Paradoxy and Meaning in Bei Dao's Poetry

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> Poetic language is the language of paradox.
> —Cleanth Brooks

> Paradox exists in order to reject such divisions as those which exist between "thought" and "language," between "thought" and "feeling," between "logic" and "rhetoric," between "logic," "rhetoric," and "poetics," and between all of these and "experience." . . . In paradox, form and content, subject and object are one, conflated, as the ultimate instance of the unity of being.
> —Rosalie Colie

> Only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.
> —C. G. Jung

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Arguably the most eminent Chinese poet today, Bei Dao lives and writes in two worlds. In China, he is a memory, a literary giant of the 1980s whose pathbreaking writings influenced a generation and sparked the democracy movement that helped accelerate the country's reform and openness. In the West, he is a reminder of China's repression and intolerance, a poetic enigma whose well-translated elliptical syntax and cryptic imagery represent a complex interior response to a hostile exterior world. Such different reactions toward Bei Dao underscore the transformation of the poet himself — from an uncompromising young rebel in pre-1989 China to a mellowing and meditative poetic voice in exile in the West.

Born in Beijing in 1949 (the year of birth for the People's Republic of China), Bei Dao's life for the most part has intertwined with the politics of China. Mao's crusade of sending the city youth to the countryside (the rustication campaign known as *zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang*) caught Bei Dao right after his high school graduation, and he was sent to work as a construction worker in a Beijing suburb, where he started to write perhaps to fight boredom and a feeling of despair. By the end of the 1970s, China had just awakened from the nightmare of its Cultural Revolution, and the oppressive Maoist ideology had lost much of its credibility. After years of overfeeding on the formulaic propaganda of socialist literature, the public, especially young readers, were ready for an alternative. Thus Bei Dao's personal pulse became that of a generation. Although, understandably, his writings paralleled the official poetry in their style of grandiosity and sloganizing, they could not be more different in message. The significance of a simple statement such as "I — do — not — believe!" can only be grasped by those who must believe nothing else but Mao.[1] The central concern of Bei Dao's poetry at this time was a plea for the restoration of personal space and life's ordinariness against a general deprivation of humanity in China for the past decade. "I am no hero," he writes. "In an age without heroes / I just want to be a man."[2] Being a man means, Bei Dao repeatedly clarifies, living a life of dignity and fulfillment without political consequences. Such apolitical ideas were given a political reading by both the student protesters of the 1980s and the Chinese government. When Bei Dao's influence spread from small circles of friends to many college campuses, the literary establishment launched a campaign against him and a like-minded group of young poets,

maliciously labeling their works "Misty Poetry," a label that Bei Dao would later gleefully embrace.[3] The official hostility made Bei Dao famous but it ultimately led to his forced exile in 1989 following the Tian'anmen Square student protest.

"The exile of the word has begun," Bei Dao announced upon his arrival in Europe in the spring of 1989, immediately becoming the symbol of China's abortive democracy movement.[4] He revived his short-lived journal *Jintian* (*Today*) and made it an important forum for the community of exiled Chinese writers and artists. By now, Bei Dao's writing career in exile is longer than it was in China, and he has a much larger body of work to match, all of which has been translated into over thirty languages. At present, maintaining a principal residence in the United States, Bei Dao continues to be a citizen of the world, giving readings and lectures in places as far away as Latin America and Africa. The recent "lenience" by the Chinese government to allow him family visits in Beijing does little to change Bei Dao's status as an exiled poet. As tragic as exile has been to his family life, Bei Dao has relished the unexpected freedom and the opportunity to work "the word" to attain the realm of pure poetry, a poetry of linguistic exactitude and aesthetic bliss. In terms of style and technique, he has become a bold experimentalist in truncated word combinations and disjointed images. He has also reinvigorated his efforts to draw on classical Chinese poetry as well as his favorite Western poets such as Paul Celan and César Vallejo. Removed from familiar sensations and relationships, Bei Dao seizes the singularity of his life in exile and contextualizes his heightened sense of subjectivity in everything that is happening—be it an accidental mosquito bite, a Bach concert, or a phone call home. In this mundaneness of life, however, an opponent always lurks, invisible and in some cases unnamable, working to undermine life's promise and fragment the self. It can be argued that exile is only an occasion for Bei Dao's profound sense of alienation and pessimism and that he also is reiterating a truth about modern life in general, a truth that is more powerful and long-lasting than a single political ideology. It is also evident that exile has reinforced Bei Dao's belief in paradoxy as a strategy for meaning that was derived from his oppositional poetics in China.

Throughout his career, however, Bei Dao has been beset with the complaint of readability. The label of Misty Poet is his legacy in China and

continues to define him abroad. In recent times, a growing number of critics — for reasons very different from those of his official Chinese critics in earlier times — have expressed frustration with Bei Dao's poetry: how his enigmatic style, fractured syntax, and disjunctive imagery have conspired to resist reading even by expert readers. For example, Michael Duke, an esteemed scholar of contemporary Chinese literature, has declared that Bei Dao's poetry "as a whole did not make any sense."[5] The Taiwan writer and critic Lee Kuei-shien offers a similar reaction: "The more I read the less sense he makes to me. The knots of so many contradictions are beyond unraveling, and the more I try to interpret, the greater the apparent disarray."[6] If the "sense" that the two critics wish to make is a traditional thematic unity and interpretative certainty, Bei Dao's poetry is bound to cause disappointment. The impression that Bei Dao is not committed to "meaning," this essay will argue, is because he is committed to paradox. If paradox produces meanings at all, they are always multiple, undifferentiated, and indeterminate. The unending display of paradoxes, whose power comes from an imaginative reordering of things and events, forms a key aspect of Bei Dao's poetic world.

Through the Prism of Paradox

Paradox, as commonly understood, is a play on logic; it first invokes contradictions and then subverts them by the power of reason to finally dissolve them altogether. In the end, logic survives a serious challenge but ultimately prevails. At least this is how two contemporary rhetoricians, Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor, characterize the strategy of paradox in literary criticism. Identified as one of the six fundamental topoi in rhetoric, the paradox topos is used by critics to "show how contradictory elements can be unified via creative interpretation."[7] If "all good literature commonly expresses a paradoxical view of life" and "the techniques of literature are in themselves interestingly paradoxical," as Harvey Birenbaum writes in his joyful book *The Happy Critic*, then we would have to consider finding and solving paradoxes a centerpiece in the puzzle of literary interpretation.[8] Obviously, this proposal, which is of great interest to my reading of Bei Dao, is premised on the belief that all paradoxes are solvable and it is from the process of such

a solution that meanings are derived. The question is what constitutes the solution of a paradox. Does it function to negate or reaffirm the paradox that it helps to explain? To answer this question, we need to first take a short detour into the philosophical discourse of paradox in China and the West.

The idea of paradox proper in the Chinese tradition comes from the philosopher Gongsun Long's (ca. third century BC) famous proposition *baima fei ma*, which is the conclusion of his mind-boggling disputation about the relationship between whole and part.[9] Translated literally, *baima fei ma* becomes "a white horse is not a horse." However, this conventional translation, as the Chinese scholar Chen Jianzhong points out, is derived from a misunderstanding of the word *fei*, which, in classical Chinese philosophical texts, expresses negativity in many more forms than the familiar "not to be." Using examples from Gongsun Long's other writings, as well as from writings by Gongsun Long's contemporaries, Chen decides that *fei* in this particular context should mean "is different from" and then goes on to rerender *baima fei ma* as "a white horse is different from a horse."[10] This new interpretation of Gongsun Long, of course, does not take paradoxy out of his argument, but it does repair Gongsun Long's reputation as a mere sophist and places him in the forefront of the Chinese epistemological tradition, which valorizes incongruity and contradiction as a path to knowledge and a way of understanding the world. That paradoxy is more than an exercise of sophistry and that it is an indispensable instrument to truth are evident in the Western tradition as well. In Plato's *Parmenides*, which is generally considered the chief source for paradox in literature and rhetoric in the West, Plato has the sage Parmenides and a young Socrates engage in an astonishing dialectical contest.[11] They argue simultaneously the opposite sides of a question and play with antithetical pairs such as likeness and unlikeness, being and nonbeing endlessly. The purpose is to find a way to access truth, and truth is shown to reside in a paradoxical state, which means, as pointed out in Charles D. Presberg's reading of Plato, that truth exists "not so much between as beyond extremes, each of which is both enlightening and deficient, both partially true and partially false."[12]

The idea of truth in paradoxy comes through in a spectacular fashion in the following classical tale, known to every educated Chinese person.[13] Once upon a time, a blacksmith comes to the marketplace to sell the weap-

ons he has made. Holding up a spear, he declares to the assembled crowd: "This is the sharpest spear you will ever find. It will pierce through any shield." Then he lifts a shield and says, "This is the sturdiest shield in the world. Nothing can pierce it." Someone in the crowd asks, "What if I use your spear to pierce your shield?" The blacksmith cannot muster an answer. Needless to say, paradoxy is practiced by both the blacksmith and the spectator, perhaps without their self-knowledge, but what is the solution to the hapless blacksmith's contradictory claims? A pragmatic person might say, let us test the spears against the shields as suggested by the spectator and we can do it hundreds of times so that we will reach a statistical truth as to which is more powerful. This approach fits the billing of "creative interpretation" advocated by Fahnestock and Secor, which may indeed resolve the blacksmith's contradictions. The Chinese reader throughout history, however, has shown little interest in such a scientific method. He identifies with the wise spectator but is content to let the blacksmith keep his puzzle. He embraces the paradox as a whole and takes no sides in the power of the spear or the shield, for the meaning of the paradox lies precisely in the symbiotic relationship between the spear and the shield: there is no absolute power when comparing the two, and the function of one depends upon the other, like yin and yang, like everything else in the world.

It is little wonder that the blacksmith's dilemma has become an all-time favorite in the Chinese collective memory. The cosmic view that is derived from a proper reading of the paradox is now a familiar one to those who have studied Chinese culture: everything has its opposite and the world is full of contradictions; change happens constantly to alter the constitution of the opposites but never annihilates one position or the other. The name of this cosmic view is, of course, Daoism in the tradition of Lao-Zhuang. According to the late scholar of classical Chinese literature, James J. Y. Liu, paradoxy is central to the cosmology of Daoism. Both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi employ the paradox of language as a strategy of persuasion and a way of articulating the presence of the Dao, which exists beyond but can only be comprehended within the means of language. Many of the parables and metaphors pervasive in their writings invariably express the idea that language is always inadequate but necessary for describing reality. For example, having asserted that the Dao cannot be named in the very beginning

of "Dao De Jing," Lao Zi nevertheless goes on to name it, with an admitted hesitation:

> I do not know its name;
> I style it "Tao" [Dao];
> And, in the absence of a better word, call it "The Great."[14]

In the same vein, Zhuang Zi writes: "The Dao has never had boundaries, and the words have never had constancy. The great Dao is not called by name; great eloquence does not speak."[15] Zhuang Zi not only upholds the "provisionality" of language but also goes further than Lao Zi in minimizing the value of language so as to deny the distinction between speaking and silence. At the end of chapter 25 in "Zhuang Zi yinde," he writes: "If speech is adequate, then one can speak all day and fully describe the Dao; if speech is not adequate, then one can speak all day and merely fully describe things. The ultimate of the Dao and of things cannot be adequately carried either by speech or by silence. Neither to speak nor to be silent is the way to discuss the ultimate."[16] The leap from "either/or" to "neither/nor," as James J. Y. Liu argues, represents a significant development in Zhuang Zi's thinking through paradoxy. What appears to be a repudiation of binary oppositions by Zhuang Zi is in fact an admission of all paradoxes.[17] This is to say that opposites are not to be united or reconciled but should be accepted as they are, alone and together. If Zhuang Zi's paradoxical thinking points toward mysticism, that is because he believes that truth itself — with the Dao as its ultimate signifier — is mysteriously elusive, with access to it depending not on analysis or scientism but on embodiment and conviction, so that one needs to take on the role of an aesthetician but not that of a logician, for an aesthetician is a connoisseur of paradox and a logician its detractor.

How much of this collective memory is alive with Bei Dao? It is always risky to guess one individual's scope of reception to his culture, but one should not underestimate the power of "cultural sedimentation," as the respected contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou has admonished us. "Writing is a way to keep a secret," Bei Dao declares, using his favorite form of sentence-structure — the statement — and this is one of the many Bei Dao statements that have taken his audiences by surprise.[18] There is no easy way to argue away the contradictions apparent in the statement. All writers

want to be read, and Bei Dao is no exception. Writing is always a public act because the language one uses is in the public domain. In theory at least, there is no writing that cannot be deciphered, and to use writing to keep one's secret then is at best a self-delusional act. Still, it would be futile to argue logically against Bei Dao because he has already precluded the power of logic in his revelation about writing and the self. The key word here is "secret," a loaded signifier of cosmic dimensions that points to the mosaic of his inner contradictions—contradictions that are not for him to keep but for him to share and that can only be expressed in writing paradoxically. A paradox begets another paradox, which may be the best way to describe Bei Dao's view of writing.

To see the world through the prism of paradox is clearly evident in Bei Dao's following remarks: "There are many principles in the world, and many of these principles contradict each other. Tolerance for the existence of another's principle is the basis for your own existence."[19] It is interesting to note that Bei Dao uses the word "principles" without rendering a value judgment, yet they "contradict" one another, as do the spear and the shield. Tolerance, a nonprinciple acting like the highest principle of all, is the distance that keeps the contradictions in check, or in other words, it is like a Daoist belief that prevents the spear and the shield from testing each other for the absolute domination of one over another. It should not be surprising that Bei Dao's words translate the Chinese blacksmith's tale so well if we remember that paradox in the Chinese context thrives on irreconcilable opposites and unending contradictions.

It may be time now for us to follow Bei Dao into his poetry where he has kept his secrets to share with us. In the following readings of Bei Dao's poems, I will try to describe the poet's construction of meanings between opposites and his reliance on split imagery, both strategies of paradoxy that are as much about the revelation as about the reveiling of a skeptical mind.

Meaning between the Opposites

Shu Ting (1952–) and Bei Dao spearheaded the rise of the Misty Poetry movement in China and they, together with Gu Cheng (1956–93), have become the embodiment of this poetic movement. Chinese readers cher-

ished Shu Ting's whispering words of love, friendship, and understanding as much as they did Bei Dao's emphatic proclamation of rebellion and skepticism. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two poets' approaches to poetry and particularly between their respective ways of constructing images and metaphors from which meanings are produced and revealed. To illustrate this difference, I will do a comparative reading below of Shu Ting's "Assembly Line" and Bei Dao's "Advertising." "Assembly Line" is one of Shu Ting's most widely anthologized works and has been hailed as a "milestone" by the German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin for its skilled use of language and modernist sensibility.[20] "Advertising" is an oft-mentioned but rarely read piece among Bei Dao's corpus of works in exile. Here is an excerpt from "Assembly Line":

On the assembly line of Time
Nights huddle together
We come down from the Factory assembly lines
And join the assembly line going home
Overhead
An assembly line of stars trails across the sky
By our side
A young tree looks dazed on its assembly line
. . . . . .

But strangely
The only thing I do not feel
Is my own existence
As though the woods and stars
Maybe out of habit
Maybe out of sorrow
No longer have the strength to care
About a destiny they cannot alter[21]

The appeal of the poem is entirely dependent on the centrality of the image "assembly line," around which Shu Ting structures her complaints against the mechanization of modern society that deprives one of individuality and freedom. The natural world is invoked, somewhat forcibly,

to parallel the lifelessness of the man-made assembly line, and it also adds what appears to be a touch of pessimism about the unalterable destiny of the young factory worker. The tone of the poem, however, is far from being pessimistic. By the very invocation of nature, Shu Ting imparts in the image of "assembly line" double meanings of oppression and liberation. This is to say, one is guided to read beyond the image's oppressive power and to reach an understanding of the final triumph of the human spirit. The experience of the speaker, who does not feel her "own existence," but can connect with trees and stars, can only be explained in transcendental terms. In this way, the "assembly line" can be called a symbol of Romantic dualism through which Shu Ting's unequivocal belief in the human spirit and the idea of freedom is powerfully conveyed and confirmed.

Bei Dao's poem "Advertising" also deals with the theme of freedom, or the lack of it in the modern world, and here is the full text:

> lilacs in the silk-cloth of dawn stamp their feet
> as doves read the human dream aloud
> in this climate of king-size price reductions
> we hear the thunder of gold
>
> freedom advances, camping in each step
> a cat's eye dilates night's anguish
> until it's a huge tire
> shadows of marriage make an emergency turn
>
> a dictator freshly elected by the newspapers
> waves warm greetings from a crack though the city
> kitchen smoke begging for war rises into solar
> heights, now's the time a flower shop opens.[22]

Instead of providing a central image to guide our reading, Bei Dao bombards us with a host of images, of which some are realistic, some surreal, some fantastic, and none is privileged over another. What is most baffling is the lack of logical transition from image to image, line to line, and stanza to stanza. As a result, each image seems to exist as an isolated fragment or, in Roland Barthes's phrase, *un signe sans fond*—a free-standing sign.[23] If one looks carefully, however, one will be rewarded with an interesting

discovery: Bei Dao's images are a collection of paradoxes, of which some are direct paradoxical pairs, some call for their implicit opposites, and almost all depend on contrast and contradiction for life and vigor. In the first stanza, we have lilacs versus "lilacs stamping their feet" (un-flowerlike act, in anger perhaps), doves versus human, and "price reduction" versus "the thunder of gold." In the second stanza, we have freedom versus camping and pain versus "shadows of marriage." In the final stanza, we have dictator versus election and "kitchen smoke" (sign of happy family life) versus war. We can further reshuffle the imagery around and subsume them under one giant paradox of peace versus war. For the former, we have lilacs, doves, the human dream, freedom, election, kitchen smoke, and flower shop, and for the latter, stamping thunder of gold, dictator, and war.

What do these paradoxes try to convey? First of all, Bei Dao's impression of the modern world is a place of cacophony and confusion, in which things happen for reasons that are often contradictory to themselves. The contradiction largely comes from our uncertain responses to the power of advertising, the omnipresent sign of modernity that mediates our sense of the self and our relations to each other and the world. Advertising, Bei Dao seems to imply, creates our freedom of choice but also presents a mockery of it at the same time. The poem is a satire, certainly, but the target of its satirical thrust is not the notion of freedom in an absolute context but the false sense of freedom created by advertising, which limits our experience of freedom as much as creates it. The meaning of freedom in modern life, Bei Dao seems to be saying, must be found and understood in paradoxical terms, imagistically and linguistically.

In this connection, the difference between Shu Ting and Bei Dao is clearly more than that between an idealist and a skeptic even though they both have an expressive concern with individuality and freedom; the difference is fundamentally manifest in their respective approach to poetic language. Shu Ting's "assembly line" is a symbol of duality, a sign that points to itself and its transcendental signified simultaneously. The symbol remains a central storage for meaning and significance for Shu Ting. Symbolism, however, is all but dead in Bei Dao. "Advertising" is neither a symbol nor a metaphor; it is an event that causes many other things to happen. To understand it, Bei Dao resorts to an inscription of a myriad of things, which are happen-

ing in the real and in the imaginary world, things that all have paradox writ large on them, as if Bei Dao were revising William Carlos Williams's famous statement "No idea but in things" to the effect of "No ideas but in things that are paradoxical." Meanings do not come symbolically and metaphorically, but reside in the very juxtaposition of these thing-images. Juxtaposition, whose power of revelation comes from fresh analogies, is a well-tested strategy in modern poetry. As the theoretician for imagism, T. E. Hulme, wrote, "Thought is the joining together of new analogies, and so inspiration is a matter of accidentally seen analogy or unlooked-for resemblance."[24] There is no doubt that Bei Dao's juxtaposition works in the same analogical context, but the resultant "new analogies" in his poetry are not those of similarity or resemblance but those of difference and opposite that are organized by their paradoxical tensions.

Not all of Bei Dao's poems exhibit such an elaborate display of paradoxical images as does "Advertising," but the idea of paradox abounds in Bei Dao's poetry and it shows up in various forms, some screaming for attention, some veiled in mystery. The poem "Transparency" is another good example of Bei Dao's paradoxy at work, not so much by means of paradoxical imagery but by the paradoxical tension in lineation. Here is the whole poem:

> The mirror's erudition
> —transformation
> visitors
> make the homeland more desolate
>
> and yet my asides
> like the foreheads of night watchmen
> begin to shine
>
> three birds transfigure
> the sky's melancholy[25]

Structurally, the poem plays the game of opposites. The title says "Transparency," but every line of the poem says opacity. The mirror does not simply reflect but transforms its objects, implying things are not what they appear to be; in this case, it is the speaker who is having contrarian emotional responses to familiar external stimuli: the visit of his countrymen does not

bring joy but makes the homeland even "more desolate." At this supposedly happy occasion, the speaker feels like an outsider: he has nothing to offer to the conversation and hangs on to his "asides" to express his sense of aging and loneliness in the well-chosen image of "night watchmen." A night watchman relies on his sense of duty and his belief in the worthiness of the things he is watching to carry on his unending fight against the darkness of the night. But what happens to the night watchman if the duty remains but things under his watch have decayed with age? A "desolate" homeland has confirmed the speaker's worst fear, a fear that is as incommunicable as a night watchman's self-doubt. The last stanza, one of Bei Dao's familiar axiomatic couplets, is a calculated play on the paradox of change and constancy. On the surface, it restates, aesthetically, the principle of synthesis between man and nature and the power of perception in reordering the objective world, reminding one of the Southern Dynasty (420–589) poet Wang Ji's famous couplet: "The trill of cicadas makes the wood quieter, / the chirp of birds renders the mountain more serene" and Wallace Stevens's imaginative landscape: "I placed a jar in Tennessee, / . . . / The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild."[26] Bei Dao has Wang Ji's implied subjectivity but he reins in Wallace Stevens's imaginary interventions. The key word in Bei Dao's snapshot of nature's customary offerings is "transfigure," which announces the presence of the speaker who redefines the relationships between the three birds and the sky. Note the three birds did not make the sky more melancholy as Wang Ji would say, nor did they cause the sky's melancholy, as would be the case with Wallace Stevens. They merely "transfigure" the sky's melancholy that is already there. What did they transfigure then? The melancholy's composition or its intensity? One can only wonder, without ever getting a clear answer. Not that it matters whether or not one can reach a measure of certitude, for the meaning of "transfigure" in Bei Dao's couplet does not at all have the linguistic transparency as defined in a dictionary: it changes the sky's melancholy in the sense that it maintains the constancy of this melancholy in the speaker's mind.

We may be in a better position now to understand Bei Dao's declared "battle with language." If we say that Bei Dao is a skeptic at heart, his skepticism would certainly extend to the idea of language as a transparent medium for poetry, an idea that the imagist movement already assaulted

many years ago.[27] Bei Dao sees language merely as reflecting the encounter of imagination with things, and, even for that, language in its conventional form cannot fully capture the full flavor of imagination. Thus Bei Dao's construction of "things" through imagery must surpass their defined referentiality to reality and must account for the infinite possibilities of imagination. It is not surprising then that paradox becomes a central strategy in Bei Dao's search for a new poetic language because paradox with its facetious play with the conventions of language and its boundless repairing of linguistic signs provides a perfect space for Bei Dao, to use his words, make "images dash against each other" in order to "stimulate the imagination of the readers."[28] It is to the question of how paradox motivates Bei Dao's image-construction that we now turn.

Split Imagery

Reading the contemporary American poet John Ashbery, Dana Gioia, echoing many a critic, offers the following impression: "One never remembers ideas from an Ashbery poem, one recalls the tones and textures. If ideas are dealt with at all, they are present only as faint echoes heard remotely in some turn of phrase. Ideas in Ashbery are like the melodies in some jazz improvisation where the musicians have left out the original tune to avoid paying royalties."[29] I would venture to say that this is not an unfamiliar feeling for Bei Dao's readers. The precise reason that we feel ideas in Bei Dao's poetry always slip through our fingers, however, may be quite different from why we feel similarly about Ashbery's poetry. Ashbery often floods his poems with realistic, rich, and amusing details from modern life, but they do not form a sense of unity and offer no clues as to why they are there to compose Ashbery's poetic landscape, a landscape in which "ways of happening" is far more interesting to Ashbery than "reasons of happening." The ending of Ashbery's famous poem "Two Scenes" captures well his suspicion of subliminal ideas in poetry:

> Terrific units are on an old man
> In the blue shadow of some paint cans

As laughing cadets say, "In the evening
Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is."[30]

"Ashbery is a master of the false summation," the critic David Shapiro thus summarizes for us, "the illogical conclusion couched in the jargon of logic" and one who relishes "an extravagance of connection that leads one nowhere."[31] Bei Dao shares Ashbery's disregard for logic and the discourse of rationality but demonstrates a more friendly attitude toward ideas themselves. In fact, ideas inspire Bei Dao in the sense that he is always ready to challenge their received values and interpretations. This is not to say that Bei Dao is interested in expressing ideas in abstract and absolute terms, nor does he care for an alternative — privileging one idea over the other. Rather, he couches both the idea and the challenge of it in his unique image-construction or what I would like to call split imagery. It is through the strategy of split imagery that Bei Dao can engage ideas and yet avoid didacticism and dogmatism and also refresh his sense of conviction while maintaining a heavy dose of skepticism, revealing a dialectic mind that is fascinated with the world's complexity and contradictions.

Consider, for example, the idea of freedom, an idea that motivates much of Bei Dao's writing, particularly in his pre-exile days. In those times, the desire for freedom figured prominently in his famous cry "I do not believe" and his earnest plea to "just want to be a man." Exile has afforded Bei Dao his much-coveted sense of freedom, yet having this experience of freedom in abundance, Bei Dao starts to question the very meaning of freedom itself. The poem "Advertising" discussed earlier is a good example, and one can hardly miss the same satirical tone of these lines from the poem "Corridor":

The world's agent of freedom
entered me into their giant computer:
an alien voice sneaking into the dictionary
a dissident
perhaps a form of distance from the world[32]

If exile did indeed change Bei Dao's perspective on freedom, it is not the cause of his skepticism, which, as I have pointed out, was already present in

his early poetry. Indeed, one finds this couplet from "Accomplices" written probably in the late 1970s: "Freedom is nothing but the distance / between the hunter and the hunted."[33] Is this a realization or revelation or both? One can hear an echo of cynicism and sense the faint feeling of freedom not being what it appears to be; or one can go along with the vociferous confirmation of the value of "distance," which may never close in between the hunter and the hunted. Either way, the precise meaning of freedom for Bei Dao is left in doubt, having been made uncertain by his precise split image.

Split imagery, as the example shows, is a compound image in which antithetical elements function to produce responses of ambiguity and paradox. Even to a causal reader of Bei Dao, examples of split imagery are abundant: "the dream world confirmed by reason / is as solid as / love confirmed by death" ("The Witness"); "people who shelter among friends / are destined to be alone" ("Notes in the Rain"); "mother breeds light / darkness breeds mothers" ("Requiem"); "freedom, that golden coffin lid" ("He Opens Wide a Third Eye . . . "); "love and hate bit into the same apple" ("Absent"); "someone set out on travels beyond their destination" ("Eastern Traveler"); "I stutter in song" ("Untitled — In the Plains of a Father's Imagination"); "it's darkness leading to that lightning of the classics" ("Landscape over Zero"); "the faucet drip-drop drip-drop / mourns the reservoir" ("Moon Festival"); and "the priest gets lost in prayer" ("Mission").[34] The following short poem "Untitled" consists of entirely split images:

more unfamiliar than an accident
more complete than ruins

having uttered your name
it abandons you forever

youth's mud is left behind
inside the clock[35]

Before I discuss Bei Dao's split imagery in the context of a poem, it may be necessary to look again at the phrase "antithetical elements" in the above working definition. By "antithetical elements," I mean separate linguistics units that semantically or thematically oppose each other but that are also

defined by each other. It is these antithetical elements that "split" the image into conflicting parts, which form a paradoxical unity. However, to say that split imagery is bound to produce responses of ambiguity and paradox may be cause of controversy, for it implies a total control of imagery on the poet's part, which, of course, runs contrary to much of the theoretical discussions of image by Chinese and Western scholars in recent times.[36] Since the psychology of response to an image, i.e., the act of reading, is an uncontrollable process, one cannot predict with certainty how a reader will respond to any given image. What, in fact, I am saying is that Bei Dao's split imagery has a greater potential to produce the experience of ambiguity and paradox because the very structure of such imagery calls for it. That is to say, the difference between split images and other kinds of images is a structural property rather than a matter of reading competency.

To illustrate this difference, let us now look at three imagistic poems. First, here is "River Snow" by the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan (773–869):

> From a thousand hills, bird flights have vanished;
> On ten thousand paths, human traces wiped out:
> Lone boat, an old man in straw cape and hat,
> Fishing alone in the cold river snow.[37]

What catches our imagination, first of all, is the image of the old man fishing alone in the snow-covered river, an image that Liu Zongyuan has constructed with enriching details and amazing vibrancy. It is, as it is now known to us all, a painting by words. It is also a "painting" of remarkable harmony and consistency, for every detail is necessary to support the centrality of the image of the lone old man and there is no element present that could have challenged the structural unity of this image. The image then stands for what it is to the eye—a piece of objective reality with all its charm and grandeur on display, and our reading of it hinges on a measure of identifying with the old man whose total immersion with his environment corresponds with our own vision of an ideal relationship between man and nature. It may be safe to say that, despite its unique composition, Liu Zongyuan's image is essentially a public construction that participates in a communal reconfirmation of the Taoist aesthetics and philosophy of life. The poem is a perfect example of what the critic Chang Chung-yuan

describes as the ideal reader-poet relationship: "The reader is directly confronted with the objective reality which the poet originally faced. The subjectivity of the reader and the objective reality in the poem interfuse without obstruction and distortion from the interference of the poet."[38]

But what if "the objective reality which the poet originally faced" itself is less transparent? Or better yet, the thing that the poet sees through his mind's eyes does not agree with the rules of the objective reality? The image would then put a much higher demand on the reader, as is the case with Ezra Pound's famous poem "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in a crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough."[39] Much has been written about the poem's importance in the imagist movement, for it fully embodies Ezra Pound's idea of the image: the image equates objective reality; it carries the poet's direct and spontaneous emotions without the mediation of thought and rhetoric. For the imagists, analogy is a celebrated principle for the construction of the image, and Pound uses it here to the fullest extent. Even though in terms of poetics and language, Pound's image is not so far apart from Liu Zongyuan's, Pound's analogical juxtaposition has proven a much bigger reading challenge for it has introduced elements of relational instability between objects not present in Liu Zongyuan's poem. Pound's simple analogical movement (simple in its structure at least) from "faces" to "apparition" to "petals" opens up almost endless interpretations as to what exactly constitutes the similarities between these objects and why Pound put them together. Hugh Kenner's well-known reading that the image is associated with Hades and that the faces detached from the crowd invoke the memory of Persephone (in Greek mythology, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, who was abducted by Pluto to reign with him in the underworld) is convincing but by no means exhaustive.[40] For example, we can say the poem describes a realistic experience, as was confirmed by Pound's own account, of observing strangers in a crowded place, "petals" conveying the feeling of beauty and "apparition" capturing the sense of people quickly appearing and disappearing from one's vision.[41] Such interpretative indeterminacy has much to do with the analogical uncertainty inherent in Pound's way of constructing images with his characteristic paratactic syntax. Bei Dao's split imagery, however, is both analogically and syntactically uncer-

tain with the indeterminacy and ambivalence of paradox deeply embedded within it.

Bei Dao's poem "Whetting" is about the clash between the psyche and time, or, to be exact, a conflicting emotional experience of time both as motion and as event, which is expressed through a series of split images. Here is the whole poem:

> When I whet a knife with dawn's faint light
> I find the spine getting sharper
> while the blade stays blunt
> the sun flares
>
> the crowds in the high street
> are trees in huge shop windows
> the silence roars
> I see the stylus gliding
> along the tree stump's rings
> towards the center[42]

Whetting is an interesting choice of a poetic metaphor for the continuity of time, a metaphor that is readily understood in the Chinese context but that perhaps does not resonate well with Western readers. I suspect that few Western readers can imagine the whetting scene intended in the poem: a big kitchen knife is locked into a slow back-and-forth motion against an even bigger sandstone, an activity that may last for hours. For the Chinese reader, at least, whetting communicates the virtues of patience and perseverance, which is another way to acknowledge our experience of time as an endless flow, much like what "dawn's faint light" and the predictable dawn-after-dawn flaring of the sun would signify. Having established this Aristotelian notion of time as continuum, however, Bei Dao quickly destroys it by the use of the puzzling split image of the knife in question still with a "sharper spine" and a "blunt blade," demonstrating the futility of whetting. This image of the knife being changed against time, or a Newtonian "event" that happens regardless of time's infinite continuum if you will, accentuates the mystery of time to the speaker who may be having too much of it at hand.

The second stanza, on the other hand, gives us a better sense of the speaker's continuing struggle with time's seemingly conflicting properties. A contrarian search enables him to imagine a switch of places between the crowds and the trees, but it is unclear which is sound and which is silence. Maybe they are one and the same: "the silence roars." This compact split image may not be original, for it has abundant intertextual precedents in Tang poetics and Chan Buddhism, but it emphatically occasions the speaker's journey of consciousness along the matrix of psychological time. Psychological time and physical time seem to be colliding in the image of the gliding stylus at the end of the poem. When a stylus moves on a record, it moves through the passage of physical time toward the center, which is the end of its journey, the death of a song; but when a stylus glides "along the tree stump's rings," its journey can only be measured in psychological time and the center it moves into is the birth of the tree, the beginning of life. It would be futile for us to choose sides between the antithetical values borne in the split image of the gliding stylus, as an interpretative indeterminacy is built into its very structural formation and it is only through the acceptance of the image as a whole, Bei Dao suggests, that we can experience the paradox of time itself.

At the end of the poem entitled "Black Box," Bei Dao writes: "Events in a chain of succession / pass through the tunnel."[43] Yet the preceding lines of the poem introduce five events that present no apparent causal relationship among them. If they do form "a chain of succession," it only happens poetically, through Bei Dao's reordering and rearrangement. Here lies Bei Dao's ultimate paradox: the conflict between his belief in poetry as a means of discovery and his view of the world as an unknowable "black box." In some way, the selection of Bei Dao's poetry discussed here is a direct reflection of this paradox. The inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy that come with any paradoxical thinking, which is central to Bei Dao's approach to poetry as I have argued throughout the essay, also become an integral part in the experience of reading Bei Dao. This may be the very reason that Bei Dao's poetry reads like a "work of enigma," which, incidentally, the critic Roger Cardinal believes to be a characteristic of all postsymbolist and postmodernist poetry. Such a "work of enigma," Cardinal argues, is "poised between sense and nonsense" and is a "revelation which is equally a re-veiling."[44] For

Bei Dao, the function of simultaneous revelation and reveiling in poetry is expressed through the operation of paradox.

Notes

I am very grateful for the comments and suggestions made by the two anonymous reviewers. A shorter conference version of the paper appeared as "The Function of Paradox in Bei Dao's Poetry," in *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 5 (2005): 77–96. "Advertising," "Transparency," "Untitled (More Unfamiliar Than an Accident . . .)," and "Whetting" reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

1 Bei Dao, "The Answer," in *August Sleepwalker*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: New Directions, 1990), 33.

2 Bei Dao, "Declaration," in McDougall, *August Sleepwaker*, 62.

3 For detailed historical accounts of Misty Poetry and Bei Dao, see Bonnie S. McDougall, "Bei Dao's Poetry: Revelation and Communication," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1 (1995): 225–52; and Maghiel van Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo* (Leiden, Netherlands: Research School CNWS, 1996), 42–75. A description of the intellectual inspirations for the rise of the Misty Poetry movement is provided by Xiaomei Chen in *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 59–86.

4 Bei Dao, "Untitled," in *Old Snow*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall and Chen Maiping (New York: New Directions, 1991), 15.

5 Michael Duke, "World Literature in Review: Asia and the Pacific," *World Literature Today* 72 (1998): 202.

6 Lee Kuei-shien, "Idiom in Exile — Bei Dao," *TaiwanNews.Com*, www.etaiwannews.com/Literature/2001/05/19/990251986.htm (accessed May 24, 2005).

7 Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor, "The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism," in *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*, ed. Charles Bazerman and James Paradis (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 76–96.

8 Harvey Birenbaum, *The Happy Critic* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1997), 206.

9 See A. C. Graham's retelling of Gongsun Long's argument in his "The Disputation of Kung-sun Lung — An Argument about Whole and Part," *Philosophy East and West* 36 (1986): 89–106.

10 Chen Jianzhong, "'Baima lun' xinjie: Feima zhimi" ("A New Interpretation of 'On White Horse': The Puzzle of Not Horse"), *Shaanxi shida xuebao (zhexue kexue ban)* (*Journal of Shaanxi Normal University [Social Science]*) 23 (1994): 31–37. Chen's new translation is supported by a number of contemporary Chinese scholars including Tian Xinjun, "Gongsun

Long 'baimai fei ma' zhi wojian" ("My view of Gongsun Long's 'A White Horse Is Different from a Horse'"), *Zhoukou shizhuan xuebao* (*Journal of Zhoukou Normal College*) 11 (1994): 59–63.

11 Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 6–7.

12 Charles D. Presberg, *Adventures in Paradox: "Don Quixote" and the Western Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 12.

13 The classical Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi (ca. 280–233 BC) is the author of the tale of *zixiang maodun* (contradiction to oneself). For an annotated version of his work, see Yu Zhifei, ed. *Han Fei Zi zhijie* (*Han Fei Zi Explained*) (Hanzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2000). The Chinese word for *paradox* that I am referring to here is *maodun*, which some would argue is an equivalent to *contradiction*, but not to *paradox*. Instead, they may propose *beilun* to be a better translation of *paradox*. However, such views are not supported by major Chinese dictionaries that I have consulted. *Beilun* is a neologism invented in the twentieth century specifically to refer to Russell's Paradox and has no wide use beyond mathematics. Another word, *luogesi*, which is a transliteration of *paradox*, does exist, but few people, except for specialists in Western philosophy, know about it. There is no denying that paradox as a mode of thinking was present in pre-twentieth-century China, and the absence of a summary word for it should make little difference. My rereading of the *maodun* tale is not to establish a translinguistic equivalency but to uncover a conceptual equivalency, if you will, between the term *maodun* and *paradox*.

14 Lao Zi, "Dao De Jing," in *Tao Teh Ching*, trans. John C. H. Wu (New York: St. John's University Press, 1961), 51.

15 Zhuang Zi, "Zhuang Zi yinde," in *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 43.

16 Zhuang Zi, "Zhuang Zi yinde," 293.

17 James J. Y. Liu, *Language — Paradox — Poetics: A Chinese Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 13.

18 Bei Dao, conference talk, Hofstra University, 1991. Quoted in Ronald R. Janssen, "What History Cannot Write: Bei Dao and Recent Chinese Poetry," *Critical Asian Studies* 34 (2002): 268.

19 Bei Dao, "On Poetry," trans. Gordon T. Osing and De-An Wu Swihart, *Hypertext*, www.hypertxt.com/sh/no5/dao.html (accessed May 24, 2005).

20 Wolfgang Kubin, "The End of the Prophet: Chinese Poetry between Modernity and Postmodernity," in *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*, ed. Wendy Larson and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 35.

21 Shu Ting, "The Assembly Line," trans. Eva Huang, in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 573–74.

22 Bei Dao, "Advertising," in *Forms of Distance*, trans. David Hinton (New York: New Directions, 1994), 11. In Hinton's original translation, the first line of the second stanza was translated as "advancing freedom consolidates its gains step-by-step," which I believe is a mistranslation because "*ying*" (camp) is left out. I have added it back in to facilitate my discussion of the poem.

23 Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zero de l'écriture* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1953), 70.

24 T. E. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, ed. Sam Hynes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 82.

25 Bei Dao, "Transparency," in *Unlock*, trans. Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong (New York: New Directions, 2000), 64. I have significantly altered Weinberger and Man-Cheong's translation. Their original translation is as follows:

> The mirror's erudition
> –transforms
> its visitors
> the homeland becomes even more desolate
>
> and yet my monologues
> like the forehead of night watchmen
> begin to shine
>
> three birds transfigure
> the night's melancholy

26 Wang Ji, "Ru Ruoye xi" ("Entering the Ruoye Brook"), in *Xianqin han weijin nanbeichao shi* (*Poetry of Pre-Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties*), ed. Lu Qinli (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1998); Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," in *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 76.

27 For a good summary of imagist ideas about language, see Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 30–50 and 65–85.

28 Bei Dao, "On Poetry."

29 Dana Gioia, "Poetry Chronicle," *Hudson Review* 34 (1981–82): 588–89.

30 John Ashbery, "Two Scenes," www.diacenter.org/prg/poetry/87_88/ashbery1.html (accessed December 13, 2006).

31 David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to His Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 17.

32 Bei Dao, "Corridor," in *Forms of Distance*, trans. David Hinton (New York: New Directions, 1994), 19.

33 Bei Dao, "Accomplices," in McDougall, *August Sleepwalker*, 89.

34 Bei Dao, "The Witness," in McDougall, *August Sleepwalker*, 46; Bei Dao, "Notes in the

Rain," in McDougall, *August Sleepwalker*, 99; Bei Dao, "Requiem," in McDougall and Maiping, *Old Snow*, 11; Bei Dao, "He Opens Wide a Third Eye . . . ," in McDougall and Maiping, *Old Snow*, 25; Bei Dao, "Absent," in Hinton, *Forms of Distance*, 5; Bei Dao, "Eastern Traveler," in Hinton, *Forms of Distance*, 37; Bei Dao, "Untitled — In the Plains of a Father's Imagination" ("Wuti — Zai fuqin xiangxiang de gaoyuan") in *Landscape over Zero: The Poetry of Bei Dao, 1993–1996* (*Lingdu yishang de fengjing: Bei Dao shixuan, 1993–1996*) (Taibei: Jiuge Chubanshe, 1999), 117–18; Bei Dao, "Landscape over Zero," in *Landscape over Zero*, 50; Bei Dao, "Moon Festival," in Weinberger and Man-Cheong, *Unlock*, 37; and Bei Dao, "Mission," in Weinberger and Man-Cheong, *Unlock*, 91.

35 Bei Dao, "Untitled (More Unfamiliar Than an Accident . . .)," in McDougall and Maiping, *Old Snow*, 7.

36 I am very aware of the many confusing and contradictory theories of image in both Western and Chinese traditions, but a full account of them is beyond the scope of this paper. My discussion of Bei Dao is much informed by the imagists, both their theory and practice. Ezra Pound's elastic definition of image remains relevant and useful: "An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." See *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 4. For those interested in the theory of image in general, see Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3–43; and John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 1–31.

37 Liu Zongyuan, "River Snow," in *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. and ed. Burt Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 282.

38 Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 175.

39 Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro," in *History and Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Wu Weiren (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1990), 2:159.

40 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 184–85.

41 Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 86–87.

42 Bei Dao, "Whetting," in McDougall and Maiping, *Old Snow*, 47.

43 Bei Dao, "Black Box," in McDougall and Maiping, *Old Snow*, 53.

44 Roger Cardinal, "Enigma," *Twentieth Century Studies: The Limits of Comprehension* 12 (1974): 45.