The Poetics of Hinting in *Wild Grass*

《野草》之暗示章法

Nick ADMUSSEN

安敏軒

Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University

康奈爾大學亞洲研究系
Introduction: “Such a Fighter”

Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881-1936) prose poem “Such a Fighter,” 這樣的戰士 from Wild Grass 野草, invents a warrior who reacts to all encounters with the same brave — and perhaps doomed — violence. Here is an excerpt:

He walks into the lines of nothingness, where all that meet him nod to him in the same manner. He knows that this nod is a weapon used by the enemy to kill without bloodshed, by which many fighters have perished. Like a cannon-ball, it renders ineffective the strength of the brave.

Above their heads hang all sorts of flags and banners, embroidered with all manner of titles: philanthropist, scholar, writer, elder, youth, dilettante, gentleman.... Beneath are all sorts of surcoats, embroidered with all manner of fine names: scholarship, morality, national culture, public opinion, logic, justice, oriental civilization....

But he raises his javelin.

(他走进無物之陣，所遇見的都對他一式點頭。他知道這點頭就是敵人的武器，是殺人不見血的武器，許多戰士都在此滅亡，正如炮彈一般，使猛士無所用其力。

那些頭上有各種旗幟，繡出各樣好名稱：慈善家，學者，文士，長者，青年，雅人，君子……。頭下有各樣外衣，繡出各式好花樣：學問，道德，國粹，民意，邏輯，公義，東方文明……。

但他舉起了利槍。) ²

Postponing, for a minute, any assertion about what kind of poem this is or how we are intended to interpret it, let’s juxtapose it against a second experience, Lu Xun’s description of the piece in a foreword he wrote to an English translation of Wild Grass.

These twenty-odd sketches, if one looks carefully, were written between 1924 and 1926 in Beijing, and then published one after another in the periodical Threads of Conversation. All in all they are nothing but little impressions written

¹ Lu Xun 魯迅, Wild Grass 野草, trans. Yang Xianyi 鄧憲益 and Gladys Yang 戴乃迭 (Beijing 北京: 我文 foreign Affairs Press, 2000), 125. I will use the term Wild Grass to represent the collection Yecao in this essay for the purposes of clarity, because it is the title of Yang and Yang’s translation. However, many important scholars of the collection such as Lloyd Haft and Michel Hoekx have made a strong argument that the title should rightly be translated as Weeds, an argument that I hope the next generation of Lu Xun translators considers carefully: see the introduction to the issue. See Lu Xun, Yecao 野草 [Wild Grass] (Beijing: Beixin sha ju 北新書局, 1932), 77-8, for the Chinese text. All subsequent citation given as YC.
at leisure. Because it was hard to speak forthrightly during those times, the language was sometimes quite vague and obscure.

I’ll give you a few examples. I wrote “My Lost Love” because I wanted to satirize the popularity of heartbroken poetry of that period. I wrote the first part of “Revenge” because I was upset with the number of mute observers in society. I wrote “Hope” because of my amazement at the depression that young people felt. “Such a Fighter” was written out of my feelings about aid given by intellectuals and scholars to the warlords. “The Blighted Leaf” was written for those who wanted to protect me out of affection for me. After Duan Qirui’s government attacked unarmed civilians, I wrote “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” when I had already fled to a different residence; during the junta war between the Fengtian clique and the Zhili clique, I wrote “The Awakening,” and after that I couldn’t live in Beijing anymore.

[...]

Later, I no longer wrote these kinds of works. The days of our age are changing, and this kind of writing is already unnecessary, even including the existence of these kinds of feelings. I think that this is probably for the best in the end. This makes up my preface to the translation, and it should end here.

(...)

This type of interpretation of the poem, in which its relationship to the particular political and social context of the period in which it was written is strongly foregrounded, is broadly influential in and representative of much Chinese-language criticism of *Wild Grass.*

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3 In this category I include works in the tradition of Sun Yushi 孫玉石, *Yecao yanjiu* 《野草》研究 [Research into *Wild Grass*].
It is also in contradistinction to some English-language criticism, for example this assessment from Leo Ou-fan Lee 李歐梵: “The uniqueness of form and sentiment in this collection may have something to do with Lu Xun’s private mood at the time these pieces were written.” Lee lists the constituent factors in Lu Xun’s “private mood” as the dissolution of the May Fourth movement, Lu Xun’s quarrel with his brother Zhou Zuoren 周作人, and his dismissal from his teaching post. Rather than historicizing, Lee’s account psychologizes and philosophizes *Wild Grass* and “Such a Fighter,” which he describes as “the image of the Nietzschean Superman given a peculiar humanistic twist.”

Lu Xun’s preface and Leo Lee’s analysis feel quite different from one another. However, the two interpretations differ mainly in emphasis: historicizing analysis often speaks in terms of the way that political and social events made Lu Xun feel, and psychologizing or philosophizing analysis usually has some real-world event at its heart. Scholars have mapped the ends of this spectrum onto national interests and academic communities, claiming that the distinction reflects the varying ways in which those communities make literature their conceptual object. In his essay “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Frederic Jameson argues that third world literature in general, and Lu Xun specifically, should be read politically, as a series of national allegories. He points out that first world criticism, with its strong divisions between the public and private, does violence to Lu

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4 Leo Lee Ou-Fan 李歐梵, *Voices from the Iron House* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 89-90. The difference between Western and Chinese readings of “Such a Fighter” is summed up neatly by Zhu Ping, “Women and the Nihil: The Shadow Subject in Chinese Literary Modernity, 1915-1936” (Ph.D., diss., Rutgers University, 2010), 24-6. “Orthodox Chinese scholars tends to use a socio-political approach to decipher the meaning of Lu Xun’s literary image, more often regarding “the array of nothingness” as a reference to the social, political, and historical reality that exasperated Lu Xun and forced him into the position of a lonely fighter...Western-trained Chinese scholars, on the other hand, find that the prose-poems in *Wild Grass* are highly personalized, emotional, and philosophical.” She goes on to analyze his work’s “array of nothingness,” which she argues “occupies a prominent position in Lu Xun’s aesthetic map, a map that reveals much of the writer’s unconscious,” see ibid., 26.

5 It is worth pointing out, however, that the events that drive psychologizing criticism are often quite different than those that drive historically-focused critical work. In the case of Western philosophical analysis of May Fourth literature, the real-world event nearly always has to do with the importation of Western literary or philosophical structures such as Nietzsche, Freud, or surrealism.

Xun’s work. He writes that “terms like ‘depression’ deform [Lu Xun’s nightmare] experience by psychologizing it and projecting it back into the pathological Other.”7 Jameson’s argument encourages close attention to the foreword reproduced above: it was intended specifically for English-speaking audiences, people who would not understand the poems’ original context, and it reminds us that Lu Xun seemed to want to provide a key of sorts to bridge the gap between these poems and the uninitiated West. Jameson believes that critics in the West are all too ready to read a pathologically depressed other who is guided by his (as Leo Lee has it) “private mood.” According to Jameson, we can take the English preface at face value, and read “Such a Fighter,” for example, as a directly allegorical criticism of intellectuals who worked with warlords instead of devoting themselves to the struggle for a more humane and peaceful China.

Reading a wider variety of Lu Xun’s comments on *Wild Grass*, though, destabilizes Jameson’s position. Lu Xun once wrote a letter to the younger writer Xiao Jun 蕭軍 (1907-1988) that contained the following exhortation: “That book of mine *Wild Grass*, the technique certainly can’t be considered bad, but its mood is too depressed because I wrote it after encountering many reversals. I hope you can distance yourself from the influence of this kind of depressive mood.” (我的那一本《野草》，技術並不算壞，但心情太頹唐了，因為那是我碰了許多釘子之後寫出來的。我希望你脫離這種頹唐心情的影響。)8 What’s more, we know that Lu Xun’s experience translating the Japanese critic Kuriyagama Hakuson 創川白村 had brought him into contact with concepts from Freud as well as a variety of Western texts.9 For an author who adapted so widely and freely from so many different cultures and literary traditions, it seems likely that Lu Xun may have written *Wild Grass* at least partially based upon what Jameson would consider to be a “first world” ideological foundation: as a reflection of a subjective psychological state as well as a political one.10 The recognition of this fact helps fight what Aijaz Ahmad argues are Jameson’s essentializing divisions between the first and third worlds.11 Lu Xun had as much or more access to and interest in non-Chinese

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7 Ibid., 70.
9 See Nicholas Kaldin, “The Prose Poem and Aesthetic Insight: Lu Xun’s *Yecao*” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1998), 5, note 5, where he points out Lu Xun’s use of psychological terminology derived from Kuriyagawa.
10 There is also the possibility that Lu Xun conceptualized his writing in some non-allegorical, non-psychologizing way, but that it can be meaningfully interpreted from a psychological perspective; this kind of slippage is particularly common in works containing literary hints, as described below.
11 “...one could start with a radically different premise, namely the proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one...” Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (Autumn
philosophical and psychological concepts as many writers in Jameson’s First World, and in any event, tension between subjectivity and collectivity is not limited to any region or economic base. As Ahmaz writes, “It is not only the Asian or the African but also the American writer whose private imaginations must necessarily connect with experiences of the collectivity.”

To accept this proposition is to return “Such a Fighter” to us as a product not of nationality, but personality — allowing the poem to be read as an exaggerated emblem of the kind of unstinting critical sharpness that Lu Xun displayed in all his literary pursuits, from the broad cultural criticisms of “Diary of a Madman” 狂人日記 to the dagger-like keenness of his later zawen 杂文 essays. Accepting Ahmad’s observation as true also directs us to move away from questions of group identity: third-world, first-world, Chinese, transnational, Marxist and Freudian are labels that do not adhere in trustworthy fashion to the individual, and they help us read sensitively only when we encounter the most committed, central members of an identity group. Lu Xun’s hybrid, boundary-crossing, constantly changing corpus requires other methodologies.

We are not limited, as scholars or as readers, to one or the other category of interpretation — we are in fact called to exceed these categories of interpretation. In his article “Lu Xun, Jameson, and Multiple Polysemy,” Gu Ming Dong advises that we read Lu Xun’s work not through the lens of restrictive allegorical symbol, but instead as a collection of multivalent allegorical signs, “public and private, political and libidinal, historical and immediate.” In this way, he encourages us to take up Jameson’s challenge to interpret Lu Xun’s work through the “multiple polysemy of the dream,” in which literary texts are representative, but in diverse and unbounded ways rather than in a set of one-to-one symbolic relationships. Gu’s supposition is an appropriate way to read much Chinese literature: following Kristeva and other theorists, he encourages the search for an open-ended, multi-directional set of signifier-signified relationships. This would allow psychological interpretations, as well as many other types of interpretations, and all would be mutually possible whether contradictory or not. Much Western criticism encourages the reading of texts under the assumption that the sign is disconnected from, or unpredictably connected to, its signifier. Readings of these kinds engage with signs in and of themselves, often at cross purposes with the intent — assumed to be unknowable — of the author. This assumption, though, is existential and traumatizing rather than simply axiomatic: as Blanchot writes, “The

12 Ibid., 15.
central point of the work is the work as origin, the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching.” In order to bring the infinity of polysemousness into a human scale, and discipline it such that interpretation produces socially usable ideas, we need goals such as Blanchot’s drive towards the origin, towards a relationship to the people who generate signs.

Tasked with reaching the origin of *Wild Grass*, we find that Lu Xun’s own multiple, seemingly unsystematic comments on the book strongly encourage polysemous reading. In his letter to Xiao Jun about the collection’s depressive qualities, the poet insists on his subjective and individual sadness; in the English preface, he insists on the necessity of sociohistorical interpretation. From the English introduction, we learn that at least from his perspective, “Fighter” is undeniably about intellectuals in service to the Beijing warlords, and at least in Lu Xun’s opinion, this information is “necessarily connected” to the feelings displayed in the poem. At play in these contradictory statements is, however, a system: poems of *Yecao* seem to accept, if not demand, two particular and partially separate layers of interpretation. This bifurcation is even visible in Gu’s analysis of the openness of Lu Xun’s work. The list he gives of potential polysemous readings suggests they could be “public and private, political and libidinal, historical and immediate, collective and personal, universal and particular, etc.”

The list is made up of twinned pairs, reflecting the presence of one interpretative tradition reading Lu Xun’s work as public, political, and historical, while another reads them as private, libidinal, and immediate. Gu’s examples are not plucked at random from an infinite range of diverse and disparate valences: the particular division he insinuates persists today, driving contradictory interpretations of Lu Xun’s work, especially of *Wild Grass*. In *Literary Remains*, Eileen Cheng makes a strong case for the intentional persistence of literary Chinese in Lu Xun’s work, including his prose poetry, in the form of a consistent, traumatic recurrence of the loss of literary Chinese at the hands of the New Culture Movement, hands which include Lu Xun’s own. In *Lu Xun’s Revolution*, Gloria Davies takes some of the same poems as direct allegories of Lu Xun’s endless commitment to revolutionary language reform.


16 Gu, “Polysemy,” 437.


sensitivity to Lu Xun’s inner landscape leads her to see the drama of his pain and ambivalence at the passage of literary Chinese out of Chinese life; Davies’ interest in Lu Xun’s historical stature leads her to see his poems as allegorical recapitulations of his overt political positions. These arguments are made with varying persuasiveness and levels of detail, but the compelling question is not which individual reading of the poems is preferable, because they both have merit and we are not forced to choose one over the other. When read together, though, they ask an underlying question: how could poems be constructed so as to generate these two very specific traditions?

I submit that the literary method at work in “Such a Fighter,” and many other poems in Wild Grass, is not the allegory, which Todorov argues must explicitly indicate the need for its second, figurative level. “Such a Fighter” does not indicate, or even indicate the need for, a figurative equivalence to make sense of its expressive exterior. I additionally believe that Jameson is right when he criticizes psychologized readings as an assertion, potentially self-serving, of pathology. Both psychological readings and allegorical readings treat the text of Wild Grass as inert, reflective objects: they reflect psychology, and reflect national politics. And yet when we read polysemously, as Gu Ming Dong advocates, we find not an infinite number of interpretations, but two specific layers of readings. We are guided from one experience to another, from a lyrical, psychologically expressive, heavily tonal poetic surface towards a finite number of partially occluded inner valences, including those mentioned in the English preface. This motion reveals that Wild Grass is not a reflective literary object but a made and making text, a book that acts as an active subject upon its readers. I read its subject role as the result of an intentional formal construction, one that for present purposes I will call a literary hint. The paper that follows will attempt to produce a usable typology of the literary

\[\text{Cheng says that it is “often read as an allegorical working through of Lu Xun’s own existential dilemma,” and cites Sun Yushi; Davies says that it is “now mostly read as an allegory of Lu Xun’s literary mission” and also cites Sun Yushi. In both citations, Sun is saying something substantially different: the formulation he reuses again and again is that Lu Xun is symbolically (象徵性) depicting his search (探求 or 尋找) for a revolutionary path (革命的道路). See Sun, Ynjiu, 23, 30.}\]


20 Some more dynamic and narrative readings of the collection are made from the assertion of some transition between these two traditions: Cheung Chi-yee 張剋怡 discusses Sun Yushi’s description of Wild Grass as an “inward turn,” and then points out not only that much of Lu Xun’s writing is generated from inward turning, but that the turn repeats endlessly in an echo of Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence of the same.” See Cheung Chi-yee, Lu Xun: the Chinese “Gentle” Nietzsche (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 151-7. This endless turning is something like the motion of the literary hint, as described below.

21 My first introduction to this concept was in a book on prose poetry by Huang Yongjian 黃永健, although I’ve
hint, with major concepts identified by italics — but put broadly, a hint is a text that actively transforms reader interpretations. To read the hints of *Wild Grass*, we will have to abandon questions about what *Wild Grass* is or reflects, and instead ask questions about how it acts in and out of its original context. In order to answer those questions, we will read the book as a set of aesthetic and sensual surfaces and as a set of intentional and unintentional actions. As we will see, although psychologized and politicized readings may seem dichotomous, reading the book’s surfaces and its interventions as mutually constitutive layers allows us to see the two different interpretive traditions of *Wild Grass* as arising from the same intentional formal structure. In the logic of this collection, at least, feelings and experiences described in the text are both caused by and are intended to bring about changes in Lu Xun’s world.

**Literary Hinting as Aesthetic Technique**

Lu Xun’s education, personal investment, and persistent interest in classical letters and classical poetry are well documented: although he was an advocate for modern baihua writing, he always also read and composed classical poetry.22 In “The Art of Hiding in Chinese Poetry,” Pauline Yu identifies a classical tradition of poetic hinting that is used to express the intangible and the ineffable as well as the personal, a practice mimetic of those qualities of experience that elude our understanding. She quotes the Qing dynasty critic Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627-1703):

> Where poetry reaches the utmost, its marvelousness lies in an endlessly concealed implication that conveys thoughts with a subtle vastness. It lodges [meaning] between the expressible and the inexpressible; what it points to rests where what can be understood meets what cannot be understood. The words are


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here and the meaning there. 23

This perspective is one which allows us to see the deep pleasures of modern hinting, the way in which the mystery of Wild Grass makes up part of the book’s persistent appeal. Ye’s spatial metaphor emphasizes the way that poetry elicits conceptual travel from the reader, a passage from “here” to “there.” Such a description illuminates the non-political pleasures of poems like Wild Grass’s “Revenge,” which takes a fairly simple moral message and turns it into a complex experience. Ye Xie helps convince us that a hint is more than a code. 24 Rather than giving the blunt political position statement that he does in the English preface’s description of “Revenge” 復仇 — that he is astonished and appalled at the “number of mute observers in society” — Lu Xun applies insinuation to blur the distinction between his expressible disgust at political inertia and the inexpressible experience of becoming aware of one’s own multivalent role as a reader/observer.

“Revenge” opens in a spectacle of blood, violence and sensuality: as the fighters face each other, the poem fantasizes about them embracing, stabbing and bleeding on one another, each tasting the “transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life” (生命的飛揚的極致的歡喜). 25 A crowd gathers, one that is perhaps familiar from similar onlookers in the preface to Call to Arms 呼喚, or the short story “Medicine” 藥. Most readers will know that the crowd, compared to a pile of inchworms or ants carrying salted fish heads, is an object of derision. The fighters face one another, but nothing happens: the crowd atrophies, melts, disperses, even “loses their interest in life” (失了生趣). 26 The fighters respond to this as if they had massacred the crowd, reveling in a murderous “transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life” that reveals their collusion in a kind of psychic attack against the onlookers. The reader of this poem is implicated: they, too, have been waiting for the fighters to murder one another, and they, too have been defeated by the persistence and self-control of the fighters. A conundrum is produced — not referred or alluded to, but experienced by the sensitive reader — in which the drive to experience the ecstasy of life itself produces the canceled, bloodless consumption of spectacle. The mystery of action and observation is simply depicted in stories like “The New Year’s Sacrifice” 祝福 and

24 Here I intend a fairly narrow definition of the word “code” as a group of words that predictably represent other words, phrases or concepts. I do not intend to engage with the critical tradition of redefining code to encompass all of language itself. For a summary of that conversation, see Douwe W. Fokkema, “The Concept of Code.” Poetics Today 6.4 (1985): 649.
25 Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 27; YC, 15.
26 Ibid., 29; YC, 17.
“A Small Incident”一件小事, but as a reader turns the few pages of “Revenge,” they become participants, and access to the inner valence of the hint is both arresting and thrilling. The way in which the ethical world of the poem reaches out to enter and transform the reader lies firmly in the genre of the transportation of beauty or the shock of empathy.

That lived moment of thrill, the inhabitation of the reader by the text that accompanies access to the inner valences of a hint, is like the moment of circumcision in Derrida’s “Shibboleth”: it can happen only once.27 Pauline Yu opens her essay on hiding in classical poetry with a poem by Hayden Carruth, one that asserts the tenselessness and timelessness of Chinese poetry in a broad misreading that Yu punctures with ease. A poem is a sculpture in time: as Yu argues, “it would be difficult to imagine a Chinese poet who could feel without an acute awareness of time.”28 As a part of poetry and a moment of lived experience, a hint is ephemeral. A reader experiences it in time like an event, rather than in the abstract and more easily frozen world of concepts. To read a hint outside of the time of its publication is to perform an act of translation that fundamentally alters it. Students read Wild Grass and are introduced to its many valences in class; Lu Xun seems to have intended for English readers to read his preface, then experience the poems with foreknowledge of their hidden layers;29 scholars read annotated editions with crucial information presented side-by-side with the poem. As we will see below, the extratextual world is intimately related to the practice of the hint, because the reader’s context radically affects how and when that reader takes in information. These experiences are organized in time by authors, sometimes with intent, sometimes without: they are rhythms of the internalization of information. Lu Xun’s composition of the English preface — in which he was much more direct about the withheld elements of Wild Grass than he had been in the past — is testimony to the fact that he believed that these variable, new ways to engage with the hints of Wild Grass could be appealing and meaningful to readers outside the Chinese literary scene of the mid-1920s. His comfort with uninitiated and less predictable readers is understandable: whether or not it matches interpretations made by the core audience of a work, and whether or not it reaches the inner valence that the artist intended, every interpretation can be reached by multiple paths, some spanning years. Those different paths, the varying rhythms of readers’ increasing connection to and understanding of the poem, are shaped by contexts and educations over which the artist has only partial control.

The experience that a hint produces is therefore variable, even though different


28 Yu, “Hidden,” 179, original emphasis.

29 The preface is not traditionally included with English-language versions of Wild Grass, including the version of Yang Xiayi and Gladys Yang.
experiences might provoke readers to intuit similar inner valences. More surprisingly, perhaps, the experience of the hint inside the work can remain even outside its originary context, allowing for hints to be read in ways whose patterns mimic those of the original or intended readership, but which produce new inner valences. To extend the metaphor, the rhythm can persist even when the song changes. American critics after the start of the Cold War sometimes read *Wild Grass* at least in part through the lens of Lu Xun’s trajectory towards (and perhaps past) leftist and Communist politics, and use the collection to ask and answer questions about Lu Xun’s support for violent revolution.\(^{30}\) Through an anti-Communist lens, reading “Revenge” at first encourages readers to view it as a turn towards the bloodthirsty in a collection that has so far contained poems like “Autumn Night” 秋夜 and “My Lost Love” 我的失恋; the romance of the contest in the wilderness and the overwhelming “ecstasy” of bloodletting seem like the excesses of the morally absent zealot. The drama of the turn of the poem that takes place when the characters refuse to fight, though, is equally palpable to those reading outside its original context: Cold War-invested readers may see that Lu Xun plays at satisfying, then declines to fulfill the drive towards the pageantry of Marxist bloodlust that they feared he adopted in the 1920s. This hypothetical reading — placed forty years after the situation of Beijing in 1925, and worlds away from the concerns of the readers of *Threads of Conversation* 語線 magazine, in which *Wild Grass* originally appears — still reproduces the drama of upended expectations and an insinuated implication of the reader. It does so because a hint is not simply an echo of some extratextual situation in arbitrarily aestheticized language, but a formal structure inside the text. That formal structure, that rhythmic experience, can be read and experienced by people of many contexts. While the rhythms of poetic meter can be difficult to translate or appreciate outside their linguistic context, rhythms made from logic, information, or narrative can often be reproduced or closely approximated in other places and times, including other languages.

The translatability and transformability of hints is not unique to the poems of *Wild Grass*. Later readers have engaged with and elicited pleasure from hermeneutically indeterminate poems ever since the *Classic of Odes* 詩經. One reason that fundamentally ephemeral poems — those written in, of and for their contexts, and whose relationship to those contexts is not made clear by the text — survive in the tradition is because a hint is first a surface and surfaces travel. The year of the composition of *Wild Grass* also saw a resumption of the publication of Lu Xun’s classical poetry. After thirteen years without recording any

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\(^{30}\) This is one of the issues treated, for example, in Hsia Tsi An 夏濟安, *Gate of Darkness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968). My hypothetical American reader in this case, however, is not Hsia, whose analysis is more subtle and thorough than the above: I am more interested in examining the prospect for new readings than I am in criticizing the literary analysis of the 1960s.
classical verse, in 1925 Lu Xun published a piece called “Redressing Grievances on Behalf of the Beanstalks” 曹植其仲於, directed against the president of the Beijing Women’s Normal College 北京女子師範大學. As Jon Eugene von Kowallis explains, the poem is a deformation of an ancient poem by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), who was purportedly forced to compose a verse in seven steps or be beheaded by his brother Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226). Cao Zhi’s poem likens the two brothers to beans and beanstalks, asking rhetorically why they must struggle against one another; Lu Xun’s poem paints the beans as self-satisfied guests at an academic banquet who have sacrificed the stalks/students in order to advance their careers. One partial reason the Cao Zhi poem is still read in the present day is the conceptual effect of the concrete experience of shucking beans from their stalks, and then using the stalks to cook the beans. The surface valence of that image, in which one thing is divided into two, and then one part is used to burn the other, has a generative power even before it is referred to some other context, one which Lu Xun inherits and adapts. The same is true for the sonic surfaces of the poems. Even without semantic content, the euphony of five-character lines in rhymed couplets produces the satisfaction of a pattern fulfilled. As aesthetic tools, these surface qualities can be used for innumerable purposes, but regardless of the nature of their use they never become fully transparent. They remain powerful experiences in their own right.

The intensity of the sonic surface of “Revenge” is also palpable. The poem is structured around a loose refrain, which begins by listing things that happen “in order to enjoy the intoxicating ecstasy of life” (以得生命的沉醉的大歡喜) and then describes a killer “obtaining the flying, ultimate ecstasy of life” (得到生命的飛揚的極致的大歡喜) and the victim “immersed in the flying, ultimate ecstasy of life” (沉浸於生命的飛揚的極致的大歡喜中). The refrain is a heavy one, with a triplicate rhythm (shengmingde chenhande dahuanxi) common in modern Chinese, and heavily extensible: in each iteration, the sentence gains another three-character section, and the rhythm gains additional force and speed, finally even encompassing the sentence’s verb with chenjinyu shengmingde feiyangde jizhiding dahuanxi. This extended rhythm is metonymic for the poem’s investment into the world of sensual human pleasure, the blood and spray of the early paragraphs. The text of the poem itself seems gravitationally attracted to both the concept of transcendental pleasure and to the

31 Jon Eugene von Kowallis, Lyrical Lu Xun, 121-5. It is instructive to point out Kowallis’ method in this monograph: he introduces the temporal, publication, social and political context of each poem, then reprints and translates the poem, and his annotations follow. This rhythm differs from, but attempts to mimic the way that the poems’ original readers would have encountered them, since they would have been familiar with their own historical context, received the text of the poem, and then examined it carefully.

32 Slightly adapted from Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 27; YC, 15-7. Yang and Yang’s translation is more attractive and readable: I have translated in a stiffer way so as to discuss a wider selection of the poem’s images, specifically with regards to flight.
sensual experience of it, accessed by its own description in rhythmic language. By the end of the poem, the roles of killer and victim change, producing an ironic, defamiliarizing twist: the two combatants “massacre” their audience by failing to kill, but instead of “obtaining”得到 transcendence as victors do, they “sink into” it as victims do. That moment of twisting is accompanied, however, by the reappearance of the refrain after a seven-paragraph absence, and the effect of that reappearance is deeply satisfying, a sonic and organizational snapping-shut of the sonic proposition produced by the piece’s first few paragraphs. The poem simultaneously insinuates that its readers are victimized by their desire for pleasure and demonstrates such by producing the pleasure of poetry. The way in which the poem’s sonic surface can be experienced, even enjoyed, without being interpreted is strong testimony to the independent life of the surface valence of the literary hint, and gives us insight into the reasons why *Wild Grass* has been studied and treasured by so many politically and temporally disparate readers. The tendency of the aesthetic surface to remain separate from a poem’s inner valences also underlines the challenge Lu Xun faced as he attempted to produce aesthetic surfaces that provoked specific moral actions.

**Literary Hinting as Social Action**

Pauline Yu’s essay on hiding in classical Chinese poetry is not limited to a discussion of the external layers of the literary hint. It also discusses some reasons why classical Chinese poets engaged in hiding. She glosses the work of the Six Dynasties 六朝 critic Liu Xie 劉勰 by saying that “while the *bi* 比 or comparison makes itself manifest, the *xing* 興 (stimulus, affective or evocative image) is recondite or hidden. Lodging political critique in an image is in his view a primary function of the *xing*...”33 Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass*, as we will see, is also a site of incisive political critique, but in the case of its poems, it is often the affective, evocative image — the *xing* — that occupies the surface of the poem. The *bi* of classical poetry tended to be a comparison between two images paired across a couplet, like the greening of the spring during the end of the year in the Chinese calendar and the whitening of an old man’s hair.34 Many of the comparisons in *Wild Grass*, by contrast, are not present inside the text but refer out of it, pointing to events in Lu Xun’s political life, conflicts which were coming to a head in the bloody spring of 1925. That blood — clotted, spilled into the earth, mourned over —

33 Yu, “Hiding,” 184. The extent to which contemporary readers can read and appreciate the poetry of this era without precise reference to its original political content reinforces the argument of the previous section: the external layer of a hint can be an independent, meaningful aesthetic experience.

34 From a couplet of Wang Wei 王維, see Yu, “Hiding,” 182.
appears again and again in Wild Grass in poems like “Amid Pale Bloodstains” 淡淡的血痕中 but in order to understand its source, its hidden import, and its role in the poems, we should use hermeneutic tools that would have been more relevant to the politics and letters of Lu Xun’s contemporary context, and not his past.

In his discussion of Russian “Aesopian language,” Lev Losev argues that writers in that tradition composed literary works made up of “screens,” which hide valences in a literary text from some of its readers, and “markers,” which indicate the presence of, or directly reveal valences in a text to other readers. In his opinion, the system was produced by and was a function of art’s interaction with state censorship, a way for writers to be legible to their readers, but not their censors. Adapting these structures to operate in and out of periods of formal state censorship, I also believe that literary hinting is the direct or indirect product of an extratextual situation in which there is something inadvisable to say. Although the censorship regime in the Chinese case was different from that of Russia before and after the revolution, Lu Xun makes it clear in the English preface that Beijing warlords of the 1920s threatened writers and censored literary production, requiring him to write in a way that was “sometimes quite vague and obscure.” The period of the composition of Wild Grass was the one in which Lu Xun came up against the hard, dangerous limits of literary expression in warlord Beijing, a swift procession from teacher to celebrity to anti-government celebrity that reputedly saw his name placed on a list of assassination candidates. Unlike the situation in pre- or post-Soviet Russia, where censorship was a pre-publication enterprise, censorship in Lu Xun’s Beijing often took place in the form of retributive violence, and the fluidity of Beijing’s political situation made it extremely difficult to estimate the limits of safe self-expression. Pre-publication censorship in the Soviet tradition often contained collaborative processes in which censors informed artists about what topics and themes are acceptable; post-publication punishment encourages self-censorship. The techniques Losev describes still operate, but their use is more chaotic and less systematic than the Russian context from which he refined them.

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35 Lev Losev, On the Benefice of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1984), 51. Lu Xun would likely have been familiar with the tradition of Aesopian language, which had been a part of the Russian tradition for decades, even before the Soviets. In 1934, Lu Xun would translate a story by M. Y. Saltykov-Shchedrin, the author who first popularized the term in the 1860s. See Douwe W. Fokkema, “Lu Xun: The Impact of Russian Literature,” in Merle Goldman, ed., Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 91 and Losev, Censorship, 1.

36 Wang, Sanwensi de Shijie, 99.

One can see, as Lu Xun narrativizes the publication of the poems of *Wild Grass* in the English preface, how he moves increasingly closer to danger with each piece, until he finally moves over the invisible line and feels too unsafe to remain in Beijing. Such an experience would never happen in Moscow: the objectionable material would never have been published in the first place.

In *Wild Grass*, however, there are also gentler acts of self-censorship. Lu Xun’s preface describes “The Blighted Leaf” 落葉 as being “written for those who wanted to protect me out of affection for me,” and Sun Yushi 孫玉石 cites a first-hand account from Sun Fuyuan 孫伏園 (1894-1966) in which Lu Xun claims a similar origin for the piece. Even in person, though, Lu Xun seemed reluctant to name names, speaking vaguely of “the noble Xu” 許公. Sun Fuyuan believes this is probably Xu Guangping 許廣平 (1898-1968), whose intimate relationship with Lu Xun was also beginning in the mid-1920s and who would soon follow him to Guangzhou. At the outset, Lu Xun was reluctant to air his relationship with Xu, who was his student at the Beijing Women’s Normal College; one wonders if he was not also reluctant to remonstrate openly with a lover in such a public way. It is not necessary, however, and is in any event not possible, to identify what particular limit on expression drove each poem: whether or not its stricture is identifiable, the practice of hinting indicates the presence of a silence, and must be read in relationship to that silence, whether it be anti-government rhetoric or the influence of one’s younger, unmarried romantic attachment.

Even though the particular shapes of its strictures differ from those of nineteenth and twentieth century Russian literature, poetic hinting in *Wild Grass* can also be read by identifying markers and screens. We know from the English preface that the poem “Amid Pale Bloodstains” was written “after Duan Qirui’s 段祺瑞 government attacked unarmed civilians.” The incident to which he refers is the massacre that took place in Beijing on March 18, 1925, when forty-seven students protesting Duan Qirui’s weakness in the face of Japanese imperialism were shot and killed by Duan’s soldiers. Among the dead was one of Lu Xun’s students at the Beijing Women’s Normal College, Liu Hezhen 劉和珍 (1904-1926). Eva Shan Chou points out the way in which this incident, and the writings that came after, brought violence directly into Lu Xun’s life, consolidated his stature, and provoked his departure from Beijing on security grounds: it was a deeply meaningful event to him both personally and politically. The presence and relevance of the March 18th Massacre is marked

38 Sun, *yanjiu*, 75-6.
39 See David Pollard, *The True Story of Lu Xun* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002), 100, where he describes Lu Xun as “very protective of his reputation and respectability,” to the extent that he “took care that they should not be seen to be cohabiting.”
40 Chou, *Queues*, 26, 38.
in the poem by its date, April 8, 1926, just three weeks later; what might read to us today as metaphorically fading bloodstains were physical realities of the time. Counterintuitively, however, the insinuational and abstracted language of “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” dedicated ominously to “some who are dead, some live, and some yet unborn,” (一切已死，方生，将生和未生)[41] is not motivated primarily by the desire to evade state reprisal for publishing anti-clique art. The poem shares its occasion, a substantial amount of its language, and its tone with Lu Xun’s essay “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen” 纪念陆和珍君 a direct excoriation of Liu’s murderers.[42] “Liu Hezhen” reaches its climax by saying “Those who drag on an ignoble existence will catch a vague glimpse of hope amid the pale bloodstains, while true fighters will advance with greater resolution.” (苟活者在淡红的血色中，会依稀看见微茫的希望：真的猛士，将更奋然而前行。)[43] Functionally, there was no line crossed by “Amid Pale Bloodstains” that was not already crossed by “Liu Hezhen”: the more explicit essay was published a week before the more indirect poem, both appeared in the magazine Threads of Conversation, and both were collected by the same Beijing press in 1927.[44] The poem hints — as fascinated as it is with the March 18 massacre, it withholds the naming of that massacre, screens it from direct view — but unlike Soviet and pre-Soviet era Russian literature, the screen in this particular case likely did not affect the poem’s suitability for publication. Instead, the broad and cosmological language of the poem expands the size of the incident, recasting Liu Hezhen’s blood as all human blood, and the young revolutionaries as transcendental fighters with the power to change the nature of creation. It would have been an easy task to recognize the story of March 18 in this poem, considering the date of publication and the recent echo of Lu Xun’s more direct essay: performing that recognition, unlocking the hint, would have been to see the participants of the demonstration as an exalted, highly romantic harbinger of an unstoppable transformation. This performs a political act of persuasion that Lu Xun desired very much, and prevents the students from being read as a ragged band of idealists overwhelmed by a superior force. Alternatively, a reader could connect the poem’s grandeur to some element of their own fight or struggle, writing themselves into the vast dimensions of the power of the fighter: as we will see, this audience identification with the fighter is a key goal of

41 Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 139; YC, 88.
43 Ibid., 272.
44 “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen” was first published in Yu Si 74 (12 April 1926): 1-2, and collected in Huagai ji 荒 cải 集 [Unlucky Star] (Beijing: Beixin shuju 北新書局, 1927). “Amid Pale Bloodstains” first appeared in Yu Si 75 (19 April 1926): 3, and was collected in Yecao 野草 [Wild Grass] (Beijing: Beixin shuju, 1927). None of this is to say that these publications were easy or safe: after two investigations in 1931 and 1933, the publisher was forced to move operations to Shanghai, much like Lu Xun himself.
*Wild Grass.* Neither of these acts undertaken by “Amid Pale Bloodstains” is exclusively about avoiding state publication restrictions in order to transmit information: the hint instead uses the occasion of censorship in order to produce other conceptual and political interpolations and transformations. Losev’s work describes a hermeneutics that is generated by systems of suppressed expression: once those hermeneutics are shared by writers and readers, they can be used for many purposes.

When reading “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” warlord restrictions on publication, the March 18th massacre, Lu Xun’s role as Liu Hezhen’s teacher and supporter, and his sense of the failure of the revolution are all extratextual, yet by design they are crucial elements in the poem’s text. This is because literary hints attempt to structure extratextuality. Losev argues that the nature of censorship is to treat a literary text as non-literary, and it seems clear that literary hinting engages in the opposite motion, pushing the logics of the text outward to encompass extratextual experiences. Lu Xun’s early fiction, especially “Diary of a Madman,” was not immediately intelligible to readers: Chou writes that its first readers “had a sense that something was waiting to be understood.” The process of Lu Xun’s career was, in part, a process of educating readers about how to read Lu Xun’s art. This process took place in and out of literary texts: the wealth of explanatory or commentarial publication over the course of Lu Xun’s career was substantial, and to this we must add the unrecorded but undoubtedly meaningful impact of his teaching, as well as his meetings with young writers. “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” along with many other poems in the collection, insists on reference to extratextual networks, and if a reader who encounters the poem doesn’t already know about the events of March 18, the poem’s mysteriousness may very well motivate them to go find out. “Bloodstains” identifies a dystopian human cycle of suffering, self-identification as victim, silence and more suffering, and over this it superimposes the arrival of a fighter who will “resuscitate or else destroy mankind,” (使人類蘇生，或者使人類滅盡) breaking its endless circuit of pain. The fighter whose presence is asserted in the poem is not an overt part of the history of the March 18th massacre: afterwards, there were no open battles in the street, no heroes raising spears against the Duan government. It is instead an interpretation of the aftermath, an announcement that witnesses (including Lu himself, perhaps) and participants (including his readers, as Liu Hezhen had been) would redouble their efforts. The presence of the fighter is prescriptive: it is an attempt to produce, rather than simply hint at, a reality, and the poem’s abstraction and remove allows description and prescription to fit seamlessly together.

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45 Losev, *Censorship*, 4-6.
46 Chou, *Queues*, 22.
47 *YC*, 89.
This observation is especially telling when reading “The Blighted Leaf,” which in its personal valence encourages Xu Guangping and others who knew Lu Xun to treat him not as a person, a lover, or a teacher, but as an image and an emblem, like the leaf. While his friends’ implicit preference is to silence or mute his literary work in order to protect the person of Lu Xun, the poem describes the blighted leaf as irredeemably doomed. That doom, and the classic poetic trope of the momentariness of beauty, is then exported out of the poem into the life of Lu Xun in the form of an implicit instruction that he not be protected or made to avoid active engagement in arts and politics. Self-conscious of his public role, he desires to put the extratextual, writerly body in jeopardy in order to promote his own utility as an agent for political change, and the poem attempts to bring that about in his own community. In a later essay, Xu Guangping writes that the poem’s interior message had originally been lost on her, so Lu Xun told her directly, admitting that the pressing of the leaf in the book described “her own situation.” (就是自況的) The odd nexus that “The Blighted Leaf” represents between high art, the reification of ideals, and interpersonal badgering is a neat typification of the literary hint: *hints are locations for attempts to manipulate action*. Much of the time, the action a hint attempts to provoke is one or another interpretation of the text, but *Wild Grass* pushes even further, asking the reader to conceptually join either the band of new, unyielding fighters, or the mass of inert, selfish victims. “Bloodstains” describes these victims in the following way: “In apprehensive silence they await the coming of new pain and sorrow, new suffering which appalls them, which they none the less thirst to meet.” (叐息著靜待新的悲苦的到來。新的，這就使他們懼懼，而又渴慾相處。) Many poems in *Wild Grass*, like “Such a Fighter,” “The Wise Man, the Fool and the Slave,” or “The Dog’s Retort” make a similar distinction between a desirable character or role and various types of morally objectionable or spiritually weak people. The descriptions of objectionable people can be seen as allegories with realist tendencies — descriptions of people who actually exist — but they are also pointed tropes that attempt to encourage and reward revolutionary action, as well as rationalizations about the use of revolution against the inert center. “Manipulate,” in this context, is a word that I use advisedly: Losev quotes Alexander Herzen saying that “to speak in such a way that the thought is plain yet remains to be put into words by the reader himself is the best persuasion.” The motions of curiosity — who is being memorialized? Who is the blighted leaf? — end in discoveries, the power of which produces an interpretation. If the hint is successful, the


50 Losev, *Censorship*, 11.
interpretation is then applied to objects in the real world, bringing the textual world into the world of the reader.

To say that “hints are locations for attempts to manipulate action,” however, does not demand that it always be the author of a text who manipulates a reader. The insinuations of hints can, with equal ease, be used to transform interpretations of the actions of authors. In this sense, “manipulate” means something less like “influence” and something more like “adapt.” The opening to participation that a hint represents can be used in all manner of readerly seizure of writerly agency. We can see this, perhaps, in Lu Xun’s strong antipathy towards and anxiety about interpretations that cheapen or otherwise transform authorial intent. Eileen Cheng describes his frustration at perceived Chinese misreadings of the role and meaning of Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House: what Lu Xun read as a play depicting the necessity of female emancipation was instead seen, he feared, as a kind of consolatory romance, a traditional entertainment in new clothes.\(^{31}\) She raises the possibility that Lu Xun’s eventual “curtailing of his experiments in fiction writing...may have arisen in part from alarm over the ‘conciliatory’ and ‘harmonious’ misreadings generated by the ambiguity that lay at the heart of his creative writing.”\(^{32}\) Whether it was misreading specifically that compelled Lu Xun to change his artistic practice, or some perceived ambivalence in the heart of the genre of realist fiction itself,\(^{33}\) Cheng’s analysis reveals a crucial aspect of indirect speech. From the author’s perspective, that is to say from the perspective of a person who has an interest in provoking particular kinds of interpretive and other action, a hint is a risk. Just as a hint reaches out into the extratextual, just as it suppresses its own qualities through the use of screens, so does it open itself for intervention from the extratextual and invite the supply of additional qualities to replace those that are screened. After the depredations of the Cultural Revolution, readers both Chinese and elsewhere may very well see something terrifying in “Amid Pale Bloodstains”: the singularity of the fighter, his transcendental power, and his willingness to “destroy mankind”\(^{34}\) have gained chilling potential valences over the course of the twentieth century, and because “Bloodstains” screens its particular political context out of the poem, its rhetoric and its tone is available to

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 138.

\(^{33}\) I am here thinking of Marston Anderson’s slightly divergent analysis in The Limits of Realism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 25 and 91, in which it is not any specific set of misinterpretations that calls the undertaking of fiction into question, but the nature of realism itself. In relation to Anderson’s work, it is worth asking if the surreal and unreal qualities of Wild Grass represent an attempt to improve upon realism, an experimental step in Lu Xun’s attempt to engineer literary forms to pursue his moral agenda. For much more careful thinking in Anderson’s tradition, see Roy Chan’s article in this volume.

\(^{34}\) Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 141; YC, 88.
apply to a number of situations.

The openness of the hint — which the recipient can interpret multiply — may have dismayed Lu Xun in a local political context, but it has not been detrimental to the lasting power of his art. One of the great strengths of *Wild Grass* as a collection is its resolute openness, and this has allowed generations of readers of different creeds and methods to make contact with the collection. Today, *Wild Grass* is still widely read, even as some of his more easily interpretable essays, like “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen” have seen their circulation decrease. One complication of this intergenerational transmission has been the eager interpretation and reinterpretation of uninterpretable noise in his poems. Noise is a crucial element in Losev’s analysis of Aesopian literature in Russia: he envisions an ideal equation in which authors produce material which appears to be noise to censors, but is interpretable as a signal to the right readers. Practically, he admits, ideal situations in which a text is made up exclusively of censor-friendly material and encoded noise are “encountered rarely”:

56  it is simply too technically difficult to produce a text in which the surface valence does not require or generate its own, non-hinting elements. In many situations, noise is therefore either an uninterpretable/as-yet uninterpreted message, or is actual noise, with no inner valence. For example, “The Blighted Leaf” opens with the speaker reading the poems of Sa Dula 蕭都刺 (1272?-1355?), a poet and painter of the Yuan dynasty 元朝. The potential interactions between the speaker, Lu Xun, and Sa Dula are many — at one point, the speaker presses the blighted leaf, which we know extratextually to refer to Lu Xun himself; in between the pages of Sa’s poems. This would seem to be a prime location for a marker, a way to guide readers out into intertextual space, with the hopes that they will return with a particular interpretation of the poem. Sun Fuyuan, though, recalls that Lu Xun dismissed the import of Sa Dula’s work: “All those things like the *Yan Gate Collection* are beside the point.” (《雁門集》等等都是無關宏旨的。) Reading Sa’s collection, which is a mixture of landscape, populist and political poetry, lightly reinforces Sun Fuyuan’s account — if the collection was in fact intended to serve as marker, what it marks is not clear. Knowing that uninterpretable noise is an unavoidable quality of the literary hint encourages us to see it not as authors, but as readers:


56  Losev, *Censorship*, 45.

57  Ibid., 46.

58  Sun, *Yanjiu*, 78.
not as a failure of the hint, but as a quality of the hint, an indeterminate and undirected space open to any potential interpretation, including no interpretation at all.\textsuperscript{59} Were the prospect of noise impossible, readers (and censors) would assume that all uninterpretable language was a failure of communication; were noise decreased to near-nil or somehow set apart from the signal of a poem, the struggle of the reader to come to terms with a poem’s inner valences would be simplified, foreshortened, disembodied. Were signal easily distinguishable from noise, we would only need a single reader per text, and texts would be definitively and finally explicated inside a single generation.

**How Hints Structure Wild Grass**

Placed side by side, the overlap between the concepts of the previous two sections demonstrates that describing hint praxis in aesthetic terms is inextricable from the analysis of hinting as a manipulation of action. The aesthetic pleasure of entering and discovering one’s own participation in a poem like “Revenge” is nearly identical to the manner in which political poetry might persuade by manipulating a reader towards activist interpretations. Without both aesthetic and activist elements, a hint becomes nothing more than a code, a meaningless pattern or a cyphered set of instructions. It is the interrelation between the two elements of the hint that produces its unique qualities, its ephemerality (its propensity to gain and lose inner valences), as well as the unpredictability of the interpretation of its noise. The life of that noise, and the strange persistence of literary hints outside their originary context, comes in part from the hint’s fundamental nature as a literary surface, one which always possesses a potential for independence from its conceptual content, but it also comes from the uncanny persistence of markers, the way in which we feel the need to interpret and unlock literary works, even those from long ago. We know from Liu Xie that hinting in highly aesthetizied classical Chinese poetry could have a sharply political use; on the other hand, Losev quotes Anton Chekhov’s praise of an Aesopian story by Shchedrin, in which his aesthetic pleasure at the piece’s daring is palpable: “A charming piece. You’ll be delighted and throw your hands up in amazement...”\textsuperscript{60} The fact that Chekhov experiences delight at the political boldness of the story

\textsuperscript{59} Of course, it goes without saying that one generation’s poetic noise is an important part of the interpretive story of later generations. Tantalizingly, the *Yan Gate Collection* was the last book Mao Zedong ever checked out of the National Library, and he read it right before the composition of some of his final *ci* poems. See Xu Jingsheng 許京生, “Mao Zedong yu Guotu Yanmen Ji” 毛澤東與國圖《雁門集》[“Mao Zedong and the National Library’s *Yan Gate Collection*”], *Guangming ribao* 光明日報 [*Guangming Daily*] (31 July 2012) accessed at http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-07/31/c_123498613.htm.

\textsuperscript{60} Losev, *Censorship*, 223.
makes his pleasure no less aesthetic in nature. The real questions raised by differences between hints as read from aesthetic and political perspectives is indistinguishable from the challenge of the hints themselves: what did the author care about? What was the author trying to do for — or to — his or her audience? What in the poem is screened, and what is marked? What is signal, and what is noise?

These questions return the agency to Lu Xun that Jameson denied him by typifying him as a “third-world writer”; they push us past the easy answers of allegory; they also remind us that while we are reading the product of a psychological state when we read Wild Grass, we are first reading the made product of a psychological state, one that does not and cannot be read as a direct representation of Lu Xun’s (or anyone’s) feelings. We know from his letters that he felt the book’s “mood is too depressed because I wrote it after encountering many reversals,” (心情太頹唐了，因為那是我碰了許多釘子之後寫出來的) but we will never know that the feelings Lu Xun had after encountering reversals and the depression of the book’s mood are the same feeling; we will never be able to say confidently that he “had a feeling,” only that he expressed a feeling in one or another way. We therefore always must refer to his agency in the particular contexts in which he writes. In the case of the letter above, we might be well served to remember that he closes the discussion with a piece of advice: “I hope you can distance yourself from the influence of this kind of depressive mood.” (我希望你距離這種頹唐心情的影響。) Whatever he may have felt at that time — and the openness of that question should not deter investigation — we know, too, that he was trying to encourage and cheer a young writer. Asking questions provoked by the form and use of the hint helps readers conceptualize Lu Xun not as a psychological object, but as a psychological subject; it helps us see the book itself not as a static allegory, but as a series of interventions, of actions.

The questions provoked by the presence of literary hints produce new interpretations of the goals, ideologies and methods of Wild Grass as a collection. The collection as a whole is difficult to typify or unify in terms of genre, tone, ideology or subject matter: different pieces inhabit a variety of spaces between prose and poetry, reflection and dejection, pacifism and revolution, the personal and the national. The pieces in Wild Grass are organized chronologically, with “Autumn Night” composed in September 1924 and “Awakening” — in April 1926. The “Preface” came after, completed in Guangzhou in April 1927. This

61 Lu Xun, Quanjji, vol. 4, 224.
62 Ibid.
63 For commentary specifically on the formal zeitgeist that made for the unstable genre of Wild Grass, see Nick Admussen, “Trading Metaphors: Chinese Prose Poetry and the Reperiodization of the Twentieth Century.” Modern Chinese Literature and Culture 22.2 (Fall 2010): 99-100 et passim.
64 All from the Yang translation of Lu Xun, Wild Grass.
is not, however, a collection of everything Lu Xun wrote for Threads of Conversation during that period, or even of all the short pieces he wrote. Among many other things, he composed a series of very short observations and self-defenses called “The Roseless Thorn” 無花的蔷薇, some of which might have fit into Wild Grass.\(^6\) We know, therefore, that the pieces make up part of some intentional structure, albeit one that Lu Xun would later call “scattered and disorganized.” (佈不成陣了)\(^6\) Attention to the hinted valence in each poem gives a possible unifying structure to the collection, one that echoes elements from Sun Yushi’s interpretations: the poems we have examined so far, namely “Such a Fighter,” “Revenge,” “The Blighted Leaf” and “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” each engage in typification of the morally selfless and heroic and the immorally selfish and inert, and these typifications map onto political action in Beijing between 1924-1926.\(^6\) The fighter of “Such a Fighter” raises his spear against all those who rely on their titles — “philanthropist, scholar, writer, elder…” (慈善家，學者，文士，長者)\(^6\) — in a poem that Lu Xun glosses as set against “aid given by intellectuals and scholars to the warlords.” (文人學士們幫助軍閥)\(^6\) The fighters of “Revenge” are revealed to be struggling against a crowd of passers-by who are desperate to “feast their eyes on this embrace or slaughter;” (賓賢這擁抱或殺戮)\(^6\) and in this way insinuates that the “mute observers in society” (社會上旁觀者) should be engaged and defeated. In “The Blighted Leaf,” Lu Xun takes up his own role in this typology, insinuationally arguing that he should be allowed to join the ranks of the indefatigable fighters, rather than the pressed-leaf relies. This division is reflected, as well, in the collection’s preface, whose speaker repeatedly claims that the book was written for “those whom I love and those whom I do not love.” (愛者與不愛者)\(^7\) “Amid Pale Bloodstains” contains a particularly detailed description of the fighter, one that is both idealized and aestheticized:

\[A \textit{rebellious fighter has arisen from mankind, who, standing erect, sees through all the deserted ruins and lonely tombs of the past and present.}\]


\(^6\) Lu Xun, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 13., 469.

\(^6\) Compare Sun Yushi’s gloss of the collection as a “對性戰鬥精神的頌歌, an “ode to the spirit of toughness in battle” in Sun, \textit{Yanjiu, 18}. I differ mainly in terms of the word \textit{ode}: I see the collection as an attempt to \textit{produce} the spirit of toughness in battle.

\(^6\) Lu Xun, \textit{Wild Grass}, 125; \textit{YC}, 77-8.


\(^7\) Lu Xun, \textit{Wild Grass}, 29; \textit{YC}, 16.

\(^7\) Ibid., 5; \textit{Lu Xun quanji}, vol. 2, 159.
He remembers all the intense and unending agony; he faces squarely the whole welter of clotted blood; he understands all that is dead and all that is living, as well as all yet unborn. He sees through the creator’s game. And he will arise to resuscitate or else destroy mankind...

(叛逆的猛士出於人間；他屹立著，洞見一切已改和現有的廢墟和荒塚，記得一切深廣和久遠的苦痛，正視一切重疊淤積的淤血，深知一切已死，方生，將生和未生。他看透了造化的把戲；他將要起來使人類蘇生，或者使人類滅盡[⋯⋯])

The unflinching and unstoppable power of the fighter is both an as-yet unfulfilled prediction — especially during a period in which, in Lu Xun’s eyes, the promises of the Xinhai Revolution were being methodically broken — and a promise to readers. The magical power and deep wisdom of the fighter is connected to, perhaps even contingent upon, their dedication to the struggle. This is the persuasive power of the hint, as well as the aesthetic pleasure of entry that the hint offers: in the moment in which the system is interpreted, the individual is called upon to place themselves in the conceptual system it produces.

With the exception of “Revenge,” the above poems, however, all appear at the very end of the collection. Those at the beginning and middle of the collection are mostly quite different — one could imagine a piece as quiet and hazy as “Autumn Night,” or as impressionistic and parable-like as “Dead Fire” appearing in a different book entirely. The “heroes” at the end of “Autumn Night” are insects, recklessly throwing themselves into Lu Xun’s evening lamp. They have the persistence and selflessness of the revolutionaries in the later poems, and the speaker pays “silent homage” to them in the way that the later fighters are celebrated, but the image is distant, highly worked, refined away from the more direct idiom of rebellion and violence. The fire of “Dead Fire” 死火 is recognizable, in the context of the rest of the book, as a kind of fighter — one who insists upon burning out, and brings a strange brand of joy to the speaker in doing so that seems to echo the “midnight laughter” (夜半的笑聲) that the speaker experiences in “Autumn Night.” The fire can be described in the language of “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” as an entity that “faces squarely” (直面) its own death, and plays boldly along the knife edge in its attempt to “resuscitate or destroy” the speaker, freeing him as just as he is crushed to death. Were it read outside the context of the collection, though, the inner valence of “Dead Fire” would seem more inacessible, and the poem might be easier

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72 Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 139; YC, 88.
73 Ibid., 13; YC, 4.
74 Ibid., 87, 11; YC, 50, 3.
75 Ibid., 87; YC, 50.
to read as a mysterious dream than as an intentional, directed literary product. The collection is structured so that abstracted or more distantly figured heroes generally appear before their explicit counterparts in later poems: this is to say that moments of pleasure that can be most fully appreciated without reference to extratextual valences generally come early in the collection, and later pieces are more strident in their insistence on reference to Lu Xun's social and political world. This is a large-scale recapitulation of the hints of individual poems which first feature a mysterious surface, a screen, and then some marker that allows the reader to peer past the screen.

This stridency does not insist on replacing the aesthetic with the political. The final poems of *Wild Grass* are quite beautiful. The moment of peace after the bombing in "The Awakening" is legible as a piece of landscape poetry,\(^6\) as well as being exemplary of a revolutionary resolve not to be dissuaded by danger. Instead, the trajectory of *Wild Grass* reveals to readers that their aesthetic experiences have always been fundamentally political, and provokes them to make overt political decisions as a result of their interpretation of the multiple valences of the collection's literary hints. We see this in the collection's consistent opposition to the concept of the audience in "Revenge," "Revenge (II)" and "Such a Fighter"; the crowds in these poems resemble the numb witnesses to atrocity in the preface to *Call to Arms*, evidence of a cultural illness experienced and spread by "mute observers." Many kinds of reading are similarly questioned, especially classical reading: the speaker falls asleep reading a classical anthology in "A Good Story," the poetry of Sa Dula is used as a physical tool in "The Blighted Leaf," and "After Death" ends with a terrifying dream vision of the dead speaker endlessly reading commentaries on the classics. The reading of contemporary work, on the other hand, is explicitly praised, like the work of Petőfi Sándor in "Hope" or the youth magazines *Small Grass* and *The Sunken Bell* in "The Awakening."

This is the hint's practice of pulling the reader towards the extratextual, of looking not just at the content of a literary work but the process of reading as a moral act, one which can be done ethically or unethically.

The enlistment of the speaker into literature as an active agent is made most explicit in the collection's final piece, "The Awakening." The promise from the preface — that the collection is meant for "those whom I love, and those whom I do not love" — is here tethered to real people, real members of Lu Xun's literary community. The piece quotes an address to the reader from the magazine *The Sunken Bell* and comments, "Yes, the young people's spirits have risen up before me. They have grown rough, or are about to grow rough. But I love these spirits who bleed, but hide their pain. They make me feel as if I am among humanity — that I live with human beings."  

\(^6\) Ibid., 143; YC, 90.
These model actors produce literature: they are not mute onlookers to literary practice, but direct participants, and they struggle on in an increasingly difficult literary environment. It is in “The Awakening” that these particular authors and editors are marked as the object of much of the collection’s praise. *The Sunken Bell*, as the piece explains, grew out of the magazine *Short Grass*, and this excerpt from the 1923 note to the reader in the first issue of *Short Grass* should sound familiar to readers of the preface to *Wild Grass*:

> In this dejected and dispirited world, a desert bordered on yet more desert, all around us and all the way to the horizon there is nothing but wasteland. Who scattered these few tiny seeds, that grew so profusely? They spread out like a thick mat: from the tender green of new sprouts, they will bring water to this dusty life.

> Oh, short grass in the wilderness: we sincerely praise you. You are joyous, the cherished and natural child of our loving mother sun!

(在這苦悶的世界裏，沙漠盡接著沙漠，矚目四望——地平線所見，只是一片荒土罷了。
是誰撒播了幾粒種子，又長得这般鮮茂？地飄般的鋪著：從新萌的嫩綠中，灌溉這枯燥的人生。
荒土裏的淺草阿：我們鄭重地頌揚你，你們是幸福的，是慈愛的自然的嬌兒！)

In addition to its many other uses, *Wild Grass* is a valorization of the effort behind *Short Grass*, an instruction to read *Short Grass* and *The Sunken Bell*, and a tribute to the spirit of their writers and editors. For the reader, situating praise of these literary undertakings right at the end of the collection — once piece after piece has encouraged readers to identify strongly with Lu Xun’s beloved fighters and other heroes — produces a strong, smooth transition out of the text and into the next experience, the next revolutionary publication, the next community of thinkers, and eventually towards the reinvention of the collection’s readers as the authors of the literature of the future. From this perspective, we can see the whole collection structured as a single hint, directed at young readers of Lu Xun’s era: they experience a love for action and a loathing for passivity, and then realize that the actions they have been admiring are organized literary and political actions in which they can themselves engage. To call this process merely political would be to miss its point: rather than a set of ethics or pragmatics, the hint is dominated

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77 Adapted from the Yang translation, Lu Xun, *Wild Grass*, 147; YC, 93.

78 From a reprint in Zhang Xiaocui 張曉萃, “Qiancao She shimo” 淺草社始末 [“The Short Grass Society from Start to Finish”], *Xin wenxue shiliao 新文學史料 [New Historical Materials]* 4 (22 November 1987): 173.

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by hermeneutics and aesthetics. We make sense of it and appreciate it fully by participating. As much as we could say that *Wild Grass* is a radicalization of art, it is equally true that it is an aestheticization of action.

*Wild Grass* produces another extratextual amplification of its readerly inducement to action by announcing, and then instantiating, the death of the artist. The book claims the death of its own wild grass in the preface; the speaker of “Dead Fire” dies in the penultimate paragraph; there is of course “After Death,” in which the speaker dies in the first sentence; and “The Blighted Leaf” is not long for the world, either. Mabel Lee has read the repeated death of the speaker in *Wild Grass* as an overt suicide note, an announcement that Lu Xun had finished writing creatively.\(^79\) Other authors have explained this theme as a psychological reflection of the threats under which Lu Xun labored and the danger of his life in Beijing, as well as a refraction of larger meditations on mortality. These interpretations may all be true; functionally, however, this position also allows Lu Xun to vacate the field in preparation for new generations of short grass and wild grass, to allow new growth that is crude, young, “strikes no deep roots, has no beautiful flowers and leaves...” (根本不深，花葉不美)\(^80\) written by young people who “scorn to use any veneer.” (不肯塗脂抹粉)\(^81\) Lu Xun’s sharp anxiety about producing literature that trains a passive and self-serving audience, rather than an active, outwardly mobilizing community, is implicit in many of his works, including “A Happy Family” 幸福的家庭 and “Regret for the Past” 傷逝 from *Wandering* 彷徨.\(^82\) To stop producing a certain kind of writing is to surrender control, to allow the as-yet “unfathomable shapes” (難以指名的形象)\(^83\) that rise from Lu Xun’s cigarette at the end of “The Awakening” to coalesce into something new. It is to give up the polish that comes with long practice and facility, hopefully to be replaced with something rougher and sharper — the literature of the fighter, even perhaps the “subterranean fire” (地火) that the preface claims will burn everything before it. In this sense, the book is ephemeral as all hints are ephemeral, and it is this that unlocks the English preface’s claim that “this kind of writing is already unnecessary” (已不許這樣的文): even though its aesthetic and other surfaces persist and can be enjoyed, the book’s necessity, the undertaking of its hint, was to provoke the next generation of intellectuals and writers to take action, and by the time

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\(^{80}\) Lu Xun, *Wild Grass*, 3; *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 2, 159.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 143; YC, 91.


\(^{83}\) Lu Xun, *Wild Grass*, 149; YC, 93.
of the publication of the preface to the English translation in 1932, the time for that work had already passed.

**Afterword: Literary Hints and Chinese Contemporaneity**

The preceding whole-book hint structure of *Wild Grass* does not, of course, “explain” the text. Although it allows us to recognize the superlative motivation and persistence of “The Passer-by” 过客, the lampooning of thoughtlessly literary consumption in “My Lost Love,” and the extreme care taken with the intellectual support of the young in “The Kite,” it leaves interpretational lacunae in the collection’s most unrelenting poems, those like “The Shadow’s Leave-Taking” 影的告别 and “The Beggars” 求丐者. These pieces presage the utter cancellation of “Such a Fighter” without providing any sense of victory, or of the necessary overturning of a broken social and political order — they foreground the impossibility of clean and selfless action without insinuating that the challenge is surmountable. In the idiom of Losev’s description of Aesopian language through theories of information, these poems could be considered noise — or, alternatively, as the thread of potentially parallel or opposing interpretations of the collection, proof of Lu Xun’s endless capability to simultaneously hold two or more ideas, and engage in two or more actions at once. These slippages also fulfill the wish expressed in the preface: the collection, for all our best efforts, persists in eluding our grasp. The production of new readings ensures that parts of the collection are let go, lie fallow, and decay. We know they have the propensity to be meaningful through our failure to make sense of them.

The openness of *Wild Grass* is matched by its continued relevance to contemporary literature and culture. The persistence of this collection is not a natural situation in a literary scene where so much is produced and so much is forgotten, especially considering that Lu Xun once summarized the book by saying that “the days of our age are changing, and this kind of writing is already unnecessary, even including the existence of these kinds of feelings.” A second interpretation of this sentence from the English preface is that after his experience in warlord Beijing, Lu Xun moved to Guangzhou and Shanghai, where literary censorship was comparatively more benign, and that at the time of the composition of the English preface, it looked as if that system might spread all over China. We know, however, that such is not the case: the system of literary control that has evolved over the years is both comprehensive

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and strictly enforced. Our understanding of today’s literature may be further aided by the capability to read responses to contemporary regimes of literary control as more than a series of codes that writers use to circumvent clear rules. Systems of control are occasions for literary hinting, a formal technique of great age, powerful aesthetic potential, and flexibility. Hinting is borne of silence but not strictly coterminous with situations of explicit state censorship, and it can be found in or affect art forms usually considered apolitical. *Wild Grass* contains individual poems that hint, and the collection itself takes the structure, moving the reader between aesthetic surfaces that provoke interpretation and interpreted interiors that provoke action. Generations later, these techniques are still deeply relevant to Chinese literary expression. Like his work in fiction and the *zawen, Wild Grass* shows Lu Xun to be a powerful forerunner and innovator, producing work that transforms classical, foreign and local contexts into a future for literature in Chinese. ※

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