

The Flavour of Emotion Recollected: Wordsworth and Yang Wanli on the Nature of Poetry.

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Wordsworth and Yang Wanli were both poets, and they both wrote many prefaces - as well as other pieces including poems - in which they talked about poetry in general, and their own poetry in particular. Did they have anything more in common? It seemed to me, reading Yang's work, that there were themes there that reminded me of the Wordsworth that I'd read many many years ago as a student of English literature, and that it might be interesting to make the comparison. That's how I came to choose the subject for this paper. I knew, though, that I should have to update my acquaintance with what people in the world of literary criticism were saying about Wordsworth and his work, and I've spent some interesting hours with recent books and articles on this subject.

Armed with the weaponry provided by a couple of decades of theorizing in the post-modern style, the Cultural Studies people seem to have made some disturbing discoveries about the author of

ostensibly innocuous poems like “Daffodils”, once committed to memory by generations of hapless schoolchildren, my own included. Professor Anthony Easthope of Manchester University, for example, is now able to inform us that “Wordsworth wishes to be the phallus”.¹ Well, I must say that

Beside the lake, beneath the trees
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze

will never seem quite the same again. In any case, I’ve found it difficult to make use of this news of William’s distressing condition in my own work, and I must admit that I have no comparable revelations to make to you about Yang Wanli. Fortunately Professor Easthope and his colleagues have other insights about Wordsworth’s artistic, social, political and personal stances and attitudes, as they’re revealed in his work, and I’m finding it useful to wrestle with these in trying to evaluate the ideas of the two poets. I’m not sure I’ve got very far with this, so that this paper is the report of a preliminary reconnoiter with the texts rather than a finished and up-to-date reading.

I thought I might start with a question that may seem impossible large and vague, but that I nevertheless find very interesting to think about, and that is, “What is poetry (perhaps: what is literature or even art) for? Why does it exist and what sorts of justification is there for spending time on it?” Both Yang and Wordsworth thought of themselves, identified themselves, primarily as poets, though of course Yang had an official career considerably more demanding than that of the Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland. Neither of them was likely to downplay the worth of poetry in broad social terms, and so it turns out. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) - cited from now on as “The 1800 Preface”² - Wordsworth describes the result of the poet’s long process of thought and self-training as follows:

we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

He does say also that

¹ You don’t believe me? Easthope, Anthony, *Wordsworth Now and Then: Romanticism and contemporary culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 98. Professor Easthope assures us that when he talks about “Wordsworth’s intention” he means “the effect of the texts as we read them now”, since “William Wordsworth hasn’t been intending anything since 1850” - which is perhaps fortunate for Professor Easthope, given the effect of the U.K. laws of libel as we read them now.

² The text of this preface, as it is given in the Harvard Classics series, is conveniently available in searchable form at <http://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html>. I have taken my quotations from that source.

The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure.

But he is at pains to qualify the kind of pleasure he has in mind:

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgement the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone.

And he has a number of impassioned passages in which he stresses the nobility of the "object of Poetry", which is

truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; ... Poetry is the image of man and nature.

Emphatically may it be said of the Poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, 'that he looks before and after.' He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love.

Yang Wanli does have, as I hope to make clear later, ideas about poetry that stress how it provides insight and new vision to its readers as well as to its writers, but his most worked-out statement of its function comes in an essay which is actually part of a set on the Six Classics. His *Shilun* should be translated as "Essay on the Book of Poetry", rather than "Essay on poetry". It is thus natural for the moral function of poetry, most of the time kept in the background of Wordsworth's Preface, though unambiguously enough stated there, to be much more to the fore in Yang's essay. All the same, I agree with most commentators that the ideas Yang here expresses are ideas he held about the function of poetry in general. His language is more grandiose, though, since the verse he is discussing is sanctified by its inclusion in the Classic.

The Poems are a tool to straighten out the world. There are people who say, "In the Way of the sages, the Book of Propriety is strict, while the Poems are easy-going." Well, I must ask: who is there who understands that the Propriety is easy-going within its strictness, and the Poems strict within their easy-going nature? When the sages were finding the way to straighten out the world, they first had to find how to hunt out the world's strongest common feelings [after reading Wordsworth, I am tempted to translate *zhiqing* here as "strongest Pleasures"]. When they had found these common feelings, and worked in accordance with them in the task of straightening people out, how could they fail to be obeyed? For reform grows from repentance, and repentance grows from [acknowledgement of] public society. If repentance is

not spoken about, it is no longer unsettling: if it is not spoken about in public, self-interest and denial take over. ... The sages would never allow the world to lose the sting of repentance, or to deny the force of public criticism. And so in this way they called on the public to make the criticism, and used that criticism to inspire repentance. So the world's miscreants cannot avoid repentance. Repentance brings reform, and reform brings return to the fold of goodness. This is the way that the Poems teach! Are the poems really easy-going, then? Majestic in the inexorability of their criticism, absolute in the implacability of their judgments: are the Poems really not strict?³

Moral teaching as the function of the poems in the Classic is of course a complete Confucian commonplace, but what seems to me to be worth special notice in Yang's ideas here, given the period in which he is writing, is the role he gives to feeling in the way this function is fulfilled (though again this is not at all novel in Chinese writing about literature). It is a very different and much more positive view of feelings Yang offers here than the one typically found in the writings of the Daoxue grouping with which he is sometimes associated. In their work, that of the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi particularly, the emphasis is on the tradition in Chinese thought which treats moral education as being, at least in part, a process of stilling or rising above emotional reactions. Qing is a treacherous word in the Chinese lexicon of literary and philosophical theory, and a full account both of its use and its place in various systems would be a very demanding project. Here, though, Yang's use of the word, and the positive educative role he gives to emotion, are clear enough. His views on the moral purposes of poetry are really quite similar to those in Wordsworth's formulations, where poetry is seen as truth "not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion", and a successful poet as one who brings it about that "the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified".

Wordsworth's ambitions for his poetry are not easily separated from his ideas about language and style. The formulation by which these ideas have come to be known, and which has indeed attracted its fair share of ridicule, is that he intends to describe: "incidents from common life" in "a selection of language really used by men". The short way with this is to point out that if Wordsworth really means it literally, the language of his poems simply shows that he hasn't spent enough time in enough pubs. And of course he hastens to say that he doesn't really mean it literally. The "humble and rustic life" which Wordsworth says he has generally chosen for his subjects (more on this later) may, as he says, generate a "more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets ...", but it needs to be "purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of disgust and dislike". Briefly, what

³ As reprinted in Guo Shaoyu, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, volume 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1979): 402. Cited from now on as "Guo".

Wordsworth is doing is offering a justification, even a polemical argument, for his own decidedly literary and rhetorical style. In that style, it is much more important for Wordsworth that he should avoid conventional, worn-out ways of expression than that he should really sound like the common man. “Simplicity” and “purity” are to be substituted for “the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers”: he has “endeavoured to look steadily at my subject”, and this has meant that there is “little falsehood of description”, but it also

has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets. I have also thought it expedient to restrict myself still further, having abstained from many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.

Wordsworth’s self-presentation is that of a man who has rejected what is commonly regarded as “poetic diction” to present a faithful account of his subject matter, so that what he says comes to the reader as a matter of direct personal experience. That this is far from an adequate, or even an accurate, description of his poetry itself goes almost without saying. All the same, it would be a mistake to ignore his self-conception as someone who tries to adopt “the simple and unelaborated expressions” of those who are “less under the influence of social vanity”.

Yang Wanli’s case is rather different from that of Wordsworth. He is heir to a more than a century of Song dynasty thinking about literary styles and models, thinking which well before his time had seen the victory - for prose - of the *guwen* values of relative simplicity, directness and faithfulness to personal experience. Poetic style was a more complex matter. In a moment I’ll say something about Yang’s presentation of his own development through different styles and models. First, though, there is the matter of “language really used by men” as it might apply to a Chinese poet.

Yang Wanli was not at all in agreement with Wordsworth’s opinion that “there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition”, that poetry is basically continuous with prose:

Poetry is not comparable to prose. It must be written by a poet. It’s the same if you want jade carved: you must get a skilled jade worker to do it - if you get a metal-worker instead to do the job, it will be botched. Yet there are people with deep learning and outstanding ability at prose, who put their fine phrases through clamps and vices so that they come out in five or seven character lines, with all the right rising and falling tones. That has to be poetry, right? ... And who dares disagree?⁴

⁴ Quoted from Gu Yisheng and others, *Song Jin Yuan wenxue piping shi*, volume 1 (Shanghai:

All the same, I do think that there was a good deal in common between the English poet and the Chinese one on the matter of language and its use. This is not altogether a simple matter to explain, though.

All poetic forms are of course by their nature removed from everyday speech, and Wordsworth gets himself into some contortions when he tries to answer his own question, “Why, professing these opinions, have I written in verse?” Chinese shi poetry, though, is inevitably even further from ordinary spoken language than the forms available to Wordsworth. This is not just a matter of the formality of the rules, the uniformity of the rhythm, the resulting concentration of meaning, and the ingenuity required to give life to the lines. The language itself - basically *wenyan*, of course - is not common speech, which the shi form could hardly handle at all. Yang, though, is well known as having chosen a style of poetic diction characterized by simplicity, directness and informality. He also makes consistent use of elements drawn from the vernacular language of his day. This “rhetorical vernacular” is often used for dramatic effect or to give a heightened sense of realism to his portrayal of some scene from everyday life. It’s worth noticing that, though Yang Wanli was certainly not the first Song poet to choose everyday events and experiences for his subjects, he certainly wrote an unusually large number of poems on such themes. As I will explain later, this is closely connected to the persona that he presents in some of his poems, where he acknowledges - and at the same time deprecates - the social gulf between the poet, by definition educated in a way that makes him part of the elite, and ordinary people, the “humble and rustic”, as Wordsworth puts it.

Now Yang doesn’t present an argument for these elements of his practice in any explicit piece of writing. And, in any case, as Qian Zhongshu notes, Yang did not really go beyond the established conventions of poetic writing. While he may have made more use of these elements of the “rhetorical vernacular”, the ones that he did use were all safely within the range of expressions already used by shi poets. Nevertheless, I think there can be little doubt that Yang’s language was tied in with a conception of his own poetic stance that is interestingly similar to the one which Wordsworth himself spells out in his justification for his own style. In a poem written toward the end of his life, one of two called “Reading the poetry of Zhang Wenqian”⁵ Yang expresses this conception simply but clearly. Wenqian is the *zi* of Zhang Lei (1054-1154), one of the writers who became known as members of the school of Su Shi (Su men) almost a century before Yang’s time. He was known, agreeably, as “Fat Immortal (Feixian)”.

Guji, 1996): 291

⁵ Zhou Ruchang *Yang Wanli xuanji*, 2nd ed., (Shanghai: Guji, 1979): 233. From now on cited as “Zhou”.

Late on, I've come to love spontaneity in Feixian's poems:
When did he ever use embroidering or filigree?
Spring flowers, the autumn moon, winter ice and snow -
He didn't listen to hackneyed old words, he just listened to nature!

The stance is one of attending to direct experience of nature and expressing it spontaneously, of not being bound by a need to decorate or by the "phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets" (admittedly a rather elaborate translation of *chenyan*). The stance is hardly new or unique to Yang Wanli. "Ziren" and "Tian" as the key values named put Yang in a very long tradition whose locus classicus is the *Zhuang zi*. (The fact that English translators (myself included) find it so easy to translate both of these terms as "nature" or "Nature" throws into relief Wordsworth's constant recourse to this English word with its different but equally long history in the European tradition.) Yang stresses the idea of experience of nature (or Nature) as a direct source of poetry, though, to an unusual degree. This is in marked contrast to the ideas of the late representatives of the "Jiangxi school" of poetry that was so influential down to in Yang's time. In their ideas, which did also influence Yang's thinking, the emphasis was rather on making full use of, and transforming, the linguistic resources of the poetry of the past.

In an earlier poem Yang uses the famous couplet,

Hunting for a line behind closed doors is no way to write poems:
Only when you get out and about will poems be there of themselves.⁶

"Hunting for a line behind closed doors" was Huang Tingjian's characterization of the style of work of Chen Shidao. A contemporary work describes Chen as going out to climb some hill for the view, "hurrying home" every time he had a stroke of inspiration, and only then closing himself in his room with the dogs and cats let out of the house and the children packed off to neighbours. So Huang's line is hardly fair⁷, but it did stick. Yang's emphasis, here and elsewhere, on spontaneity as a characteristic of poetic creation is meant as a correction to one-sided concentration on linguistic craft. He acknowledges the need for skill and technical care, but simply wants to subordinate them to what might in the European tradition be called "inspiration":

⁶ Zhou: 161.

⁷ As Zhou Ruchang points out in his note to Yang's poem: loc.cit.

There's no way to forge lines without hammer and furnace -
But when the lines are done, those need not be all that's made them.
I don't go looking for lines of verse:
Those lines themselves come looking for me.⁸

Yang makes essentially the same point in prose, using the terms of Chinese literary theory, in a letter to a friend:

In general, in the composition of poetry, it is “inspiration” (or much less loosely “stirring”: *xing*)⁹ that is of the first importance. “Exposition” (or “elaboration” *fu*) comes next. Writing verse modelled on the poetry of others [*genghe*] is a last resort. When I have no original intention of writing a poem on some particular subject, but some particular thing or some particular matter happens to strike [*chu*] me, and my attention happens to be stirred [*gan*] by that particular thing or matter, then the being struck comes first, the being stirred follows, and the poem comes from that. What do I [consciously] have to do with it? It is a matter of Nature [*tian*], and that is what I call “inspiration”. Or I may concentrate my attention on a flower, or take as a theme [*fenti*] a particular plant. In this case, designating the thing exacts a poem, or setting up the theme elicits a set of verses. This is already not a matter of Nature, but it still has solely to do with my own self. That is what is called “exposition”. When it comes to poetry modelled on that of others, who or what does the striking? Who or what the stirring? the setting of the theme? There's nothing there but other people ... all that's involved is being pulled along by other people! Can you expect the tiniest particle of Nature, or grain of self? So I've never observed something and then turned around to imitate someone else's observation. I don't want to take a rhyme and just follow someone else's use of it. Could even Du Fu or Li Bai handle such a task? In any case, they did not do such things.¹⁰

If not by following previous example, though, how does a poet come to be capable, not just of literary skills - Yang's “hammer and furnace” - but of inspiration, of the capacity to have the telling theme, image, metaphor come to mind? Wordsworth proposes a process of self-training, which importantly is basically a matter of training emotions, with “thought” being seen as in effect the “representative” of emotional experience:

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts,

⁸ Zhang 182.

⁹ The word is one of those central ones for which any translation will necessarily be misleading. Its implications belong to associations with its use in previous Chinese theorists, while any roughly comparable English term carries an equivalent but quite different freight. “Stirring” is Stephen Owen's word for *xing*, not misleading as theory, but perhaps misleading because not theoretical. Owen also translates *xing*, when it is used to speak of the effect rather than the genesis of poetry, as “affective image”. See his indispensable *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992): 587. “Exposition” is Owen's choice for *fu*: op.cit.: 45.

¹⁰ Zhang Jian, *Nan Song wenxue piping ziliao huibian* (Taipei: Chengwen, 1978): 244-5.

which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

The process of self-training, *bildung* perhaps, which Wordsworth describes is all in terms of thoughts and feelings. There's no doubt, though, that it was to be undertaken in the company of the English poetry of the past: Chaucer, "the old ballads", Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, to all of whom Wordsworth makes constant reference. When he says,

an accurate taste in poetry ... can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition ... if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and ... in many cases, it necessarily will be so.

he is speaking of readers, but there is no doubt that he would accept that what he says is even more true of poets themselves. Making himself into that very particular personage the professional Poet, then, involved close familiarity with the poetry of the past, something that Wordsworth demonstrates very clearly in his Essay Supplementary to the Preface to the Poems of 1815. The process of producing the "habits of mind", obeying whose impulses "blindly and mechanically" will produce acceptable utterances, can hardly be separated from "long continued intercourse with the best models of composition". For the great poetry of the past is itself, of course, the product of the same process of thought and feeling on which our own Poet is embarked.

Yang Wanli provides us with no explicit theoretical statement on this matter of the necessary training or development of the poet, the process which will eventually make him receptive to inspiration, and being "stirred". Yet it is not difficult to find a description of how he saw his own development. In his collected works are to be found prefaces to eight of the nine collections of poetry that he published. These soon became, and have remained, the standard references to the development of his ideas about poetic practice and his relationship to poets of the past.¹¹ Stephen Owen describes Yang's prefaces as "announcing the author's external circumstances and interior disposition at that stage of his life", as part of an "initial movement toward a documentary *bildung*, tracing the formation and development of a poet".¹²

¹¹ For citations from southern Song writers and from Huang Zongxi some four centuries later, see Zhang Ruijun, *Yang Wanli pingzhuan* (from now on cited as "Zhang Ruijun"), Nanjing: Nanjing University Press: 2002: 214.

¹² Stephen Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography", in Shuen-fu Lin and

Whether these pieces of writing do accurately reflect the ways in which Yang developed as a poet is of course very much open to question. While his prefaces have often been taken at face value, it's clear from their dates that this isn't really possible. While the poems in the collections were written over a period of forty-two years, and published over eighteen, the prefaces, all dated, prove to come from a period of less than six years, from 1186 to 1192. As Qian Zhongshu puts it, "his account of stages in his work is too neat, and somewhat at odds with the reality."¹³ By the time he began to write the prefaces, Yang was nearly sixty years old. So whatever the value of the poems in his different collections as contributions to a "documentary bildung", the prefaces are less useful in that way than is Wordsworth's 1800 Preface, published when the poet was just thirty. All the same, the prefaces have their own interest as statements of what Yang wanted to present - retrospectively - as the story of his development.

The first of Yang's prefaces to his own work was in fact written, in the sixth month of 1186, for his third collection of verse, *Nanhai ji*, containing poems written between 1180 (when Yang was 53) and 1182.¹⁴

My liking for writing poetry began in my earliest years. But though at first I liked it, later I became fed up with it. Then in 1162 [Shaoxing renwu] there was the first change in my poetry. I took pleasure in it once more, but after some time I again grew fed up with it. In 1170 [Qiandao gengyin] my poetry again changed. At that time I was temporary magistrate of Piling . Three years later I was moved south, at first becoming Intendant of Granaries and later Judicial Intendant. Between 1180 (gengzi) and 1182 (*renyin*) I wrote four hundred poems ... and showed each of them to my friend You Yanzhi .¹⁵ Yanzhi would always beat out their rhythm, and said that they had the feel of Liu Mengde ¹⁶, though I wouldn't presume to say I believe him. ... Alas, I am old now, and I don't know if my poetry as I have written it up till now is still capable of change. Yanzhi once said that my poetry has made progress with each change of style. So I have been capable of change, but am I still capable of making progress?¹⁷

This emphasis on change, on moving on from work whose style he had tired of, is a central theme of Yang's self-presentation - or self-imagining - in his prefaces. Yet here he puts it entirely in terms of his own progress. It is his own early work he tires of, and he gives no hint that the reason is Stephen Owen, eds., *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 71-102: at 104.

¹³Zhang Ruijun, 215, citing Qian's *Song shi xuanzhu*, Beijing: Renmin, 1958 (and various reprinted editions), 181.

¹⁴ Zhang Ruijun has a very useful chronological table of the editions of Yang's poems and the prefaces written for them on his pages 214-5..

¹⁵ You Mao (1127-1194).

¹⁶Liu Yuxi , 722-842. An associate of Bai Juyi, known for his "folk-style" poems.

¹⁷ As quoted in Gu Yisheng and others, *Song Jin Yuan wenxue piping shi* , volume 1 (Shanghai: Guji, 1996): 307

that he finds it derivative, that it is not in his own individual voice. Less than a year later, in the fourth month of 1187, he makes the stages of his development much clearer, names the influences on that development, and stresses the liberation that comes from leaving them behind:

At first, in my poetry I followed models from the writers of the Jiangxi school.¹⁸ Then I followed the five-character regulated verse of Houshan (Chen Shidao) and then again the seven character jueju of Banshan laoren (Wang Anshi). Late on, I followed the jueju of Tang writers. The more I followed these styles, the fewer my poems became. I used to grumble about it to Lin Qianzhi, who said, “The poems you select are the very finest, and so capturing their style is really difficult: can you really expect to write many like that?” I sighed and replied, ‘Each poet’s kind of block seems different (shiren gai yi bing), and yet their source is the same. It’s not just me!’ And so from 1162 down to the spring of 1177, I managed to write only 582 poems. In the summer of that year I went as prefect to Jingxi [that is, Changzhou]. When I took up the post, what with perusing law cases and putting the tax files in order, I had no time to spend with anything but official documents. Poetic ideas sometimes welled up in me as in years past, and though I would have liked to write the poems, there was no leisure time. On the first day of the New wuxu Year, [towards the end of 1177, that is], the holiday meant that there wasn’t much official business, so I took the chance to write some poetry. Suddenly, it was as if I had been awakened, and I took my leave of the Tang poets; of Chen, Wang and the Jiangxi writers. Now that I was no longer presuming to follow their models, I felt quite light-hearted. I tried having the boys take the brush to see if I could dictate a few poems, and they came flowing forth with none of the hang-ups I’d been having before. From this time on, every day in the early afternoon, when the clerks had left and the offices were empty, I would pick up a fan and take a walk in the back garden, climb up on a high part of the wall, pick some wolfberry or chrysanthemum, break off a spray of flowers or some bamboo, and all kinds of images would come flooding in to furnish the material for my poems. Before the flag-bearers had set out, or the vanguard troops had responded to their orders, the ranks behind would be treading on their heels! As if it had just melted away, I no longer felt the old difficulty in producing poems. For the days of poet’s block are numbered when you get rid of set styles. At that time, not only did I feel no difficulty in writing, I felt no difficulty in administering my prefecture. On the last day of the second month of the next year (1179), my replacement arrived, and after I had verified his credentials I left. I checked out all my manuscripts: in fourteen months, I had produced 492 poems. I did not dare to take them out and show them to anyone, though. This year, holding down a post in the capital, I have received a letter from my old friend Mr Zhong Jiangzhi in the Huai valley, which runs: “Changzhou has recently had another change of prefect. The prefecture you once found no trouble in administering is now at least ten times as difficult! Are you still not ready to bring out those poems you wrote there?” I have copied them out with a smile to send to him.¹⁹

This is more clearly an account which sets out the stages of a kind of apprenticeship. It’s quite clear that Yang is not suggesting that he could have simply done without his models and “got rid of set styles” from the start. Working through “the very finest poems”, and appreciating their difficulty to the point of finding it a cause of “block”, itself finally brought him to the point where he could feel released to write in his own style. The classic reference for this process of internalizing the

¹⁸The “Jiangxi school”, first given this name by Lü Benzong (1084-1145), of the generation before Yang Wanli’s, had been the subject of an earlier preface by Yang himself, to a collection entitled *Poems of the Jiangxi school (Jiangxi zongpai shi)*, the preface being dated 1174, three years before the publication of Yang’s own first collection. It is included, with extensive notes, in Guo: 381-398.

¹⁹ Zhou: 290-292.

canons of writing till a free, personal style evolves is of course the one by Han Yu, in his letter to Li Yu.²⁰ In this piece, the moral importance of sincerity in the struggle to get rid of accepted, stale modes of expression - as well as Han Yu's fundamentalist approach to Confucian doctrine - is stressed explicitly, as it is not in Yang's account. Yet Han Yu's approach to literature in general was something which had been an integral part of Song thinking for well over a century, and not just among Daoxue thinkers. The struggle with models, to use them and yet be able to go beyond them, was a matter of personal self-conception as well as purely linguistic or stylistic choices. Yang's own commitment to the ideal of "sincerity" (*cheng*), taken from his revered mentor Zhang Jun, is after all preserved in his choice of the term for his hao: Chengzhai, the "Sincerity Studio".

When Wordsworth is talking about "simple and rustic" life and characters he idealizes them, makes them into the carriers of true and unspoiled feelings and utterances. But it doesn't take much acquaintance with his work to find that his portrayals of these characters are very much written from the outside. The stress is not on the people he is portraying themselves, but on their poverty, ill fortune or isolation. Wordsworth does also try to convey qualities of strength, endurance and stoicism in these figures. Yet what comes across is less a part of a convincing portrait than the poet's own insistence on these characteristics. It is something of a critical commonplace that Wordsworth's poetry achieves the strength that it undoubtedly does, less in terms of the aims he articulates - of conveying simple characters and the grandeur of nature - than in terms of an account of himself, and his efforts to read meaning into his own life and his society. This is not meant to denigrate Wordsworth's work at all. All the same, he remains an educated gentleman in a very class-divided society, writing for those enough like him to participate imaginatively in his observations, and to understand his reactions and attitudes. On the whole, when he writes about himself directly, it is usually in the abstracted, generalized vein of heavily interpreted memory to be found in *The Prelude*. In the shorter poems on rural life and characters, the Wordsworth persona is usually not a participant, but a rather shadowy interlocutor. One poem manages to present a more believably dramatized version of the poet as participant, that is, "Simon Lee". I think it is no accident that the effect of this poem is one that is not usual for Wordsworth: that is, an ironic sense of social distance from the character he is describing. The whole poem is constructed in a way that emphasizes what the modern writer David Simpson calls "the odd mixture of emotional release, honest sympathy, condescension and embarrassment that critics have often found in the climactic moment of the poem", an effect I take to be more calculated than simply being, as Simpson suggests, "related to the conflicting aspirations and anxieties in the Wordsworthian psyche".²¹ The whole poem is too long to quote here. The early stanzas set out the plight of Simon Lee, once a famous "running huntsman"

²⁰ In Guo: 115-119.

²¹ David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (London: Methuen, 1987): 155,

merry”, but now in his old age reduced to “the poorest of the poor”, with a scrap of land he once enclosed from the heath, but which he and his wife “can till no longer”. The last four stanzas of the poem are the “eye” of the poem, as Chinese critics might say:

O reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.
What more I have to say is short,
I hope you'll kindly take it;
It is no tale, but should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

One summer day I chanced to see
This all man doing all he could
About the root of an old tree,
A stump of rotten wood.
The mattock tottered in his hand;
So vain was his endeavour
That at the root of the old tree
He could have worked for ever.

“You're overtasked, good Simon Lee,
Give me your tool!” to him I said;
And at the word right gladly he
Received my proffered aid.
I struck, and with a single blow
The tangled root I sever'd,
At which the poor old man so long
And vainly had endeavour'd.

The tears into his eyes were brought,
And thanks and praises seemed to run
So fast out of his heart, I thought
They never would have done.
- I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds

With coldness still returning.
Alas, the gratitude of men
Has oftener left me mourning.

I don't have time here to deal in detail with Yang Wanli's poems written from observation of rural life and the vicissitudes of the subordinate classes in Southern Song society. It has been a critical cliché in the People's Republic that Yang's work contains fewer poems on these themes - and on patriotic ones too - than it should. Be that as it may, I can just record here that the poems in which Yang does describe or evoke rural life seem to me a great deal more convincing and concrete than anything in Wordsworth. He can write brief poems in the persona of a farmer, or a Yangtze river boatman, and give his reader a fresher sense of interest in these people's actual lives than Wordsworth manages in lengthy and much more earnest pages. But the two brief poems I want to quote here are different. Both of them are responses, as is Wordsworth's "Simon Lee", to social hierarchy and distance. In both of them Yang presents himself, as Chinese poets had learnt to do since at least Du Fu's time, as something of a comic figure, unable to bridge the gap between himself and the common people, but also unwilling or unable to behave as if that gap was part of the natural order.

Going home drunk in the morning

It got late, and I did want to go home,
But my host was pressing and persuaded me to stay.
It's not that I can't hold my wine,
But, old and ill, I was worried about keeping up.
People's wishes shouldn't be gainsaid:
I wanted to leave, yet I stayed right on.
When I was drunk he relented -
Well, being drunk's no cause for grief.
On the way home my wits were fuddled
And the sun went right down behind the hills.
In among the bamboo, someone's house:
I asked to rest there just for the night.
An old fellow - he was pleased to see me:
Kept calling me "Your lordship"!
I told him I wasn't that;

But he just smiled, looked down and shook his head.

I long ago left behind the spirit of the hunt -

But still the gulls won't come down to me.²²

If an old farmer like this keeps his distance,

Who will I have for company now I'm old?

Hanging out the clothes

At noon, I hang out the clothes, in the evening I fold them.

Willow box in a cloth sling: I bring them home with me.

The housewives and kids giggle and ask each other:

“Who's that if not a barefoot serving man.?”

Yang's poems seem to me to typify his readier, more empathetic, responsiveness to social situations. The characters in his poems are more human than the Stonehenge monoliths that Wordsworth summoned up in such figures as the Leech Gatherer. There is also a stronger vein of humour, or ironic self-deprecation, something that is certainly there in “Simon Lee”, but is not easy to find in much else of Wordsworth's work.

The lighter touch on social themes does not mean at all that Yang was in fact insensitive to social and political problems. Here there is some need for caution. Yang was a serving official whose reputation was high enough for him to be given the opportunity of submitting to the throne a formal memorial of advice, part of the Song institutionalization of the Confucian role of the responsible minister. In the essay he submitted, Yang the public servant showed himself to be both a forthright moralist and also something of a practical administrator. He complained of quite specific abuses in the tax system, and voiced indignation about what he called, fairly explicitly, corruption among the highest officers. He clearly held a very negative view of the morale and behaviour of the bureaucracy he knew, even perhaps of political life in general. It was not so unusual a position in his time, and an understandable one. Should we attribute these views as well to Yang the poet? Perhaps a better question would be to ask whether he found ways to make poetic form carry the sense of political disturbance he reveals in his memorials. Yang the person is revealed to us in his prose papers as well as his poems, and this was something he was well aware of. But, after all, it is Yang himself who insists that poetry is different from prose, and that poetry itself is one of the sternest

²² The gulls are from the *Liezi*: they had been ready to come down and play with the hero of the story till his father suggested he trap one for dinner. The next time he went out, the gulls would not come down.

modes of Confucian teaching. Does his poetic practice live up to those notions, or is it politically escapist to a degree? This last is the accusation that is made against Wordsworth. Yet however much later critics might disagree with, or feel cheated by, the spiritualization, the exalted religiously toned finessing, of social and political problems in Wordsworth's work, a good deal of its strength for modern readers at least comes from appreciating how much he wrestled with those problems. It is the wrestling that is alive in the poems, not the conclusions. What to say of Yang? I really can't answer this question at this point. Few Chinese poets have been closely studied in English, in a way that gives adequate attention to the social and political context in which they wrote. Yang is certainly not one of them, and a full appreciation of his thousands of poems is a daunting task.

The Confucian vocation for political service was always a qualified one. The master himself, after all, never found a suitable opportunity for high office. To hand on the culture to later generations, to keep ideals alive in a time of corruption, was a calling that had its own nobility. There was some ambiguity about these notions in the Imperial period, though. From at least the Song dynasty on, intense competition for degrees and office made the notion of principled refusal to serve an unprincipled court unconvincing. In any case, for a man of any standing to make a public refusal of service to the emperor on such grounds was hardly politic. True to Confucian ideals Yang did not, like Wordsworth, refuse any social calling other than that of poet. He was never detached from political concerns. In his retirement, he is said to have fallen into ill health as a result of his rage at the administration of Han Tuozhou, whom he had angered earlier by refusing point-blank to write an inscription Han had requested from him. His family kept political news from him until he finally died from what seems to have been a stroke, after hearing the news of Han Tuozhou's plan for an ill-prepared military adventure against the Jin. Despite this evidence of political concern, though, Yang kept his identity as a poet above other things. More than a century before his time, Ouyang Xiu had written an account of the poetry of his friend Mei Yaochen, which had popularized the idea that "Poetry doesn't make men poor, but poverty can make a man a poet (*shi qiong er hou gong*)."

In Yang Wanli's version of this, put forward in his preface to the poetry of an unsuccessful friend, Ouyang Bowei, the tone is darker than in Ouyang's fairly optimistic time. Ouyang Bowei asks Yang for a remedy for his poverty. Yang replies, typically, that he can't even find one of those for himself, let alone for someone else. But he goes on to say, not as Ouyang Xiu does, that it would be good if Bowei's talent were recognized, but that political success is too often tainted:

[I asked]: "Who was the better man, Du Fu or Li Linfu? Xie Yi or Cai Jing?" Bowei replied, "You're having me on! But really should we be talking about people's characters in that way?" I said, "Why not discuss character? When Li Linfu and Cai Jing were at the height of their power, who in the world would have swapped their position for that of Du Fu or Xie Yi? Yet now that's not the way it is. ... Li Linfu and Cai Jing dominated the world: Du Fu and Xie Yi were poor the whole of their lives. ... Yet if these two poets were here today, would

they be willing to swap their lives for those others? So it may be all right for your poverty not to be remedied!²³

Li Linfu's villainy was safely back in the distant Tang past, but Cai Jing was a recent historical memory, a man whose misdeeds were seen as contributing to the catastrophic loss of north China to the Song Dynasty. To be a poet, to write work that is "clear, sharp, elegant and profound", as Yang describes his friend's verse, is to be true to a vocation that political life all too often betrays rather than fulfilling.

Such a high estimate of the worth of poetry - quite as committed to the vocation of poet as was Wordsworth's apologia - is most memorably summed up in the well-known lines in which Yang Wanli describes the function of poetry in terms clearly drawn from the Chan discussions of enlightenment that furnished an important part of Song aesthetic ideas

What is it that constitutes poetry? It is to stress language, that's all. I say: the skilled poet leaves language behind. So does he stress the *idea*, no more? I say: the skilled poet leaves the idea behind. So if you leave behind the language and the idea as well, where is poetry to be found? I say: when you leave behind the language and the idea, there is still poetry there.²⁴

Poetry is like the bitter taste of tea that turns to incomparable sweetness when it is savoured. Poetry evokes its experience or message rather than stating it - the experience itself is beyond words as is a "flavour *wei*". Like Gerard Manly Hopkins, Yang looked to moments of aesthetic recognition, which could only be evoked, not directly stated, by the words of poetry. Hopkins used the language of his own religious tradition when he spoke of "epiphanies": in the Southern Song men like Yang spoke in the language of Chan about "enlightenments *wu*". Wordsworth defined poetry in terms of "emotion", whether spontaneously overflowing or "recollected in tranquillity". Yet it is plain enough that he, like Yang Wanli, thought that the experience to be evoked by the words of the poet was more important than the words themselves. Both of them believed that the words were there to evoke the feelings or the experience the poem was directed toward, rather than existing simply as one more reconfiguration of language or cultural convention. In this belief, both of them were at odds with important strains of thought in their own time. The Jiangxi school believed poetry was of necessity a series of variations on previously created linguistic forms: Augustan writers, or so at least Wordsworth believed, were creative only within narrow confines, simply adding polish to established (stale) modes. Both Wordsworth and Yang insisted on the need to make language work creatively, not simply to recycle what had already been said. To refute such a conception, it is hardly enough to point out, as so many recent theorists of literature have done, that the poetry of these men depends on linguistic convention, and is full of reference, borrowing and "intertextuality". Poetry is made of

²³ Chengzhai wenji, 77, as quoted in Sichuan daxue Zhongwen xi, *Song Wenxuan*, Beijing: Renmin, 1997:391.

²⁴ "Yian shigao xu", *Chengzhai wenji* 83, as quoted in Guo: 401.

language, of course, but to remain alive it must point beyond language and evoke the experiences that truly conventional words obscure rather than revealing. In their different ways, it seems to me, Wordsworth and Yang Wanli both recognized this necessity. They insisted on it in their theory, and tried to realize it in their poetry, different in tone and form as that poetry inevitably was.