True Disbelief: The Poetry of Han Dong

Maghiel van Crevel

ABSTRACT

As a poet, an editor and a contributor to critical discourse, Han Dong 韓東 (1961–) is one of the most important voices in poetry from mainland China. As is true for all other contemporary "avant-garde" poetry, his work continues to stand more or less in opposition to the politico-literary establishment, but to say so has become flogging a dead horse ever since the avant-garde began to outshine this establishment, in the mid–1980s. What concerns us here is that *within* the avant-garde, some of Han Dong's best-known work is negatively defined by its rejection of the Obscure poetry (朦朧詩) associated with the unofficial journal *Today* (今天, 1978–1980). This essay recognizes the significance of Han's anti-Obscure stand, but shows that negative definition captures only a fraction of his oeuvre in the full breadth of its development. Han's rejection of Obscure poetry is but one manifestation of a multi-faceted, original poetics that transcends its local literary-historical context.

KEY WORDS

contemporary Chinese poetry, Han Dong

In the study of literature and art, negative definitions abound. Negative definitions focus on what a poem or a painting is not, on features that it does not have: rhyme, for instance, or figurative resemblance to the natural world. This makes sense, for literature and art are a cumulative undertaking, and our expectations of them are shaped by what has gone before—which is precisely what the new work of art may deny us. A negative definition such as *this poetry does not rhyme* by no means excludes a simultaneous, positive definition such as *this poetry highlights performative aspects of literature*. If, however, a poem's distinguishing features are limited to the rejection of another, it operates as a commentary rather than a primary text, even if that is a relative distinction.

Negative definitions feature at critical junctures in the history of modern Chinese poetry. Among these are the 1917 "literary revolution" proclaimed in the pages of *New Youth* 新青年, at the onset of the New Culture Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Obscure (朦朧) poetry of the 1970s and early 1980s, first published in the unofficial journal *Today* 今天, which paved the way for the contemporary avant-garde in mainland China.[1] Both New Culture poetry and Obscure poetry were—and continue to be—negatively defined with reference to the tradition of classical Chinese poetry. In addition, Obscure poetry is negatively defined with reference to orthodox literature produced by the mainland politico-literary establishment. Finally, both New Culture poetry and Obscure poetry maintain an ambivalent relationship to "Western" literature, an impossibly large and generalized category that is, however, ubiquitous in scholarship on Chinese literature. While both trends were actively receptive to Western influence, before long

they also displayed a concern with their own Chineseness. Think, for instance, of Wen Yiduo's 聞一多 search for modern Chinese forms and of Yang Lian's 楊煉 engagement with Chinese and Tibetan history and mythology.

As a poet, an editor and a contributor to critical discourse, Han Dong 韓東 (1961-) is one of the most important voices in poetry from mainland China.[2] As does all "avant-garde" or "experimental" (先鋒 or 實驗) poetry since *Today*, his work continues to stand more or less in opposition to the establishment, but to say so has become flogging a dead horse ever since the avant-garde began to outshine the establishment, in the mid–1980s. What concerns us here is that within the avant-garde, some of Han Dong's best-known work is negatively defined by its rejection of Obscure poetry. This is because some of his early "representative works" (代表作) directly write back to famous Obscure poets and poems, as do some of his explicit poetical statements.

This essay recognizes the significance of Han Dong's initial, anti-Obscure stand, and of his work's function as a commentary on what was doubtless the most influential poetic trend at the time (section 1). It also shows, however, that negative definition captures only a fraction of Han's art as a primary text, and does no justice to his oeuvre in the full breadth of its development. Han's rejection of Obscure poetry is but one manifestation of a multi-faceted, original poetics that transcends its local literary-historical context (section 2).

(1) The Rejection of Obscure Poetry

Today was closed down by the police in 1980, less than two years after the publication of its first issue in December 1978. Short-lived as the journal was, it had a tremendous impact among young urban intellectuals, most of all those studying at university. Many of them contributed to the upsurge of Campus poetry (校園詩歌), a collective name for poetry by university students that circulated throughout mainland China, through unofficial channels. Han Dong, who was studying philosophy at Shandong University, quickly became a

Campus poet of some renown. Wu Kaijin 吳開晉 notes that the award Han received in 1981 from the—official!—literary journal *Youth* 青春 was for a poem series that still clearly reflected the tragic-heroic Obscure tradition established by *Today*, particularly by Bei Dao 北島. Soon thereafter, Han radically changed his style. His 1982 poem "Mountain People"山民 is widely seen as a harbinger of trends within the Third Generation (第三代) that would supersede Obscure poetry from the mid–1980s onward (Wu 1991: 214; Lao Mu 572–73):

> as a child, he asked his father
> "what's beyond the mountains"
> his father said "mountains"
> "and beyond beyond"
> "mountains, more mountains"
> he made no sound, looking in the distance
> for the first time, the mountains made him tired
>
> he thought he couldn't get out of the mountains in this life
> the sea was there, but far away
> so before he'd get there
> he'd die halfway
> die in the mountains
>
> he felt he should set out together with his old lady
> his old lady would give him a son
> and by the time he died
> his son would have grown up
> and his son would have an old lady too
> and his son would have a son too
> and his son's son would have a son too
> he stopped thinking
> his son made him tired too
>
> he only regretted
> his ancestors hadn't thought that way

or the one to see the sea would have been him

As Luo Hanchao 駱寒超 duly notes, if "Mountain People" alludes to the fable of the foolish old man removing the mountains 愚公移山—and to the story's Maoist reception—it takes an ironic turn when its protagonist grows tired of the mountains and of thinking about his sons, in contradistinction to the foolish old man's unflinching determination and perseverance (Jin 290; Mao, vol. iii: 271–74). Of greater interest to us here is that the poem deviates sharply from Obscure poetry, famous for its daring metaphors and its socio-political humanism. Immature as it is when compared to Han Dong's later work, it does presage his two best-known poems, discussed below. Written in the same, sometimes deceptively simple style, they are characterized by skepticism and irony.

The said two poems appear in just about all mainland-Chinese anthologies and literary-historical surveys of contemporary poetry. Let us first consider "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" 有關大雁塔, from 1982:[3]

of the Wild Goose Pagoda
what do we really know
many people come rushing from afar
to climb up
and be a hero
some come a second time
or even more than that
people not pleased with themselves
people grown stout
they all climb up
to be that hero
and then they come down
walk into the road below
and disappear in the blink of an eye
some real gutsy ones jump down
red flowers blooming on the steps

now there's a real hero—
a hero of our time

of the Wild Goose Pagoda
what do we really know
we climb up
look at the view around us
and then come down again

In section 2 of this essay, we will dwell on Han Dong's famed colloquial usage and other positively defined features of his work. Here, following earlier scholarship, we merely register that "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" writes back to Obscure poetry, specifically to Yang Lian's "The Wild Goose Pagoda" 大雁塔.[4] Han Dong deconstructs Yang Lian's conventional view—and its bombastic literary presentation—of the Pagoda as a proud landmark of Chinese civilization, as well as the average Chinese tourist's supposed consciousness of the same. Rather than of Lermontov's novel, *a hero of our time* reminds one of the many larger-than-life heroes in literature from the People's Republic, in both orthodox works and early Obscure poetry.

In similar fashion, Han Dong writes back to Obscure poet Shu Ting's 舒婷 exalted "To the Sea" 致大海 (1973) and "Morning Songs at the Seaside" 海濱晨曲 (1975), and dismantles what Wang Yichuan 王一川 calls a literary "myth" of the sea. This is Han's 1983 poem "So You've Seen the Sea" 你見過大海:[5]

so you've seen the sea
you've imagined
the sea
you've imagined the sea
and then seen it
just like this
so now you've really seen the sea
and imagined it as well

but you're not
a sailor
just like this
so you've imagined the sea
you've seen the sea
perhaps you even like the sea
just like this, and nothing more
so you've seen the sea
and you've imagined the sea
you're not willing
to be drowned by the sea
just like this
just like everybody else

There can be little doubt that a critical response to and dissociation from Obscure poetry were part of the early Han Dong's literary motivation. In interviews in recent years, Han acknowledges the overwhelming influence of Obscure poetry with Bei Dao as its leading figure, and says that his own generation's attempt to break free may well be called an act of patricide. Incidentally, he also recalls that Bei Dao's recommendation was instrumental for the publication of "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" in the literary journal *China* 中國 in 1986 (cf. Yeh 396–97; Han, "Interview" in Yang 296 and 299, and "Interview" in *Chinese Poets*). A special section in the third issue endorsed by senior poet Niu Han 牛漢 constituted official recognition of what was then called Newborn (新生代) poetry, as a worthy alternative or indeed successor to Obscure poetry. Before long, the younger (literary) generation's rejection of the Obscure poets was epitomized in a much-publicized, brief article in the *Literary Gazette*文匯報, written by Cheng Weidong 程蔚東 and entitled "Farewell, Shu Ting and Bei Dao" 別了, 舒婷北島 (Cheng 1987).

Aside from Han Dong's poetry, the act of dissociation is manifest in early, verse-external poetical statements he published from 1985 onward. In its local context, Han Dong's influential dictum that "poetry goes no farther than language" (詩到語言爲止) exudes the rejection of

ideological claims made by literary orthodoxy and the early Obscure poetry alike, each in their own way, as champions of their respective brands of ideology.[6] Han discusses his poetics more elaborately in pieces such as "After Three Worldly Roles" 三個世俗角色之後 (1989), in which he decries the fact that (Chinese) poetry is made to play political, cultural and historical roles, and specifically attacks Bei Dao and the way he "uses" Western readers. If we put Han Dong's poetry and his poetical statements side by side, the latter stand out by their solemn, grim and generally heavy tone, and by their penchant for abstractions. This does not detract from the sensibility and insightfulness of many of his remarks on things like the role of poet, reader and critic, inspiration, poetic form and technique, the social position of poetry and so on.

From 1984 until 1995, Han Dong was the driving force behind the Nanjing-based *Them* 他們, one of the most widely read and enduring among the unofficial poetry journals that help shape the face of the mainland avant-garde to this day. *Them* has received insufficient attention in foreign scholarship. Its name was inspired by the Chinese translation of Joyce Carol Oates' novel—but at one point translated back into English as *They*, on the cover of the fifth issue. The authors at the journal's core started their exchange and cooperation in 1984. They included Han Dong, Ding Dang 丁當 and Yu Jian 于堅, as well as Lu Yimin 陸憶敏, Lü De'an 呂德安, Pumin 普珉, Wang Yin 王寅, Xiao Hai 小海, Xiao Jun 小君 and Yu Xiaowei 于小韋. Nine paper issues of *Them* appeared: # 1–5 between 1985 and 1989, and # 6–9 between 1993 and 1995. Its hibernation from 1989 to 1992 coincides with a period of reintensified ideological and cultural repression in mainland China, following the suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement remembered as June Fourth. Since 2002, the journal has continued as an online forum.[7]

Just like Han Dong's poetry is infinitely more than the mere rejection of Obscure poetry, defining *Them* negatively by calling it a reaction against the Beijing-based *Today* would tell us next to nothing. Yet—again, in its local, literary-historical context—*Them* did to some extent derive its identity from being different from *Today*, and different

from other unofficial journals such as those emerging in Sichuan province, brimming with poetic activity at the time (Day 2005; Han, "Life" 194–98). The Nanjing journal counts as an early, institutionalized manifestation of a shift away from the elevated—often in the sense of heroic, noble, grand, exalted—and toward the quotidian and, more generally, the earthly, which questions the sacralization of poetry and brings it down to earth: in themes and imagery, language usage, and the overall attitude expressed by the poetic voice.[8] Han Dong's "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" and "So You've Seen the Sea," both published in the journal's first issue, are cases in point.

Editorials by Han Dong in the third and fifth issues of *Them* confirm its dissociation from *Today*. On the cover of the third issue (1986), below the names of the ten contributors, we read:

> When we first published *Them*, we did not make any theoretical statements. It is still like that. But some issues are becoming ever more pronounced, and we need to sum up [our views].
>
> We are concerned with poetry itself, with what it is that makes poetry poetry, with that form of life in which a sense of beauty is produced by the interaction of language with language. We are concerned with the feeling, the understanding and the experience of entering deep into this world as an individual, with the power of fate as it flows through his (the poet's) blood. While we face the world and face poetry, we depend on nothing, although the glory of all kinds of ideas is projected on our bodies. But we don't want to—and we could not—substitute these ideas for our relationship with the world (including poetry). The world is right here before us, we can reach out and touch it. We will not grow confident through the approval of some kind of theory, and then believe that this world is the real world. If this world were not right here in our hands, a million reasons would not make us believe in it. Conversely, if this world *is* in our hands, what reason could there be to make us think it is not real?

> These days, silence has become something of an attitude. We will not keep silent as an attitude. But we have always thought that our poetry is the best statement we can make. We do not belittle any theoretical or philosophical contemplation, but we don't place all our hopes on that sort of thing.

Especially the second half of the second paragraph implies rejection of the type of poetry and presentation on the literary scene associated with *Today*. Reprinted in 1988 in the *Overview of Groups in Modernist Chinese Poetry 1986–1988* 中國現代主義詩群大觀 1986–1988, compiled by Xu Jingya 徐敬亞, Meng Lang 孟浪, Cao Changqing 曹長青 and Lü Guipin 呂貴品, the declaration ends on an additional, one-line paragraph that says: "We ask of ourselves to make our writing more real" (眞實), and Han Dong is credited as its author.[9]

The fifth issue of *Them*, published late in 1988 or early in 1989,[10] has a portrait of Han Dong on the cover, and opens with a selection of his recent poetry. The inside cover contains an editorial by Han called "Writing for *Them*" 爲《他們》而寫作:

> . . . Writing for *Them* is our way of writing, it makes our poetry possible. One can write for pure white paper, or for a good pen. We write for *Them*. It's the same thing.
>
> The difference with the idealists is that we don't need to write lots of essays on the goal-oriented nature [of our journal]. We know we should do the right thing, and we must know how to do it right. . . .
>
> . . . We are comrades [同志, literally 'of one mind,' 'of the same intention'] and fellow travelers [同路人, literally 'people on the same road']. Friendship between fellow travelers is stronger than that between comrades. . . .
>
> "Them" is not a literary school, it is merely the possibility to write [the way we do].

> "Writing for *Them*" is a symbolic expression. *Them*, then, is a symbol. In present-day China, it is the only one, and it is pure. The people attracted by it are those who understand what it is to write poetry. "Writing for *Them*" means no more than that.

The "idealists" and the "lots of essays" bring to mind the poets and the extensive critical, theoretical and strategic discourse engendered by *Today*; and, when Han Dong wrote "Writing for *Them*," by the Sichuan journal *Not-Not* 非非, which had burst upon the scene in 1986 and enjoyed tremendous publicity in the following years. Similarly, the questionable assertion that "Them"—meticulously put in quotation marks, referring not to the title of the journal but to its contributors—is not a literary school (文學流派) creates a contrast with the commonly used "Today School" (今天派) as a collective name for the authors that published in *Today* (cf. Wu 2002: 86). "Pure white paper" and "a good pen" function as simple, concrete stage props. They are disclaimers of other things mainland-Chinese readers at the time might have learned to associate with (Obscure) poetry: truth, beauty, righteousness, prophetic vision, a tormented soul, private symbolism and so on. Finally, the editorial's closing sentence—"'Writing for *Them*' means no more than that"—is vintage Han Dong. It urges the reader to see things in proportion, and specifically to realize that something is in fact less than it is made out to be—less profound or mysterious, less elevated, less complicated or even special.

In sum, the early Han Dong's poetry and his poetics present a forceful commentary on what were then doubtless the most influential works and authors of poetry in mainland China, after its emancipation from total political control. As such, Han's work augurs the diversity we have witnessed ever since.

(2) An Original Poetics

No conventional experience of Chinese civilization or the wonders of nature, no bombast or exaltation, no highfalutin ideals, no need for lots of essays, no literary school, "no more than that." While

Han Dong's rejection of Obscure poetry is plain for all to see, there is more to all these negations. They are manifestations of an original poetics that transcends its local literary-historical context.

As regards thematics, scholarship has tended to focus on Han's deconstruction of conventional topoi, as reviewed above; and on his predilection for the quotidian, for the trivia of everyday urban life. We will see an example of the latter in "A and B" 甲乙, the last of four poems to be discussed below. One characteristic of Han's poetry that has received little attention is that of a shock effect caused by the crude interruption of monotony or smoothness, especially powerful when a sudden turn in the poem's semantics occurs without a change in its prosody or other formal features. As for the poems cited above: in "Mountain People," Han's first attempt at finding his own voice, there is no shock effect, and the poem fizzles out. We do find it in "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda," in the offhand mention of individuals jumping to their deaths. They make for a disturbing contrast with gregarious tourists eager to share in the glory of a public landmark. Hence, their behavior takes on extra significance and offers food for thought. The phrase *a hero of our time* becomes ambiguous, beyond its first, ironic reading. The speaker may truly see the *real gutsy ones* as heroes after all, with the courage to disrupt and indict uncritical worship of Chinese civilization, by making the Pagoda the site of their suicide.

In "So You've Seen the Sea," nearly the entire poem is reserved for building up a hypnotic drone, through repetition and near-repetition. Then, suddenly, the speaker shatters the monotony by picturing *you* as drowning and the sea *you* likes to romanticize as a killer, without a single unevenness in the poem's aural or visual qualities. Then, too, we realize that the observation *but you're not / a sailor*, not quite halfway through the poem, was a warning. By association with the sea as a popular image across literary traditions, Han Dong implies an opposition of poet versus sailor as one who speaks of the sea but has no right versus one who has the right but does not speak. We will see another such shock effect in "A and B" below.

In addition, Han Dong's presentation of his themes is often enhanced by what appears to be willed superficiality on the part of the

speaker.[11] This may be viewed as part of a general inclination toward "objectivism" noted in Han and other Third Generation authors by Chen Zhongyi 陳仲義 (*Mutiny* 26ff and 45ff). The flat observations made in "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" do not lead to soul-searching or value judgment. They refuse to reaffirm seemingly self-evident assumptions: say, that landmarks like the Pagoda give individuals the opportunity to experience their cultural heritage—or, for that matter, that poetry is a suitable vehicle for expressing that experience or, with reference to the classical Chinese tradition, that ascending a high point to take in the view is a suitable theme for a poem. The speaker merely observes that all sorts of people come to the Pagoda, climb up, look around and perhaps enjoy the illusion of being a hero, and then come down again, with the suicides as a terrifying aside whose exploration is up to the reader. The repression of so-called common knowledge and of conventional reasoning has the effect of defamiliarization, summed up in the question it asks in the beginning and again at the end: *what do we really know*. If this objectivism is a part of authorial strategy, that is of course not to say that the author or the speaker can or indeed wants to attain any measure of objectivity in representation, and has no designs on the reader, so to speak.

Critics habitually call Han Dong's language usage colloquial (口語). His thematic preferences aside, this is one of the most commonly cited characteristics of his art, frequently noted for other contributors to *Them* as well. It has had considerable impact, in that writing in colloquial language has been among the claims to fame of many Chinese poets since *Them* first appeared, most famously of Han himself and of Yu Jian. Scholarship to date and the poets themselves have pointed out that the language of this so-called colloquial poetry is not the same thing as that spoken in ordinary human traffic, but the label is by no means unreasonable, and acknowledged as such by Han, Yu and other authors concerned (e.g. Yu, *Sixty Poems* 1–2; Han, "Interview" 1994: 119). With reference to the phenomenon of negative definition, there is no harm in emphasizing that in this respect, the power of Han Dong's poetry lies not just in the rejection of literary language of one kind or another (書面語). His sparse, sober usage comes

across—positively defined—as carefully measured, focused and controlled. It lends his poetry a quiet confidence and insistence, especially in its employment of (near-)repetition, as noted above. Han's usage and the form of his poetry are well suited to one another: free verse, with occasionally very short lines.

Perhaps inevitably, immediate canonization of a small number of Han Dong's early poems as primarily "colloquial" trendsetters away from Obscure poetry has led to neglect of other aspects of his work in multiple-author anthologies and literary histories. His 2002 collection *Papa Is Watching Me in Heaven* 爸爸在天上看我, a rich selection spanning the years 1982–2001, shows that there are many more sides to this oeuvre. In the following, we will consider three very different poems, none of which fit canonized descriptions of Han Dong's poetry, and conclude by discussing a fourth, in which several characteristics of his art come together.

This is "A Man in a Riot of Stones" 一堆亂石中的一個人, written in 1988 (Han, *Papa* 63):

a man in a riot of stones, a
man like that, a riot of stones like that

crawler, man hugging the ground
slowly moving, even unmoving lizard

athlete leaping amid riotous stones, or
stone falling down on stones

it's not that man at the foot of an enclosure
that man before the neat and orderly brickwork

stops right there when we stare
transfers one stone's warmth to another

its shape is six stones overlapping
now, as if craving rainwater, crawls

into the picture

"A Man in a Riot of Stones" is not about the trivialities of urban, daily life. Instead, in one possible reading, it allows the imagination to transform a man into a reptile, then athlete, then stone, then—by negative association: *it's not. . . .*—man again, and then, from the fifth stanza onward, cold-blooded, crawling animal again. The poem does not display anything like the objectivism that Chen Zhongyi identifies in Third Generation authors. It is syntactically ambiguous, for instance in the connections between the fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas. It is enigmatic, not to say inaccessible—what enclosure? is the man at the foot of the enclosure inside or outside the brickwork? who are *we*? whose shape is *six stones overlapping*? what happens next?—but it remains fascinating, and invites multiple re-readings. It also invites the classification of images as metaphors, as opposed to the professed what-you-see-is-what-you-get poetics of authors such as Han Dong himself and his literary soulmate Yu Jian (e.g. 1997). Most importantly, the attitude expressed by the poetic voice is one of tension, complete engagement, and anything but irony. "A Man in a Riot of Stones" is a powerful text that is in many ways unlike Han Dong's best-known works. One feature, however, that it has in common with "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda," "So You've Seen the Sea" and the three poems to follow in the rest of this essay, is that of concentration. This poem handles its metaphors better than happens in not a few Obscure poems. There are not too many of them, and they do not produce loose ends, but feed into one another.

Another poem from 1988 is entitled "There Is a Darkness" 一種黑暗 (*Them* # 5 [1988]: 7; Han, *Papa* 69):

I notice forest darkness
darkness with a difference
darkness like a square, in the forest
darkness made by four people walking off in four directions
darkness between the trees but not inside the trees
darkness rising spreading through the sky

darkness not of underground rocks that share everything
darkness that weakens lights scattered evenly
across a thousand miles to their lowest glow
darkness gone through turns of endless trees, not vanished
there is a darkness that forbids strangers to enter at any time
if you reach out a hand to stir it that is
darkness in a giant glass
I notice forest darkness although I am not in the forest

Darkness, with 12 occurrences in 14 lines, acquires incantatory qualities, at the end of most lines in the original, and anaphoric in the translation. Just like "A Man in a Heap of Stones," "There Is a Darkness" contains enigmatic, surrealist scenes and literary techniques not normally associated with the demystification known as a trademark of Han Dong's poetry: *darkness made by four people . . . . darkness gone through turns of endless trees . . . . darkness in a giant glass*, and the personification of the underground rocks, in the expression *share everything* (不分彼此 'not divide thine and mine'). While its language is not difficult, it is not at all colloquial: *darkness that weakens lights scattered evenly / across a thousand miles to their lowest glow.*

Its differences with canonized poetry by Han Dong aside, a particularly important scene in this poem is that of four people walking off in four directions. Their separation and the increasing distance between them take the form of the darkness that gives the poem its name. Subsequently, these things are projected on the trees that make up the forest: there is darkness between them. This is not, however, because they are so close that they share everything, like the underground rocks. Theirs is a distancing, mutually unwelcoming darkness. The observation that it forbids strangers to enter projects the darkness back from the trees onto human beings and the said central scene (*four people* . . .). Finally, there is a double distancing, not just among the people—and the trees—in the poem, but also between them on the one hand, and the speaker on the other. This is visible in the clinical, objectifying formula *I notice* (我注意到), in the poem's first line and its last, and most of all in its closing words: *I am not in the*

forest, meaning "I am not among those people or those trees." "There Is a Darkness" questions people's ability to establish and maintain company and contact. This is a common feature of diverse moments in Han Dong's oeuvre, as we will see in the next two poems.

This is "See" 看, from 1990:[12]

see you
and see him
but neither of you
can see each other
in the middle there's a wall
a tree
or mist
I am beside the wall
above the tree
I am the mist itself

but both of you can
see me at the same time
you can see me
now see the one
then turn to the other
I am the wall
the tree
the mist itself
any thing
that can both be seen
and used for cover

a bird's
two sides
with my left eye
separate from my right
see you
and see him

only neither of you
can see each other

"See," too, shows the impossibility of human contact. The obstruction that stands between *I* and *you* takes various shapes. Of these, the wall and the tree appear frequently in Han Dong's poetry, for instance in "Man at the Foot of the Wall" 牆壁下的人 (1988) and "Small Street Scene" 街頭小景 (1999) (Han, *Papa* 67 and 260).[13] Both texts speak of the limitations of mutual perception, to say nothing of understanding. Interestingly, in "See," after taking position beside the wall and above the tree, the speaker changes from an observer of obstruction—a voice-over, as it were—into the agent of obstruction: voice-over and protagonist at the same time. The first stanza's final line is almost triumphant: *I am the mist itself* (我就是雲霧本身).[14] In the third stanza, the speaker-obstructor takes the shape of a bird, whose left and right eye operate independently. Again, a note of mockery can be detected in the poem's closing lines: *[I] see you / and [I] see him / only neither of you / can see each other*, although this is not the only possible reading. In another, the final four lines would be a neutral observation or indeed suggest regret: unlikely, but theoretically possible. Regardless, "See" concurs with other poems by Han Dong in its disavowal of company, contact, communication—including communication through poetry. This brings to mind a paradoxical vision of the poem as a type of language that thwarts communication (cf. Gerbrandy 1999). "See" is, furthermore, one of several poems by Han in which the speaker explicitly observes this paradox, and actively partakes in it.

Han Dong's aforementioned 1991 poem "A and B" has great potential for making poetry readers in China and elsewhere realize that there is a lot more to his oeuvre than "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" and "So You've Seen the Sea." "A and B" is one of the texts reviewed in Hong Zicheng's 洪子城 *Reading Poetry in the Classroom at Peking University* 在北大課堂讀詩 (2002). Professor Hong's book records graduate students and staff members' discussions of works by famous mainland-Chinese poets. The product of a leading institution of higher education, *Reading Poetry* is a palpable example of the ongoing

process of literary canonization: it has chapters on Zhang Zao 張棗, Wang Jiaxin 王家新, Zang Di 臧棣, Ouyang Jianghe 歐陽江河, Zhai Yongming 翟永明, Lü De'an, Sun Wenbo 孫文波, Xiao Kaiyu 肖開愚, Xi Chuan 西川, Han Dong, Bai Hua 柏樺, Zhang Shuguang 張曙光, Yu Jian and Chen Dongdong 陳東東.

Zhang Xiafang 張夏放, primary speaker in the session on Han Dong, provides an introduction of Han's life and work. On "A and B," he notes that it dismantles traditional "poetic sentiment" (詩意), drawing attention to what he calls Han's prose-like usage, some central images, and the fact that the poem has both comical and shocking qualities. In his brief comments, Hong Zicheng says that he does not like "A and B" very much. Being a faithful record of a classroom exchange, the lively debate that ensues is somewhat impressionistic. That does not detract from the value of remarks by Leng Shuang 冷霜 and Hu Xudong 胡續冬 on the role of the speaker and Han Dong's technique of depersonalization. Zang Di says that Han knows how to "carry out effective destruction." He also claims that "A and B" was a powerful poem especially when it was written[15] and that what Han Dong does in "A and B" has since been done better, later in the 1990s, by authors such as Xiao Kaiyu. This appears to be a reference to the controversial concept of Poetry of the 1990s (九十年代詩歌) as a critical, not a chronological, category, which was among the issues constituting a polemic within the avant-garde from 1998 to 2000.[16] Be that as it may, Zang's claim is debatable. The discussion below shows that this poem's literary merit is by no means limited to its deviation from one-time conventions, traditional or within the avant-garde. Here is "A and B":[17]

> two people A and B sit up on opposite sides of the bed
> A is tying his shoes. so is B, back turned to A
> in front of A there's a window, so that he looks out on the street
> and a horizontal tree-branch. the tree-trunk is obstructed by the wall
> so that, from this obstruction, he must look back
> along the tree-branch, ever thinner, all the way to the end

after which, before the next stretch of wall, there's still a large
empty space, nothing there, neither tree branch nor street
maybe only empty sky. A (a second time) looks back again
head moving five centimeters leftward, or five centimeters
forward too, or even more than five centimeters leftward and forward
at the same time, anyway, with the aim of looking at more
and more tree-branch, and less emptiness. the left eye can look at more
than the right. the distance between them is three centimeters
but the extra bit of tree-branch looked at is more than three centimeters
using this disparity, he (A) looks once again at the street
closes his left eye, then closes his right and opens his left
then closes his left again. at this point both eyes
are closed. A looks at nothing. when A ties his shoes
there's no need to look, no need to look at his feet, first left then right
now both are tied. at four he knew how
at five he was commended, at six he was skilled
this is a day in A's life after seven, a day when he's thirty-something or
one day when he's sixty-something, and can still bend over to tie his shoes
it's just that he's neglected B for too long. this is our
(first of all the author's) and A's joint mistake
she (B) sits up on the bed's opposite side, facing a cupboard
looks through the glass or the screen and sees dishes that A doesn't see
to bring this narration to a close, let it be noted that
when B has tied her shoes and stands, sperm trickles down that was once A's

Calling the poem's two protagonists A and B—甲乙 in Chinese, the first two of the ten Heavenly Stems, employed as serial numbers for

unspecified enumeration—has the effect of depersonalization noted in Hong Zicheng's Peking University classroom. This is more so than would have been the case if Han Dong had used equally nameless personal pronouns. The effect is strengthened by simple yet slightly formal language usage. While any essentialist distinction of prose and poetry would be of little relevance here, it is open to debate whether we should call that usage prose-like, as Zhang Xiafang does. One could object by pointing to the emphatic repetition of words and phrases, such as *so that* (lines 3 and 5) and *look* (throughout); and poetic usage, in this case minimally meaning Han's highly concentrated use of language, by no means excludes the narrative feel of the poem that Zhang rightly notes (Hong 250).

But let us return to depersonalization. In what we have earlier called his superficiality, the "objectivist" speaker is not satisfied by noting that A spends a short while looking out the window before bending over to tie his shoes, but describes his every movement in minute detail.[18] For a different plot—say, the operation of hi-tech machinery in preparation for robbing a bank—this type of description might produce tension building up to a climax. Here, however, it is as if behavior such as A's, or indeed the very existence of his species, is perceived for the first time, and fails to activate any ready framework for the construction of meaning. This explains the speaker's inability or unwillingness to be selective, and the obsessive recording of detail, even though A's exercises in looking do not produce tension or a climax. All this happens in a language not unlike that of scientific observation: the geometry of A's attempts to see more of the tree-branch, quantification of the shifts in his physical position, the use of expressions such as *disparity* (差距) and *at this point* (目前爲止). The speaker moves from depersonalization to dehumanization—in other words, to ever-stronger defamiliarization—by stating what is the obvious in everyday human experience. In this respect, Han Dong's literary kinship to Yu Jian is especially clear.

As in many of Han's poems, one of the central images is that of looking (看). While the better part of "A and B" is dedicated to an exact description of the act of looking, its message concerns the limitations of

perception. This happens on several levels. First of all in the literal sense: A's look at the tree is stopped by the wall, which he tries to circumvent, to see not just more of the tree, but also less of the emptiness that is his share if he accepts the wall's restrictions. Secondly, *maybe* in *maybe only empty sky* (line 9) and *or* in *through the glass or the screen* (line 28) stress the impossibility of knowing what it is that someone else perceives. In this poem, that does not just apply to ordinary mortals like A's co-protagonist B. It also holds for the otherwise seemingly all-powerful speaker, to whose role we will return below.

The transition in which A goes from looking out the window to closing his eyes and finishing the tying of his shoes is brilliant. It is the mechanism of defamiliarization, again, that produces a line of reasoning that in itself is not illogical, while we know it to be untrue, and somehow find it funny to imagine. We are not sure why A closes and opens and closes his eyes again—is he testing his vision?—until we realize that to the speaker, this makes perfect sense. A is done looking out the window, and doesn't need to look at his feet while tying his shoes. He stops looking by "switching off" his eyes, just like one stops chewing once the food is swallowed and gone from the mouth. The act of shoe-tying casually takes us back to A's childhood, which operates as a miniature for social experience. One learns how to do this or that, is commended if one does it well, becomes skilled at it—and, in the revised edition of the poem in *Papa Is Watching Me in Heaven*, gets bored with it and stays bored with it.

"A and B" shows Han Dong at his most sophisticated in manipulating the trivia of every day as poetic material. An important part of the message—once we decide to interpret what is offered to us at face value—is that entire worlds may lie behind the tiniest of details, whether we apply that to poetry or to other things in life. Another key component of the interpretation, in line with the poems reviewed earlier in this section, is the cynical view of human togetherness and interaction. In the poem's opening lines, A and B are pictured as sitting with their backs to one another. B disappears from view until the closing scene. There, the speaker observes that A has neglected B, and

that A and B each see different things—such as the world outside the window and household chores embodied by the dishes in the cupboard, respectively—and do not see each other.

A's sperm leaving B's body when she gets up—that is, distancing itself from her—confirms their fundamental separation. This holds in the defamiliarized outsider's view that represses common knowledge, in this case of the physical details of sexual intercourse and mechanisms of reproduction. Neither the physical togetherness of sex nor a possible pregnancy would do anything to change that view, in which human contact is little more than a chance meeting of monads incapable of real interaction. Conversely, any (naive) association of sex with things like romantic love could make the speaker's emphatic presentation of A and B ignoring one another after having had sex positively painful—and the ending to the poem (naively) scandalous. In Zhang Xiafang's presentation in the Peking University classroom, the sperm appears as one of Han Dong's shock effects in that sense. To illustrate how the poem dismantles traditional poetic sentiment, Zhang says that "it may well give the reader an 'unclean' (不潔) feeling, both psychologically and physiologically" (Hong 253). One may take this as a sign of prudishness on the part of Zhang, or prudishness of the rules for the public documentation of a classroom community at a highly reputed university in mainland China. At any rate, there is more to the poem's final phrase (*sperm trickles down that was once A's*) than uncleanliness or scandal. One may also read it as the speaker's ironic satisfaction of a particular type of reader expectations: alright, here's your clue, or your punch line—even though it means nothing.

This brings us to a final observation, for which we must take another look at the speaker in "A and B." In addition to the impossibility of sharing in the protagonists' perceptions, he questions and disparages the relevance of his own words. This happens in the sudden summary (*anyway*, line 12) of his meticulous report on A's head movements, and in the indifferent remark that while A may be thirty, he might just as well be sixty. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker makes his presence felt more strongly. He explicitly reduces the protagonists to being puppets on a string, and foregrounds the

artificiality of the poem as a textual construct. A's failure to pay attention to B is *first of all the author's [mistake]*. In addition, by first calling it *our* mistake, the speaker makes the reader his accomplice. If we follow him in taking the lack of attention to B as failing to see or indeed avoiding to look at her (*neglected*: 忽略 "neglect, overlook, lose sight of"), that bespeaks a vision of the writing process in which the author has, or wants, no complete control.[19] If we don't, we see a well-considered authorial strategy instead. Finally, the penultimate line (*to bring this narration to a close, let it be noted that*) employs a literary meta-consciousness and formal, almost bureaucratic language to create radical differentiation and ironic distance between the speaker and the rest of the poem.[20]

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Literary history and criticism to date have paid overwhelming attention to Han Dong's rejection of Obscure poetry in some of his early, best-known works. This is understandable in itself, but it entails the risk of reducing a versatile poetic oeuvre to a negatively defined commentary on other texts. In Han's case, the danger of early canonization leading to simplification and indeed distortion is particularly acute. Diverse features combine to make him one of the most important voices in contemporary poetry from mainland China: quotidian themes, superficial description, colloquial language, literary meta-consciousness, and last but not least, his individuality and sophistication in handling all these things. Or, conversely: the deconstruction of heroic themes, the repression of conventional interpretation, the rejection of literary language, and defamiliarization as a fundamental textual attitude.

The first list of features would make Han Dong's poetry one that believes in authenticity, and in personal experience as the measure of all things, sometimes *ad absurdum*. The second makes it a poetry that disbelieves in affectation, and in anything that lies outside personal experience. While both perspectives are rewarding, there is one important theme that is impossible to fit into the first list, and easy to

add to the second. That is this poetry's skepticism regarding human contact and communication, including communication through poetry. As such, Han's art reflects a poetics of disbelief. Notably, Han's disbelief is of the existential kind, and as such a "true" disbelief when set off against the early Bei Dao's over-exposed declaration: *I—don't—be—lieve!* (我不相信). The latter is really another way of saying *I—do—be—lieve*, in humanist values such as dignity of the individual self.[21]

Crucially, Han Dong's disbelief is positively defined. It is among the central features of an oeuvre that is not just a commentary but a complex, primary text before anything else, and a major contribution to Chinese literature.

NOTES

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[1] The titles of Chinese texts are rendered in English, with the Chinese original followed, and Chinese names are given in Hanyu pinyin transcription, followed by the Chinese characters at each name's first occurrence. For full bibliographical detail, see WORKS CITED. All translations are mine. On *Today*, see Van Crevel 1996: 61–68.

[2] For Han Dong's poetry, see *Them* 他們, Han, *White Stones* and *Papa*, and influential anthologies such as Lao Mu 1985, Tang & Wang 1987, Tang 1993 and Wan & Xiaoxiao 1993. For biographical information, see Han, "Life" and "Interview" 1994. In addition to his editorship of *Them* (see below), Han edits the ambitious *Epoch Poetry Series* 年代詩選 (see Van Crevel 2003). Journal articles aside, Chinese-language book-length surveys of contemporary

poetry from the PRC invariably include discussions of his work: e.g. Chen 1989, Wu 1991, Chen 1994, Chen 1996, Zhang 1997, Wang 1998, Yang 1999, Chen 2000, Xiang 2002 and Hong 2002. *Explorations in Poetry* 詩探索 1996 # 3 contains a special section on Han Dong: excerpts from Han, "Interview" 1994, followed by Xiao Hai 1996 and Lin 1996. As for English-language scholarship on Han Dong's poetry, Michelle Yeh (1992) and Su Wei and Wendy Larson (1995) mention his work in their comparisons of Obscure and "Post-Obscure" (後朦朧) / "New Age" (新時代) / "Third Generation" (第三代) poetry, and Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas and Huang Fan (1997) introduce it in their essay on the Nanjing poetry scene, which includes translations. Tang Chao and Lee Robinson (1992) have also translated some of Han's poems, as have Tony Prince and Tao Naikan (*Renditions* # 57) and Yanbing Chen (Zhao, Chen & Rosenwald 2000). Han Dong's fiction—in which he has made a name for himself since the 1990s—is beyond the scope of the present essay.

[3] *Them* # 1 (1985): 36; dated 1982 in Tang & Wang 205 and 1983 in Hong 249; included in Han, *Papa* 10. The poem first appeared in 1982 (Han, "On *Them*"; Day 2005: chapter 7), in the Lanzhou-based, unofficial journal *Same Generation* 同代, but I have been unable to consult that source.

[4] Twitchell-Waas and Huang (30–31) and Wang Yichuan 王一川 (236ff) provide detailed discussions of this intertextuality. Yang Lian wrote "The Wild Goose Pagoda" in 1979 or 1980. It was first published in his unofficial collection *There's a New Sun Every Day* 太陽每天都是新的 (1980). The poem's early official appearances include those in *Flower City* 花城 (fifth supplement, 1982: 9–14) and in Lao Mu 282–91.

[5] Wang 1998: 239ff. For Shu Ting's poems, see Shu Ting 1–6. Han Dong's "So You've Seen the Sea" was first published in *Them* # 1 (1985): 37; it is dated 1983 in Tang & Wang 208, and included in Han, *Papa* 14. Zhang Zao (217) identifies Han's 1988 poem "Afternoon" 下午 (first published in *Them* # 5: 6) as another example of writing back to Obscure poetry.

[6] Chinese scholars and critics frequently cite this adage. Su and Larson (290) translate it as "Poetry stops at language." This implies that poetry "stops" before it has "reached" or "arrived in" language, while the original wording indicates that poetry stops only after it has done so. Twitchell-Waas and Huang (34) expand it to "Poetry *begins and* ends in language" (italics added), which appears to be a conflation of Han's words with Shang Zhongmin's 尙仲敏 in

"Against the Modernists" 反對現代派 (229 and 232): "Poetry begins in language" (詩歌以語言開始). A similar, seemingly conscious combined citation of Shang and Han occurs in Yu 1991: 310 (詩 "以語言開始" 到 "語言爲止" [*sic*]). Han Dong's phrase must have begun to circulate early in 1987 at the latest (see his reference to it in Tang & Wang 203), and probably after 1985, judging by its absence from the poetical statement in the third issue of *Them*. Xiao Hai 小海 (19), most knowledgeable on Han Dong and *Them*, dates it as "probably from the mid–1980s," and not even conscientious annotator Wu Kaijin (1991: 218), who must have been close to Han Dong at the time of his research (221, note 1), can tell us where it first appeared. Han Dong himself was elegantly evasive about it in March of 2003 (personal communication), saying that he could not quite recall if he had said it, but could imagine himself as having said something like it. In a 2004 interview by Chang Li 常立, he characteristically plays down its significance by saying that it was never intended as a theoretical formula and should not be turned into some kind of "truth" ("On *Them*"). In addition to the editorials in *Them* and Han, "After," Han Dong's verse-external poetics is found in Han, "Hang Dong," "Young Poets," "Life," "Interview" (1994), "Ten," "Wait" and "Two" and Shen 1996 among other places—the latter is a medley culled from various sources, but without bibliographical references. See Van Crevel 2005.

[7] On *Them* and its continuation as an online forum, see Han, "Life," and surveys of contemporary poetry (note 2), Han, "Interview" (in *Chinese Poets*) and www.tamen.net or Day 2003. On the relaxation of repression around 1992, see Van Crevel 1996: 91–95.

[8] An opposition of the elevated—or the sublime—and the earthly is put forward in Van Crevel 2003. My current use of the notion of the elevated rather than the sublime is in order to steer clear of the philosophical-aesthetic discourse activated by the latter, in the light of European enlightenment and Romantic traditions. In China, most influential critics and scholars of post-Mao poetry have dwelt on the diversification of the poetry scene since the mid–1980s, from remarks made in passing to ambitious typologies. In western-language scholarship, Michelle Yeh (1992) first offered insight into this topic. There is an obvious connection with research on fiction, drama and film presented in Wang 1997 and Tang 2000.

[9] Xu, Meng, Cao & Lü 52–53. Han reconfirms his authorship in "On

Them."

[10] While the front cover has "Nineteen-eighty-nine" in large characters, the colophon on the back cites November 1988 as the date of publication.

[11] This use of the concept of superficiality is different from Fredric Jameson's (9), cited by Su and Larson (291–92) in their discussion of Chinese "New Age" or Third Generation poetry. Their focus is on superficiality as a sign of the postmodern. The present essay identifies superficiality as a mechanism causing defamiliarization, such as in "A and B," discussed below.

[12] Han, *Papa* 126–27. Well aware of the differences between *look* and *see*—the most important being that the former implies stronger agency, although this is less clear in Chinese than in English—I have translated 看 'look' as *see*, so as to retain the connection with 看見 'see,' which is by far the more important expression in this poem.

[13] Han, *Papa* 67 and 260.

[14] Remarkably, 烟雾 'smoke, mist' in line 7 is followed by 雲霧 'clouds, mist' in lines 10 and 18.

[15] Zang makes that 1992 instead of 1991, a minor inaccuracy that does not change the argument.

[16] Hong recognizes the contested nature of this category in chapter 15. According to its proponents in previous years, including Zang Di, the majority of poets studied in Hong come under Poetry of the 1990s, exceptions being Han Dong, Lü De'an and Yu Jian. The polemic was sparked off by Cheng 1998. See Zhang and Jing Yi; few other reports can lay claim to impartiality.

[17] First published in *Them* # 6 (1993): 42; included in Han, *Papa* 137–38. In "A and B," I have stuck with *look* for 看 'look,' and indeed for several instances of 看見 'see.' Different from "See," the former is the more important expression here.

[18] The speaker's sex is deduced from the reference to the author (作者) in line 26.

[19] This tallies well with Han Dong's verse-external poetics as laid out in Han, "Two."

[20] Han Dong removed this line in the poem's revision for inclusion in the overview of his work in *Papa Is Watching Me in Heaven* (2002). He also changed *the author's [mistake]* to *our [mistake]*, and added a line to the shoe-tying history: *at four he knew how / at five he was commended / at six he*

was skilled / at seven he was bored, beyond seven he stayed bored.

[21] From "Answer" 回答 (1972), Bei Dao 25–26; for a full English translation by Bonnie McDougall, see Bei Dao 33. My rendition of its most famous line aims to retain the emphatic, four-syllable rhythm or the original. The poem has often been linked to the 1976 Tian'anmen Incident, but its first version, including its most famous line quoted here, dates from 1972 (Van Crevel 1996: 51, note 87). Xia Yuanming 夏元明 (113) fails to elucidate a remarkable association of Han Dong's "Of the Wild Goose Pagoda" with Bei Dao's "Answer."

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