye and John Stuart Mill.¹³ By the discursive temporality of the here-and-now of the address, as opposed to that of narrated time, these occurrences of *you* draw attention to the poem as an event, as a speech act, and to its lyrical qualities. A dual identity of *you* as both reader-narratee and the addressee of the apostrophe is by no means excluded, for example in its first and last occurrences (1:1 and 9:8). In the closing sentences of stanza 1 and the opening of stanza 2, *you* can be seen to change gradually from the reader-narratee into the addressee of the apostrophe. *You* remains so through stanza 8 and some way into stanza 9. Only there does the reader-narratee resurface, flustered and set off against the speaker’s cool-headed distinction between reality and make-believe—or, between real life and the theater—that takes us back to the start of the text. The overall picture, then, is of two distinct but inextricable identities of *you*. Their duality doesn’t subvert the poem’s content narrativity in itself. On the contrary, it heightens narrative acuity by reminding us of the lyrical in the middle of the nar-

¹³ Culler 1981: ch7, Frye 1973: 5 (Mill citation), 249-250.

rative. This thematizes the text's very status as a poem, making it poetry about poetry, or an outstandingly poetical text: it says what it is.

3. «THE PROGRAM»: FORM

As with most other poems, the primary formal feature of «The Program» is its sound, but its visual appearance merits attention too. Indeed, we shall find that the poem's overall formal effect hinges on the interaction of the acoustic and the visual.

Objectifiable Features

«The Program» has nine numbered stanzas of eight lines each. The identical size of its component parts is typical of large parts of Sun Wenbo's oeuvre. A striking example is his «Narrative Poem» (叙事诗), in 23 stanzas, also of eight lines each.¹⁴ In «The Program», line length varies from 13 to 18 characters. All nine stanzas end in long lines and all but the first two begin with long lines—in the original more clearly so than in the translation—which gives them a cyclical feel. For a narrative poet like Sun, we should remind ourselves that the poet determines where the line ends, not the typesetter. This presents one of several interfaces with the analysis in chapters Five, Six and Seven, another being that while Sun's «Narrative Poem» is almost three times as long as «The Program», both texts far exceed the single page and fail to meet Gerrit Krol's poetic criterion of viewability at a glance. On the whole, as an orderly line-up of robust blocks of writing whose width exceeds their height, «The Program» looks solid and regular if not monotonous, repetitive and long drawn out. There is a patient insistence about the look of «The Program» —and, as we shall shortly find, about its sound.

How does «The Program» sound? Like much contemporary Chinese poetry in more or less free verse, it has no structural rhyme to speak of, be it end rhyme, internal rhyme or alliteration. The poem does, however, employ the device of repetition to considerable effect. Stanza 4, for example, begins with *thereupon*, ends with *thereupon* and literally hinges on *thereupon*, as the first word of its second half. *The crowd's*

¹⁴ Sun 1997: 109-118.

eyes (人们的眼睛 *rénmen de yǎnjīng*) resonates in the crowd's heads (人们头顶 *rénmen tóudǐng*). We can read the asymmetry (no 的 in the latter) as the conscious avoidance of monotony or as indicating that the text has little regard for detail in this respect. Repetition also occurs on the level of syntax. Each of the stanza's first three lines ends with a noun phrase ushering in a new sentence (*clouds, rivers, bats*), standing out because of its position between a punctuated pause and a line break. The focus of the present analysis requires a slight terminological adjustment as compared to chapter Five: here, a sentence is defined as (implied) noun phrase + verb phrase, so that it can end on a comma or a (semi-)colon. The effect of the noun phrase in line-final position depends on the poem's manner of recitation, for there are sharply different ways of acoustically negotiating enjambment—and on its being visually read, that is: seen, in addition to being heard. Easily the most effective instance of repetition throughout «The Program» is that of the singular pronouns *you* and *he* as the first word of a sentence or a line. Section 2 has shown the importance of these pronouns from the viewpoint of content. Excluding pronouns that don't refer to the protagonists, there are as many as 38 cases. Their density is highest at the poem's start and end, and lowest in its middle third (stanzas 4-6), in the play within the play.

After rhyme and repetition, let's now turn to meter, meaning the regular arrangement of stressed and unstressed or long and short syllables into fixed patterns such as feet. At this point, it won't surprise the reader that «The Program» displays no strict meter. Nevertheless, a look at stress patterns in the text is worth our while. Here is stanza 1 in transcription, with stressed syllables underlined:

Fān-kāi yìn-zhì de jīng-měi de jié-mù-dān, nǐ kàn-jian
yì-ge xū-gōu de yè-wǎn: yuè-liang xiàng huò-luàn bīng-rén de miàn-kǒng.
Tā zuò zài huā-yuán de shí-yǐ shàng. Shū-qu fū-qín de bēi-shāng
xiàng liú-déng jiǔ yí-yàng cì-jǐ zhe tā de xīn-líng. Nǐ kàn-jian
tā shū-shén de mù-guāng níng-wàng zhe kū-wěi de jú-huā.
Dāng bàn-zòu de yuè-qú xiàng-qǐ, tā kàn-shǐ zài wú-tái shàng
lái-huí zǒu-dòng. Tā kàn-jian le nǐ. Nǐ hé tā zhī-dào
yǎn-yuán hé guān-zhòng de wèi-zhí de què-dìng, yì-wèi zhe: hùn-xiáo.

In assigning stress, I have worked along the following lines. A toneless second syllable in a compound word is unstressed: e.g. *jian* in *kàn-jian*,

liang in *yuè-liang* and *dao* in *zhī-dao*.¹⁵ A fourth-tone second syllable of a compound word with a first syllable in second or third tone is stressed: e.g. *yàng* in *yí-yàng* (with *yí* realized in second tone through tone sandhi), *wàng* in *níng-wàng* and *dòng* in *zǒu-dòng*. Stress is assigned with attention to syntactic sentence structure rather than lineation: *yí* in line 2 remains unstressed. Stress within the sentence is relative: *xiang* in lines 2 and 4 and *dang* in line 6 remain unstressed. This may appear problematic, for where does one draw the line? But if we agree that calling all but the toneless syllables stressed would defeat the purpose of the exercise, minimal regard for prominence and said special cases results in a pattern of six to eight mostly trochaic and dactylic feet per line.

Notably, exceptions occur in six places spread evenly through the stanza, highlighted in the above citation. All mark the beginning of a new sentence, as defined above, in a monosyllabic pronoun (*nǐ* ‘you’ and *tā* ‘he’) immediately preceding the stressed first syllable of another verse foot: *nǐ kàn*, *tā zuò*, *nǐ kàn*, *tā shī*, *tā kāi*, *tā kàn*. These instances of stress on two consecutive syllables add effective syncopation to an overall rhythm that can be traced throughout the entire poem. Form and content—interaction of the poem’s protagonists, *you* and *he*, as well as thematization of the dual identity of *you*—iconically connect and reinforce one another.

In *Mysterious Music: Rhythm and Free Verse*, Burns Cooper submits that rhythm is essentially a perceptual and therefore subjective but not an arbitrary phenomenon. Its perception may to some extent be culturally and linguistically determined. I will not speculate on similarities and differences between perceptions of «The Program» by native speakers of Chinese, non-native speakers of Chinese and people who don’t speak Chinese, and merely observe that my analysis of the written text is supported by Sun Wenbo’s recitation, in my non-native Chinese perception.¹⁶

As regards phrase length, with the phrase defined for present purposes as what lies between any two punctuation marks—which is not necessarily a noun-verb sentence—Sun strictly follows the written text, audibly pausing at each punctuation mark and nowhere else. Disregarding lineation, his recitation yields the following sequence of phrase length

¹⁵ In addition to Sun Wenbo’s recitation, I go by DeFrancis 1996, in light of this work’s primary concern with true-to-life transcription.

¹⁶ Cooper 1998. 1998 Rotterdam Poetry International festival.

in characters = syllables in stanza 1: 11-10-10-9-20-17-8-11-5-16-3-2. If we do take lineation into account, the longest phrase has 14 characters. The stanza-final phrases of five, three and two characters are conspicuous in their brevity. Combining the character count and punctuation patterns with the stanza's syntax, we find that of these three, the middle one is closely linked to the preceding 16-character phrase, justifying emphatic pauses around the five- and two-character phrases in lines 7 and 8. Again, there is a connection with the poem's content, in that both phrases, *he sees you* and *confusion*, have a high specific gravity in the stanza. This connection is reaffirmed if we include short phrases with line breaks instead of punctuation as their right boundary, in lines 2, 4 and 7. In linear order, the short phrases build a content skeleton for the stanza and the poem: *you see [the scene] . . . you see [him] . . . he sees you . . . you and he know . . . this means . . . confusion*.

We have noted that Sun Wenbo employs enjambment. In this respect, as in others, «The Program» is representative of large parts of his oeuvre. Only a third of the line breaks in the poem coincide with the completion of a sentence, always marked by punctuation. For all line breaks in the other two thirds of the text, from the viewpoint of syntax we must read on. There are three degrees of enjambment. The first, accompanied by punctuation (nine cases), is that exemplified in lines 5-6 of stanza 2: *You, / brandishing the sword*. The second degree of enjambment (27 cases, or more than one third of the full text) is seen, for instance, in lines 1-2 of stanza 1: *you see / a fiction of night* and in lines 7-8 of the seventh: *strides into / a small wine shop*. The line break interrupts the sentence, but respects the integrity of noun and verb phrases. We find enjambment to the third degree where the line break also cuts through the middle of a (compound) noun phrase or verb phrase (12 cases), as in lines 1-2 of stanza 2: *the audience's / line* and lines 3-4 of stanza 5: *a quarrel / arises* (in the original, a four-character inchoative verb compound, one word broken in two: 争吵 / 起来). Last but not least, there is a conspicuous case of enjambment bridging a stanza division (between stanzas 4 and 5): *Thereupon, // the crowd sees . . .*

Enjambment is remarkably frequent, to where run-on lines become the default mode. As a result, end-stopped lines with breaks that coincide with the punctuated completion of a sentence gain in emphasis and finality, a typical example being the poem's last sentence and closing statement: *You now think that whatever you lay your hands on is just that*. Conversely, sentence-final lineation is systematically undermined.

The narrative character of Sun Wenbo's work—in contradistinction to its lyrical elements—thus partly derives from enjambment, that is: from one of this poetry's *formal* features. The poem *sounds* like a story, quite aside from the *sense* we have made of it in section 2. As above, we should note that for its effect, it hinges on the text being seen and preferably heard at the same time, in the reader's voice or someone else's. This is less so for poetry with sentence-final line breaks, for example that of Ouyang Jianghe; and for poetry without line breaks, such as that of Xi Chuan.

Objectifiable formal features of «The Program» show that content aside, the oft-cited narrativity of Sun Wenbo's poetry is generated by its look and sound, as well as their interaction in near-ubiquitous enjambment. We will return to the role of enjambment in a discussion of the relation between rhythm, sound and sense toward the end of this section.

Rhythm

With critical reference to an array of literary, linguistic and cultural theories (Jakobson, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Abraham, Kristeva, Lacoue-Labarthe), Amittai Aviram's *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry* presents a theory of poetry built on the principle of rhythm, defined as the repetition of discontinuous elements, which controls both the meaning and the sound of the poem. As noted above, to the latter one might add the poem's visual appearance, and indeed any other sensory features it may have. Poetry can then be read as¹⁷

an allegory of the sublime power of rhythm to manifest the physical world to us. It is a way of infusing words with a power that is not itself in words, a way of saying the ineffable.

If “saying the ineffable” comes under what I have called definitions through bootstrapping in chapter Six, the mobilization of rhythm makes it that much more concrete and operational.

Seen thus, poetry not only tells of unrepresentable experience but also of the impossibility of conveying such experience by way of words and symbols. One of the strengths of Aviram's argument lies in its

¹⁷ Aviram 1994: front flap *et passim*, esp part I.

negotiation of an issue that is acutely pertinent to the study and indeed the definition of poetry, summed up in the question of why Li Bai, Wen Yiduo, Eliot and countless others went to so much trouble to write what they wrote in the particular way that they did. If poetry were merely another way of doing what prose can arguably do better—say, transmitting information, even if this includes information of the imaginative, the aestheticized, the non-goal-oriented kind—then why bother? Rhythm, then, is an origin of poetry, not an ornamental or rhetorical device attached to or even worked into a prior message. Rhythm compels affect, which triggers an attempt on the part of poet and reader to think of words and images to address it. This approach also informs Aviram's stimulating treatment of the relation between form and content or, in his terminology, sound and meaning. Here, their order is not hierarchical but ontological, and determined by the primacy of rhythm. Poetry valorizes and energizes reality by using its own material reality, its own material being—pure rhythmic sound that allows us to witness the failure of language to address the power of the very material out of which its signs are made. Notably, this failure can be realized in exquisitely crafted form and content. There is, in other words, no contradiction between the primitive power of rhythm and the sophistication and complexity of a poem like «The Program».

Here lies an interface with the discussion of poetic form in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic frameworks. Building on Jan de Roder's work on the unmeaning—*betekenisloosheid*, what Aviram calls the meaningless or the non-sensical and Forrest-Thomson the non-meaningful—I have elsewhere suggested a definition of form that challenges content bias and the dominance of the cognitive in literary criticism and education:¹⁸

Form is everything about the poem that may be perceived by one who doesn't know the language of which the poem partakes.

With some exaggeration, one could proceed to a view of the actual realization of content or meaning as a cultural-linguistically determined aspect of poetry, on the assumption that rhythm, by contrast, is universal. We need only think of musical-rhythmic differences between, say, Indian, Australian Aboriginal and Middle-Eastern traditions to

¹⁸ De Roder 1999, Forrest-Thomson 1978: xi *et passim*; after Van Crevel 2000: 5.

recognize that universality of rhythm lies not in historically specific interpretation but in what Aviram calls its catchiness and in its affective access to the human body. Further exploring what is self-evident in everyday experience, the universality of rhythm is shown by association with things like heartbeat, breathing, sex, swimming-crawling-walking-running-flying, night and day, the seasons, birth and death and so on. Incidentally, this forges a connection with the thematics of death, famously universal—that is, significant in every single cultural-linguistic habitat—in the realm of meaning but equally so in that of rhythm. The reader will recall that in «The Program», death makes its advent in the pivotal stanza 5, the play within the play, at the heart of the text.

Aviram presents his theory primarily with reference to conventionally metrical texts, ranging from classical, canonized high culture to contemporary popular forms like rap. While it may work especially well for these types of text, this need not detract from its applicability to free verse. Indeed, if in comparison to metrical poetry, free verse is closer to prose, Aviram's questions and his answers become all the more pressing. At any rate, the theory of poetry as telling rhythm can advance scholarship on free verse without claiming exhaustive or exclusive analytical power.

Returning to «The Program», we find that Sun Wenbo's poetry is not strictly metrical and employs little rhyme, but that it does display systematic, formal regularities that distinguish it from radically free varieties of free verse. Its acoustic and visual qualities combine on the levels of word group, sentence, line and stanza to produce a patiently insistent surface beat. In verse feet, lines and stanzas, acoustically as well as visually, the poem's rhythm is easily discernible, and so—albeit more cognitive and mediated—is the rhythm's manifestation in the poem's content.

To conclude this section, I will pull together my earlier remarks on the relation of form and content. First, the ineluctable repetition of interpersonal and social role patterns mirrors the poem's orderly, monotonous flow of words. From its initial affective status, the poem's patient insistence is cognitivized into a verbal representation of behavioral patterns. Conversely, the poem's calm, balanced formal features produce a stark contrast with the violence at the heart of the text. This exemplifies Aviram's definition of poetry as affording a sustained feeling of tension by drawing the reader's attention simultaneously in the

opposed directions of sound—and vision—on the one hand, and of meaning on the other.

Second, when *you* and *he* generate syncopation, this disrupts and challenges the rhythm's surface manifestation. Subsequently this surface manifestation is time and again restored to reaffirm not just itself, but also the futility of the protagonists' efforts to take charge. For all their efforts at individual agency, they are subjected to predetermined mechanisms. Similarly, enjambment subverts the visual surface rhythm of the poem's lines, which is only disciplined in the nick of time at the end of all but one of the stanzas, including the last. Here, I invoke Aviram's observation that rather than thinking of poetic rhythm as a sign representing something, we should see it as a function that is *doing* something. It manifests the physical world to us and underlies poetry's knowingly doomed attempts at saying what cannot be said. One thing the text's inadequate representation of poetic rhythm can do is to register anxiety over the fact that the power of rhythm cannot be controlled—by lineation, for instance, or by division into stanzas.

Third, in the poem's content, the said role patterns emerge on different levels. Reading linearly we first move inward, from the outer world to levels one, two and three in the diagram on page 292. At this point, reading on means moving out again. Levels two and one, and level zero or the world outside the poem, are like ripples around a stone cast in water. Especially in the first stanza and the last, ever larger and more self-aware, levels two, one and zero are cognitivizing spheres sent forth by the painfully physical, central scene on level three, in the fifth stanza. The message of mortality and the rhythm of death are driven home in minimal, immediate words: *people die* (有人死亡).

These are three ways in which words, including their syntax, and images in «The Program» tell of the poem's rhythm.

4. NARRATIVITY AND ITS CONTEXT

Let's return to the question asked earlier and recapitulate our findings. The analysis shows that «The Program» has strong narrative components. Its narrative acuity is heightened by the dual identity of the second-person protagonist, setting narrativity off against lyricism and thematizing the contrast as a poetical statement. But what are the nar-

rative components of Sun Wenbo's poetry, or *how* exactly is his poetry narrative? The answer opens up the full width of the sliding scale between content and form, with referential, cognitive matter at one end and non-referential affect at the other.

«The Program» has conventional story-like qualities. It ostensibly relates a chronologically unfolding course of events and their internal dynamics. One could with some justification approach the text using structuralist narratological concepts like narrator and focalization. Alternatively, Monika Fludernik's "post-classical" narratological concept of experientiality could also apply to «The Program». According to Fludernik, narrativity occurs, that is: the reader views a text as a story, upon encounter with any anthropomorphous agency that accumulates and evaluates recognizable, "real" experience and displays emotional involvement.¹⁹ Especially in modern literature, there is no reason why theory designed for one conventional genre cannot be applied to another. Still, to explore and explain narrativity in «The Program» as poetry, narratology would at best offer incomplete insights. More is to be gained from adopting Aviram's view of poetry's sensory features and its meaning as combining and interacting to tell of the power of the poem's rhythm.

Of equal importance to its paraphraseable aspects, then, the poem's essential affective impact may be gleaned in its tone and rhythm. The extension of the protagonists' audience within the text to its "outside" reader establishes a direct relationship with this reader. Narrative hues thus acquired on the level of tone are reinforced by "prosaic" diction in words like *and*, *thereupon*, *now*, *but* in sentence-initial position and by formulas like the expository *this leads to* and the phatic *Well*. As for the text's rhythm, its conventionally poetic, semi-metrical qualities are clear, but on this level its narrativity is decisively enhanced by the absence of rhyme and by enjambment in most of the line breaks. Referential matter in an abstract, neatly structured plot aside, the poem almost sounds like the telling of a story. This is no less important for its narrative status than the issues of content that have dominated the discussion of narrativity in the avant-garde to date.

Content bias in scholarship on twentieth-century Chinese poetry has its culturally and historically specific contextual reasons, previously mentioned at several points in this study: traditional Chinese ideas

¹⁹ Cited in Herman & Vervaeck 2001: 146ff.

about the poet's social responsibility, coupled with social upheaval in the modern era. The verse-external, explicit poetics of the three poets identified with Narrative Poetry in the 1990s points in the same direction. At the start of this chapter we noted as much for Xiao Kaiyu, the most systematic theorizer of the three and a champion of the what-to-write school, even though in one of the more light-hearted of his essays, he remarks on the "even pace" of the language of Sun Wenbo's poetry and—perhaps not in earnest—offers biographical explanations for Sun's characteristic rhythm as stemming from his experience as a soldier (marching), a factory worker (machines) and a city resident living close to a railroad (train wheels).

Neither does Sun Wenbo's own explicit poetics do much to dispel content bias; Zhang Shuguang is the only one who dwells, albeit fleetingly and inconsistently, on the phenomena of tone and rhythm as lying at the heart of the matter. All three emphatically situate their writing in its social context of life in present-day China, including its less than glamorous and its positively banal moments. In 1997 Xiao proposed the original notion of Transitive Writing (及物性的写作), meaning writing whose motivation and consciously limited, focused subject matter stem from personal, lived-through experience. Linked to the concept of narrativity, this has proved influential in historical and critical survey works of later years, such as those by Luo Zhenya and Wei Tianwu. These present Transitive Writing as contributing to the deconstruction of a utopian lyricism found in poetry of the 1980s, ranging from early Obscure Poetry to Root-Seeking trends and poetry as religion in the work of Haizi.²⁰

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In sum, according to Chinese poets, scholars and critics writing in the 1990s, content reflecting a real world outside the poem is indispensable. It is confirmed as such in the oeuvres of the Narrative poets. Content, however, acquires prominence and sustains it beyond a particular historical moment only if the poem satisfies Archibald MacLeish's request that *A poem should not mean / But be*—or, in Aviram's

²⁰ Xiao Kaiyu 1995: 158-159. Sun 1998b, 2001b. Zhang Shuguang 1999, esp 245-246; the said inconsistency is with his answer to the first two questions, on 235-236. Xiao Kaiyu 1997a: 221. Luo Zhenya 2005: 172-188, Wei 2006: ch 5.

words of similar import, if it tells of the power of rhythm, which is precisely what «The Program» and many other Narrative poems do.²¹ Especially in light of China's turbulent twentieth century it is important that we remind ourselves that narrativity comes in various kinds, and more generally that poetry is not social documentation.

²¹ MacLeish 1985: 106-107.