

***Terminus Intractable* and the Literary Subject:
Deconstructing the Endgame in Chinese Avant-
Garde Fiction**

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Any and all mistakes herein are my own, and I shall have to take the blame.

All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Transcriptions of Chinese are in the official *pinyin* system, unless otherwise noted.

Christopher Neil Payne

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Abstract

The following paper will deal with the *actantial* place of memory and history in the works of Ge Fei, a so-called avant-garde writer in China. Analyzing his three major novels published in the nineteen-nineties, as well as an earlier short story, the paper will discuss how Ge Fei renegotiates the status and place of the literary subject as configured through the act of writing, and its close relationship with the medium of memory and history. Contrary to the prevailing opinion, the avant-garde experiment in Ge Fei's works does not intimate the dissipation of the subject, but rather assists in reconfiguring it in an entirely new and dynamic conceptualization. Instead of a figural e/End and vulgarization of literature in the nineties, Ge Fei's experimentation with the acts of writing and reading, as well as his *play* with language, open up new possibilities for the writing of new literatures in contemporary China.

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There is an intrinsic *impossibility* in any linear conceptualization of h/History. Even the terminology itself constantly needs to be textualized as to whether it refers more to a chronological sense of *time*, or whether it has a more theoretical thrust behind it, which in turn inherently destabilizes its very textualization. Indeed, the last decade of the twentieth century flirted with, and perhaps still does, the *idea* of ‘the end of *history*:’ that we have somehow reached an e/Endgame, wherein all previous modes of historical conceptualization are now defunct and inapplicable to our current global/globalizing situation. Whether it is in the fields of politics, sociology, or in cultural/literary productions, the most general consensus reached is that we have “run out of things to say,” that somehow we have reached an e/End: “In Francis Fukuyama’s opinion, the outcome of humanity’s ideological development has already become known, that is: Western liberal democracy has emerged as humanity’s penultimate form (在福山看来，人类意识形态演变的结果已经明了，那就是：西方自由民主的普遍观念作为人类统治的最后形式).”¹ And yet, the problem lies in this formulization of an “e/End,” for how is it possible to have an “e/End” when we have already stated that there is an inherent *impossibility* in a linear conceptualization of history? Indeed, is this e/End a (desiring) movement for an eschatological End: the ultimate realization of a Judeo-Christian apocalypse and the thousand-year kingdom of the New Jerusalem? How does this factor into an Asian context very much different from the West? Can this thrust for the e/End be

¹ Chen Xiaoming, *Shifting Boundaries: Multiculturalism and the Expression of Desire* (Hubei: Hubei Educational Publishing House, 2000 (陈晓明著, *移动的边界: 多元文化与欲望表达* (湖北: 湖北教育出版社, 2000)), 2.

a manifestation of the Freudian *death-instinct/drive*, wherein the very fact of our mortality is what allows us to identify our very *subject* self? Or rather, is the self-destructive move towards even a fictional and unreal e/End the culmination of “the final aim of the destructive instinct ... [which is] to reduce living things to an inorganic state,” if indeed the death instinct conforms to the formula that suggests that “instincts tend toward a return to an earlier state,” wherein Freud argues that living things emerge only after the existence of inanimate objects?² Could it be a functioning of the human psyche and its “desiring” impulse, generating a *thrust* toward the e/End as the realization of an existential desiring being-machine? This would seem to be the formulization intimated in Deleuze and Guattari, and suggest the emergence of mechanization, or the desiring machine of production, which will be an issue that we will return to later. Or is it more profoundly a problem with the very way in which h/History is thought about, conceptualized and *written down*, a problem within human consciousness itself? Yet, if we read from Walter Benjamin’s theoretical and cultural project, history has to be redeemed, in at least some form, in order for humanity to realize all its possible *futures*, or rather, there is a need for reckoning with all the synchronic “now-times,” and a re-incorporation of the past into the present as a means of realizing a diachronic future. If this is the case, then our task is thus: we have to attempt to deconstruct this Endgame in (literary) history, and not just in the manner of

² Freud, Sigmund, 1938, “The Instincts,” from *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, collected in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (Edited by Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 564.

revitalizing Marxian terminology,³ which does not imply a negation of Marxist criticism, but rather the need for new (and possibly Marxist) investigations into existing terminologies *and* new ways of interpretation, that do not necessarily need to rely on past explorative criticism. Rather, there is a need to (re-)interpret and reemploy these formidable critical endeavors within a new paradigmatic language of critique. We need to destabilize the current confining theoretical climate and implications of a totalizing conceptual thrust, without falling into the trap of subtext exploration and subservience to the hyperreal. The e/End might be illusory but our reality is not always-already a simulation and we cannot be *only* engaging in a re-writing of what has already been written down. Jameson's invective, "always historicize," his so-called "transhistorical imperative of all dialectical thought"⁴ ought to be read with a firm image of Damocles' sword hanging precariously over a young lover's head, just as Baudrillard's *simulation* has to be problematized because of the very ironical fact that *it is* itself *written*. Indeed, if humanity is perched upon the edge, the *mise en abime*, the Endgame, with the inclination to turn away (out of terror?), then the theoretical onus of our project becomes all the more imperative. We ought not to rewrite, but rather the necessity lies in *nouveau ecriture*, in new writing. To be more blunt: *we need to jump*.

³ The 1991 conference, "Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective," in California, is one example of an attempt to reinterpret and reutilize a more Marxian position of critique, which, due to the inherent position a "Marxist" critique as being historically situated and based on class divisions, holds within it a possible sense of "containment," which for our purposes would be limiting. .

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

While it is true that this issue is present in most multidisciplinary/global theoretico-critical endeavors, for the purpose of this discussion, we shall concern ourselves more intimately with the manifestation of the endgame in literary history. To narrow our project a little more, we shall be dealing with this endgame and its phenomenal place in twentieth century Chinese literature, most notably its “culminating epoch” (used strictly as a chronological periodization): the Avant-garde of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of course the problematic of literary history has been of great importance to many Western scholars, especially since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and hence it is from this personal cultural framework, from this scholarship and past theoretical exploration, that we will be working as a means to conceptualize a possible paradigmatic *escape point*; or at least a point of transcendence. The objective is to present the opportunity for Chinese literature to be thought about in a vastly different way, to be the subject of prolific critique, as well as to (re)situate it within an entirely new conceptualization of literary history; one that is not consciously bound to a linear progression of “periods.” While this might raise the spectre of “Orientalism,” it is necessary to state that these very same theoretical interests and speculations are at the fore of Chinese literary scholarship, with most critics working within a firm knowledge of Western critical methodology, while infusing that within a larger contextual enterprise of “Chinese Literature.” The works of Chen Xiaoming (陈晓明), Chen Sihe (陈思和), Zhang Xudong (张旭东), Tang Xiaobing, and others are testament to this fact. The ready availability of Western theory in translation

(over 37,000 copies of Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*⁵) further illustrates the emerging interconnectedness of global scholarship, with all the benefits and pitfalls therein. We will address some of these issues concerning an emerging trans-theoretical culture and the problematical uses of Western theory in the Chinese context in a later section wherein we will at least attempt to contextualize the uses of theory, however paradoxical. Nevertheless, the problematic of Orientalism will always remain within my own textual background, which in turn will require a constant questioning of my own formulizations and a need to be aware of the spectre of Orientalism. However, to assist in situating our discussion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the theoretical implications of deconstructing the endgame in Chinese literary history, we must first mention the socio-cultural climate from wherein the conceptualized linearity of history emerged in twentieth century China: The *Wusi yundong* (五四运动), or the May Fourth Movement of 1917-19.

⁵ Chen Xiaoming, *Wenxue de Chaoyue (Literature's Transcendence)* (Beijing: The Chinese Development Publishing House, 1999 (陈晓明, 文学的超越 (北京市: 中国发展出版社, 1999)), 6. I make note of the number of translations of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* for two reasons: the first is more for a factual account of the sheer number translated. Sartre, along with numerous other Western works of philosophy and theory, was vigorously translated into Chinese in the early 1980s, and in essence, these works entered into the canon of Chinese critical thinking. Secondly, throughout the subsequent pages there will be reference to a plentitude of Western thinkers and writers, and while that begs the question of why, the answer is rather simple: these writers, such as Sartre, Beckett, and Hemingway, are widely read and have been incorporated into the literary world of modern Chinese literature. Ge Fei, in his *Selected Prose* (2001), continuously refers to Hemingway, Malraux, Beckett, and other Western writers, not just as so-called *Western* authors but also more as *writers*. What this paper will try and suggest, is that Chinese works are also part of a greater whole, and that the movements and experimentation within Chinese literature should not be read for particular *Chineseness*, but rather as equal participants in worldly fiction; as setting standards much like the existentialist French novels did in the 1960s. And what was particularly French about them? The general cultural malaise evident in Camus was indicative of the times, and not just those in France. In our globalized/globalizing world, the problems tackled in Chinese literature are those very same problems tackled in other *world* literatures. Do they have to be localized and particularized by their cultural origin? This paper attempts to say "no."

Wusi, as it is commonly referred to in China, was a *conscious* effort to re-conceptualize, and to a certain degree, *rewrite*, Chinese history. All realms of cultural production were brought under the scrutiny of re-evaluation and reappraisal by the cultural establishment and intelligentsia; a Gramscian “organic intellectual” emerged to challenge the old traditional hegemony and to (re)write anew the future(s) of China. The thrust towards this re/de-construction of Chinese tradition brought with it the concomitant influx of Western style mimetic or realist literature, which soon became the dogmatic form of most literary production. With the domination of the literary trope of *mimesis* in Chinese literature beginning with *Wusi*, the figuration of an endgame soon became an implicit futures’ e/End, and the dominant discourse of history’s linearity was granted full privilege within the cultural domain. Inherent within this formulation of (Western) mimetic literature in China was the undercurrent of literatures’ utilitarian impulse, brought to the fore most forcefully with the adoption of Socialist Realism in the 1930s and throughout the early years of the People’s Republic of China.

The “endgame” conceptualization that has been prevalent in the 1990s, notably in the works of Chen Xiaoming, argues that the experimentation of the avant-garde has exhausted the possibility of *new* literature, in so far that the experimentation has fragmented and initiated a vulgarization in literature; or rather, literature has been divorced from any sense of purposiveness. The problematic in this conceptualization of an endgame is the very fact that it is itself a *figuration*: it is a language construct. If we were to read language as a creation of the conscious producer, then this necessarily implies an originating “moment,”

and, since inherent in this designation there is a suggestion *of* an emergence, consciousness, language, and things possessing such an originating moment *a priori*, retroactively implies an endgame, a final moment. Reading language in this way allows us to broach the topic of time/temporality, since by association with language, “time,” being figured by language, likewise possesses its own endgame, which is always-already deconstructed. To extend our analogy, history too comes under this rubric of language, as it too experiences its manifestation within language. If language inherently possesses a deconstructive matrix as some critics argue, Paul de Man for one, and we read time/history as being figured by language, then time becomes rhetorical. Temporality is thus a literary trope: the trope of time. From semiological analyses we can now read literary experimentation, which was the intellectual thrust behind the Chinese avant-garde fiction, as an interpolation and (re)discovery of this deconstructing matrix inherent within the literary text. Language’s natural destabilizing hypogram, or infra-text becomes engaged, on the level of creation (of the literary text). What emerges from this experimentation can be read as a destabilizing moment or rupture of the horizon line of literary production, or in other words, an escape point. The weakening of the gnotobiotic world of literary mimesis in turn destabilizes the linearity of literary history, which can also be read as *canonization*, wherein the “traditional barriers between literary and presumably non-literary uses of language [read: experimentation]... liberates the corpus from the secular weight of textual canonization.”⁶ The literary experimentation allows

⁶ Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 9.

for the rupturing of literary tropes, wherein the horizon line of literary production is shown to be inherently unstable, which in turn figures the destabilization of linear conceptualized literary history. This linear conceptualization of history as a trope of time, wherein temporality itself *is the* trope, suggests to us the figural nature of the endgame. Through this rhetorical and literary *adventure*, the endgame looses its authoritative and terrifying power, because we can now read it too as a literary trope, thus implying the activation of its own inherent deconstructive matrix.

The avant-garde writers of China, with their experimentation upon the construct of language, as well as their intentional disorientation of the tri-polar relationship between the writer-text-reader, were attempting to figure an escape point and to present a transcending move beyond the traditional conceptualization of literature and literary history in China. Their drive to liberate literature from what they perceived to be the suffocating entrapment of realist literature can be read as a manifestation of this production-desire to move beyond—to transcend the confining matrix of (historical) representational mimesis.⁷ However, the rejection of realist literature was not an outright objection to realism per se; rather it was more a rejection of the idea that (realist) literature had to be purposive. Hence, many of the avant-garde works do have the trappings and tropes of the realist text, but the situations and narratives are almost always interpolated with absurdities, or macabre violence, or, in the case of Ge Fei's *Bianyuan* 《边缘》 (*The Edge*), a disorienting continuity structure which takes place both on the level

⁷ It should be noted that while realist literature had/has existed throughout the Chinese literary tradition, the realism that these authors were rebelling against was the more Western style realism introduced into China during the May Fourth Movement.

of the infra-narrative as well as on the formal and physical structure of the novel itself. The narrative sequence in *The Edge* is vastly disjointed, whilst the scope of the protagonist's life is the central focus, or logos of the narrative, it is not presented in any semblance of a sequential order. Instead, the reader is subjected to constant disorientation: the protagonist's "life" is *imaged* in a series of nonlinear epochs, or periodic "now-times," spanning the entire twentieth century of China. These "now-times" become mirrored in the novelistic structure: each chapter is a character name or fictional setting, wherein the reader experiences the relationship or encounter between the protagonist and each particular character/place, regardless of temporal sequentiality or narrative logic. The result is a unique reading experience that will be discussed at length in the following section devoted entirely to *The Edge*.

The implications of this experimentation for the act of reading are immense: the reader's position is no longer secure, nor is the text. If the reader is required to resituate him/herself vis-à-vis the text and the implied author, which indeed destabilizes the traditional binary relationship between the realist work and its representative logos, then the text (and by implication the act of writing), in conjunction with the act of reading, becomes de-centered and unstable, and is thus fragmented; it is left as free-floating semi-autonomous nodes of thinking or conceptualization. Our horizon line, or endgame, of literatures' representative ability is no longer secure and the base structure of critical analysis has been alienated from the very texts it wishes to critique.⁸

⁸ This brings to mind an interesting parallel with the early twentieth century author Zhou Zuoren (周作人), who also attempted a similar destabilization of tradition in the hopes of venturing into a

If we now return to our trope of time, and history's figuration within and of language, which is constantly mediated by the unstable and antagonistic tri-polar relationship of author-text-reader, then we have reached a breaching-point. Indeed, if we are able to deconstruct the literary endgame in the Chinese avant-garde fiction, which is presupposed because of languages' inherent deconstructing matrix, it begs the question: if (literary) h/History is nebulous, and not culminatory, hence allowing for the representation of history within the texts of the Chinese avant-garde to be likewise nebulous and malleable, on both narrative and formalistic fronts, then what *kind* of history do we have? Have we succeeded in "redeeming" history within the text, or have we totally fragmented it? Are we left within a realm of free-floating automatons of semi-autonomous monads or moments of thinking wherein history and its representation in literature have become subject to Althusserian *overdetermination*, thus making it an inaccessible

new territory of literary production. Writing in the early twentieth century, Zhou reutilized the traditional binary polarity of what he believed to be the two main trends in Chinese literature: the *Shi yan zhi* (言志) and its polar opposite, the *Wen yi zai dao* (文以载道), each respectively meaning "poetry expressing the heart's wishes," and "literature as a vehicle for the Way." It must be noted however, that Zhou's "attack" upon traditional Chinese literature was more aimed at the tradition of *Wen yan* (文言), and for it to be read as a polemic against the recently introduced Western realism would be more of a misappropriation, since the article in which Zhou illustrates his reformulation of the two traditional concepts was indeed written during this introductory period of Western mimetic fiction. In any case, if we were to employ David E. Pollard's summation of Zhou's reformulation of these concepts, wherein it becomes a binary relationship "between literature simply as an uttering of feeling, free from any direction or control and oblivious to its putative effect, and literature written in the service of a philosophy of life" (Pollard, *A Chinese Look at Literature: the Literary Values of Chou Tso-jen in Relation to the Tradition*, 1), then it becomes possible to read the "uttering of feeling" as the main thrust behind the experimentation of the avant-garde, since experimentation ought to be "free from any direction or control and oblivious to its putative effect," and yet still be essential for the author engaged in the *act of writing*. The reason for associating this "uttering of feeling" with our above mentioned rhetorical and literary *adventure* helps us to contextualize an author's very intimate relationship with his own textual production, which is, nevertheless, under a constant onslaught from a "reader" and the latter's *act of reading* itself.

category of understanding? What is the *actantial*⁹ place of history in the text? Is it possible to read it as Jameson reads the “pilgrims” in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, wherein its literary function has a:

substantive meaning in its own right, which is constitutive for the text. This is ... the kind of situation in which the Althusserian notion of

⁹ The uses of the “*actantial*” designation and all its derivatives, is taken from the works of Algirdas Julius Greimas, as modified by Fredric Jameson. For the former, *actants* are part of the “deep structure underlying both sentences and discourse” and correspond “to subjects and predicates in the sentence and to fictional characters and their actions in narrative discourse or thematic subjects and their elaborations in expository discourse” (Marvin Katilius-Boydston, *Lituanus: Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Fall 1990). Further elaborating on this approach to narrative analysis, Jameson problematizes the fictional character as a site for the *actant*/as the *actant* by stating that “the ultimate blind spot or aporia of such *narrative analysis* is rather to be found in the problem of the character, or in even more basic terms, in its incapacity to make a place for the subject” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 123). While Jameson suggests that Greimas made strides in the deanthropomorphization of narrative analysis by means of designating characters as “structural ‘operators’ of underlying semic transformations” (123), the relationship between the function of the narrative and the *actants* “necessarily works both ways; and if the latter is thereby displaced and made structurally subordinate to the former, the fact remains that, ... the concept of the narrative function is [still] shackled to some ultimately irreducible nucleus of anthropomorphic representation,—call it *actant*, structural role, character-effect, or whatever you like—which then fatally retransforms narrative function into so many acts or deeds of a human figure” (123). The problem for Jameson emerges in the formality and strictness in Greimas’ structure of the *actant* as the informant for the surface structure of the narrative and its *lack* of historical contextualization, and hence its weakness as the place for the subject in and of the narrative. For Jameson, the Marxist goal is the dissipation of the subject and the “emergence of a post-individualistic social world” (125), or rather the decentering of the individual bourgeois subject and the arrival of the collective socialist mass-subject, which however is denied in Greimas’ narrative analysis due to the two-way road between the narrative function and the narrative *actant*: the reanthropomorphization of the subject that Jameson paradoxically identifies within the former critique. Jameson thus turns to the contemporary post-structuralist decentering of the subject, suggesting that the critique’s “descriptive value” is of use when it addresses the status of the subject, “without necessarily endorsing the schizophrenic ideal” (125) which becomes a means of engagement with the individual consciousness as a “lived—and not merely theorized—“effect of structure” (125). This critique of Greimas is not meant to undermine the value of such a formalized approach to narrative analysis, and indeed, Jameson claims that Greimas’ narrative system is productive, when “the narrative text in one way or another *deviates* from its basic schema” (126), and thus breaks the cycle of reduplication of texts by deep narrative *actants* that are always-already the same (126). It is here that we will site our own critique of Ge Fei’s textual *actants* of memory and history and how each text under discussion in the subsequent pages likewise performs an act of *deviation*, which thus allows for productive critique as opposed to simple bookkeeping. While memory and history inform upon the deep-structure or infra-narrative, each work in turn deviates from the former, thus transforming the specific site textual *actants* while never totally disassociating them from the diachrony of texts. They become monadological moments or textual ruptures without dissipating the text. It is in this non-dissipation of the text, or rather the resiliency of the text’s montage totality of interconnected monads that in turn opens up a space for Ge Fei’s renegotiated subject, which will be addressed in the actual critique of the works selected.

“overdetermination” is useful: we cannot argue the importance of this particular evocation of the pilgrims from its necessity in the mechanism of the plot, yet we can propose a secondary line of determination such that, even as narrative pretext, this content imposes itself and becomes unavoidable. Its necessity is, in other words, not to be found on the level of narrative construction, but outside, in the objective logic of the content, in the unavailability of any other “illustration” to fill this particular empty slot [in the narrative structure].¹⁰

Is history just “filling” a particular “empty slot”? In deconstructing our endgame, have we left history weightless? Can a nebulous, malleable history still *be* History? And how does the *act* of *writing* and the *act* of *reading* factor into the equation? What is their ultimate *symbolic* status? These are some of the questions that are tackled in the following sections, wherein the investigation takes on greater materiality: the phenomenality of these themes and questions in the works of Ge Fei.

In the first major section we examine an early work by Ge Fei, *Hese Niaoqun* (*A Flock of Brown Birds*). The *actantial* place of memory throughout the entire short story is pronounced, and indeed the reader is often left stranded, or rather, dragged along by the narrator as he engages in a re-remembering of a romantic encounter, which nevertheless becomes destabilized and continuously re-sited in the *present* of the exegesis. In the second major section, we move into an examination/interrogation of the *actantial* positioning of history and fate in *Diren* (*The Enemy*), and continue with a discussion of the formalistic and conceptual experimentation, or the “floating memory of self” in *Bianyuan* (*The Edge*). In the postscript, I address the possibility of Ge Fei’s (strategic)

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 246.

withdrawal from the experimental terrain and the dissection of self and history, to the more “well made” novel *Yuwang de Qizhi* (*The Banner of Desire*). Underlying these concerns will be the status and the role of history and memory in Ge Fei’s literature, and how they do not precipitate the so-called “e/End” of Chinese literature in the twentieth century, but rather intimate and instigate a transcending movement beyond a conceptual rewriting of history. Utilizing the de Manian *material event* as paradigm, or the so-called “stuff”¹¹ of actual History, we will attempt to illustrate how the May Fourth Movement, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the Era of Reforms are all moments of change; of events inscribed upon history that initiate an irreversible course of transformation, and any and all attempts to saturate this change within the realm of the simulacrum or the hyperreal are simply deceiving moments of rewriting, much like de Man’s suggestion of Schiller’s rewriting of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics.¹² The postscript will attempt to suggest a new reading for Ge Fei’s last major novel, *The Banner of Desire*, and suggest that it too is an experimentation, which continues the renegotiation of the literary subject and history but on a far greater scale. The implication is that the figural endgame is no longer an issue within the spectrum of Chinese literary history and the experimentation of Ge Fei and other so-called avant-gardists did not exhaust the possibilities of literature, but rather opened-up a new terrain for literary development. The following excerpt from Yu Hua’s *The*

¹¹ This “stuff” of actual history will be developed more fully in the subsequent pages, and indeed inform upon the entire paper as a whole. For now, we will just state that de Man’s *material event* is intimately connected to his formulation of language and its own figural endgame which becomes deconstructed through the performative in language thereby making it real history: the irreversible event.

¹² See de Man, Paul, “Kant and Schiller,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 129-162.

Past and the Punishments, illustrates our somewhat ominous and yet poignant reflection on the *actantial* possibility of history within the text, as well as figuring a move beyond our endgame, if somewhat tenuous:

“Actually, we always live in the past. The past is forever. The present and the future are just little tricks the past plays on us... The fact is that you’ve always been deeply immersed in your past. You may feel cut off from the past from time to time, but that’s merely an illusion. A superficial phenomenon. A phenomenon that, at a deeper level, indicates that you’re really that much closer.”

“I still can’t help thinking that there’s some force cutting me off from my past.”¹³

Ge Fei (格非): An Introduction

“回忆就是力量。”

“Memory is *just* power.”[my italics]

Contemporaneity always means copying. Our ancestors wrote prose in long, beautiful sentences, convoluted like curls; although we still learn to do it that way in school, we write in short sentences that cut more quickly to the heart of the matter; and no one in the world can free his thinking from the manner in which his time wears the cloak of language. Thus no man can know to what extent he actually means what he writes and in writing, it is far less that people twist words than it is that words twist people.

(Musil, Robert. “The Paintspreaders.”)

We begin by sitting down with Ge Fei, “the archexperimentalist,” who “is especially fascinated with the marginal moment between the past and the present,”¹⁴ and we plead with him to explicate his texts: What does it mean that

¹³ Yu Hua, *The Past and the Punishments* trans. Andrew F. Jones (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 117.

¹⁴ Wang, Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics & Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 242.

memory is just power? We beseech him to tell us the history of his writing, to tell us history's actantial role in his textual productions, and we wonder how it (how has it) informs(ed) upon the (re-)construction of narrative plot and character? We also wish to ask him about what role, or perhaps, what character, *memory* plays in the construction of the text, of history? And then, just as we complete expounding our readerly disquiet vis-à-vis his texts, the surrounding (ir-)reality fades and flattens, and we are Sun Deng from *Hushao* (from *history*?) staring at the image/part of the image (?), the broken water vessel lies at our feet, another flattened image barely discernible, much like the evanescent "whistling" or *hushao*, that floats unrestrained around and through our (non)bodies (dispersed bodies?), while we attempt to grasp that last *memory* of Ge Fei sitting idly before us. All too late we realize the terror of that text/statement: *memory is just power*.

Robert Musil sits angrily beside us, ruminating on history's ambivalence towards talent. Nevertheless he continues to pen his unfinished masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*, and like that central character, Ulrich, on the eve of ruination for the Austrian Empire, Musil embraces the fatalism eerily present throughout most of his works, with just a hint of Sisyphean determination at the end-dab of the ink pen. His image too flattens and disperses and we, the "sometimes-lonely" reader, are left swirling in Indra's Net, forever connected to the totality, but always-already at the *mise en abyme*, we are staring into the abyss. But, if there is an inherent sense of fatalism in Musil's statement concerning who or what is doing the "twisting," man, or language, then we have not *really* read

the text and it is from there that we must begin; from there that we must gather in our floating selves and attempt to make that terrifying leap.

In the above excerpt from Musil's short story, "The Paintspreader," collected in the volume *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten* (Posthumous Papers of a Living Author), is Musil really suggesting an ontological priority of language in its sense of Being-in-the-world when he writes that "it is far less that people twist words than it is that words twist people," or is there more a sleight-of-hand maneuver of intertextuality? It seems to me that, Musil is not necessarily suggesting a fragmented subject-self adrift in a sea of malleable language referents, still nevertheless entrapped in a net, and always in danger of slipping through, so much as he is suggesting a writers-own *power creation* vis-à-vis that very same malleable language. The telling line is cloaked itself in a lattice of intertextual (mis)persuasions, wherein Musil laments the state of his contemporaries' writing with that of yesteryear (when writers wrote with "long, beautiful sentences," as compared to the "short sentences that cut more to the heart of the matter"), before hitting on the key intertextual referent that disrupts the illusion of any sense of figural reality constructed autonomously by language in the text: "Thus no man can know to what extent he actually means what he writes..." If language were indeed doing the "twisting," then authorial power would be but a subsidiary of language's ontological autonomy, but if meaning is such a free-floating phenomenon, if there can be varied interpretations of textual productions, if there can be numerous agreeable and disagreeable associations between signified (the concept) and signifier (the form of the sign), if indeed the author has no *real*

knowledge of the potential truth value of what he/she writes *with* language, then how can it (language) possess an ontic priority, how can it Be? As Paul de Man observes in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, ontic priority is associated with *natural objects*, wherein “their [the natural object] origin is determined by nothing but their own being,” they have no originating “moment” (they lack, but not in the negative sense of ‘being-without,’ temporal markers). De Man elaborates the argument further by stating that: “The word “*entstehn*,” with its distancing prefix, equates origin with negation and difference. But the natural object, safe in its immediate being, seems to have no beginning and no *end*. Its permanence is carried by the stability of its being, whereas a beginning implies a negation of permanence, the discontinuity of a death in which an entity relinquishes its specificity and leaves it behind, like an empty shell. Entities engendered by *consciousness* originate in this fashion [my italics].”¹⁵ The implication here is that language is a manifestation of a human’s *consciousness*, and since the human becomes aware of his/her “Being” by obtaining, or perceiving consciousness, and

¹⁵ de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 4. *Entstehn*, to “originate,” is discussed in length by de Man in the chapter “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” in the above book. What is of interest for de Man and for us, is the use of that word (and others) in Holderlin’s poetry, wherein a differentiation is established by de Man between an everyday “common” usage of words, where one’s meaning ought not to be ambiguous, but rather clear and succinct, i.e.: words “are used as established signs to confirm that something is recognized as being the same as before,” and with the *word* in poetic language: “words are not used as signs, not even as names, but in order to *name*: “Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu” (Mallarmé) or “erfand er fur die Dinge eigene Namen” (Stefan George): poets know of the act of naming... as implying a return to the source, to the pure motion of experience at its beginning” (3). The problem for de Man and for us is in the word itself, in *entstehn*, to “originate,” which we have already mentioned in the above text, and which contains that element of de Manian *blindness* because, even though we the reader/writer are aware of the paradox involved with the word as natural object, i.e.: the word as ontic, “since origination is inconceivable on the ontological level” (5), we nevertheless fail to *see* it, or rather we “deliberately forget” the paradox and rather only *experience* the beauty (of the line of poetry). And while de Man notes that “it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, [it can never achieve] the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object” (6), and it is here in this instability of *meaning*, the instability between *signifier* and *signified*, that language makes known its figural and *constructed* nature, or rather, its *inherent deconstructive matrix*, and thus the impossibility of an ontic priority.

if that same consciousness implies a “beginning-end” duality, then, by association, language has its ontological priority stripped from it; it too possesses a beginning-end duality, and hence that same duality can be re/de-constructed. If language can be re/de-constructed, if there are free-floating signifiers wherein meaning is always-already dependent on any number of interpretations; wherein a writer can never be assured of what he/she writes, then by no means can language be seen to be purely autonomous. It can neither be said to twist, nor do the twisting, and it is this instability of meaning that Musil seems to be referring to in his own textual (mis-)production.

What the above interrogation of Musil’s text implies is the unstable figural nature, or figurality of language, and the concomitant instability in the figural nature of any textual product, in our case, the literature of Ge Fei. Above we spoke of the *power* of memory and the actantial place of history in Ge Fei’s text, and it is to this that we must now return.

Ge Fei’s *Hese Niaoqun* (*A Flock of Brown Birds*) (I)

In the night, Chess did not leave my residence. Of course things that would likely have happened between a man and a woman in a secluded place late at night did not occur between us. The whole night she was listening quietly to my story, a story about my marriage. I trusted she was smart enough to have guessed that there must be an obstacle deep in my consciousness, something she would rather call *repression*. Did she discover this when we appreciated her painting? Throughout the night she made herself a psychoanalyst listening to my *confessions*, yet this might not have

come exclusively from her sympathy for me, but rather because, I figured, we both believed the motto “*Memory is just power.*”¹⁶

Claire Huot of the Universite de Montreal described *Hese Niaoqun* as a “play with time, people, emotions, objects, all conflated into pawns, or signs, to produce an experimental tour de force.”¹⁷ Zhang Xudong categorizes *A Flock of Brown Birds* as “meta-fiction,” wherein Ge Fei’s short story is a “tireless effort of self-analysis and self-construction [taking] place in what might be called the outer space of social life,” interpolated with “an imaginary struggle to bring time to a standstill.”¹⁸ Yin Guojun in his *The Avant-Garde Experiment: Chinese Avant-Garde Culture in the 80s and 90s* (*Xianfeng Shiyan: Ba-jiu shi niandai de Zhongguo Xianfeng Wenhua*), situates Ge Fei and his short stories in the cultural and theoretical climate of the late 1980s and the conceptual problem facing fictional writing, or rather the oscillation between “what to write?” and “how to write?” Yi states that:

This conceptual problematic [“what to write?” versus “how to write?”] initiates a change in the core of the artistic attitude. From this [development] there emerge two types of narration: one type is reminiscent/borrowed from Alain Robbe Grillet’s style [of the French *nouveau roman*]. Writers such as Yu Hua (余华), Can Xue (残雪), Ge Fei (格非), Zha Xidawa (扎西达娃) are representative of this narrative style; the second type of narrative, noticeable in narratorial behavior [in the text], is borrowed from Jorge Luis Borges among others, [and] involves the narrative tactics of Latin mysticism and also leads to a narrative “trap” in writing: Ma Yuan (马原), Lu Xin (吕新), Pan Jun (潘军), Bei Cun (北村), Ye

¹⁶ Ge Fei, *A Flock of Brown Birds* (excerpts), in Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 173. (with modifications)

¹⁷ Huot, Claire, *China’s New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 18.

¹⁸ Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 173.

Zhaoyan (叶兆言), Sun Ganlu (孙甘露), and others are representative of this narrative type. Both types encounter the [modern] separation between signified and signifier, the language play of *difference*, both exhibited in “scene and technique.”

这是一种本质层面上的美术态度的转化。从此叙述人分化成了两种类型：一种... 是从罗布-格里耶 (Alain Robbe Grillet) 那儿借来的一种方式。如余华，残雪，格非，扎西达娃等人；另一种是明确凸现叙述人的写作行为，它是从博尔赫斯(Jorge Luis Borges) 等那儿来的凸现叙述策略与圈套的写作：如马原，吕新，潘军，北村，叶兆言，孙甘露等。通过能指与所指关系的拆解，通过语言操作的差异关系的凸现，展示一种“情景与技巧”。¹⁹

All of these critics are involved in examining Ge Fei's narrative style, or rather the implementation of a narrative technique of meta-fiction, which provokes an instability in the tri-polar relationship between writer-text-reader. This is a common destabilizing move throughout much of Ge Fei's fiction and we will have time to come back to it when we examine his second long novel *Bianyuan*. For now however, I wish to focus on that last line from our excerpt, “*memory is just power*,” wherein that crucial modifier “*jiushi*,” or “just,” is not translated by Zhang (his translation simply reads: “memory is power”), for whatever reason, but which directly impacts on the entire thrust or onus of the so-called “motto.” If memory is power, but only just, the implication is of the impossibility of any certain or concrete rhetorical meaning associated with a *written* memory, which is after all what we are dealing with. The reason I say “*written* memory” is twofold, wherein the reference is (1) a direct announcement or announcing of the textual concreteness of Ge Fei's fiction, and (2) the construction of memory only ever

¹⁹ Yin Guojun, *The Avant-Garde Experiment: Chinese Avant-Garde Culture in the 80s and 90s* (*Xianfeng Shiyan: Ba-Jiushi Niandai de Zhongguo Xianfeng Wenhua*) (Beijing: Dongfang Publishing House, 1998), 131.

through language, by which we can amplify that to include both written and spoken forms; this is especially important when we consider that the narrator in *A Flock of Brown Birds* is telling the story of his marriage to an interlocutor, instead of it being a reminiscence in one's own mind, i.e.: there is a layering of meta-fictional levels, which nevertheless destabilizes the tri-polar relationship between writer-text-reader. While Zhang suggests that *A Flock of Brown Birds* is a meta-fictional interrogation into the writers' agenda, wherein a "shocking encounter between the world and humanity"²⁰ is indicative of this narrative technique, underlying this characterization is the suggestion of retreat, or withdrawal from the "shock" or perhaps "terror," which is a word constantly recurring throughout Ge Fei's fiction. However, I would suggest that he is not announcing a retreat into always-already re-constructed memories, as much as he is suggesting, if only unassumingly, a writers-*own* authority over the text, even if that authority is constantly under siege by the instability of meaning inherent *in* language. To make it more blunt, if memory is *just* power, i.e.: if memory can only be given form via language, which is, nevertheless, the language implemented *by* the writer, then the writing subject is not necessarily adrift in the sea of free-floating memory, or, at the very least, he/she possesses the ability to ground one's self in the world of Being, if only tentatively.

When Wang Jing and others assert that the artistic thrust of the Avant-garde writers, Ge Fei included, was to deconstruct the literary subject as the logos of history, or to force the decomposition of the human as the Marxian *force* of history, they are *misreading* the textual implications of this *act* of deconstruction.

²⁰ Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 175.

Rather than a desire to create a subject-less literature, the Avant-garde writers, by their very *act* of engagement with the literary subject on the level of the text are not so much deconstructing the literary self, as they are trying to renegotiate the terms of that subjectivity. If literature is a desiring process, a desire to produce, to create, wherein “production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a cycle whose relationship to desire is that of an immanent principle,” the process itself “must not be viewed as a goal or an end in itself, nor must it be confused with an infinite perpetuation of itself. Putting an end to the process or prolonging it indefinitely... is tantamount to ending it abruptly and prematurely.”²¹ The “goal” is always deferred but not in perpetuity. The Avant-garde exploration into the figural aspects of that subject through its language is just that: the subject *as* allegory, or rather the engagement with the subject as *permanent parabasis*: the subject is *not* deconstructed in a negative sense of being dissipated, but in contrast, it is always being engaged on the level of the text; it is always *interrupted*. Why do we say interrupted? Well, if “parabasis is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register,” or “the interruption of the narrative illusion by intrusion,”²² the narrative structure of Ge Fei’s *A Flock of Brown Birds* is precisely constructed around such acts of disjointment and rupture; or intrusion and interruption. The constantly shifting focus and temporal disjuncture initiated by the act of memory and the act of telling (the narrator is after all engaged in an exegetic act with his interlocutor *Qi*), all point to one thing:

²¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 2000), 5.

²² de Man, Paul, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178.

memory is itself the anacoluthon, or the “interruption of the narrative;”²³ the *parabasis*. Why is it a *permanent parabasis*? De Man, reading from Friedrich Schlegel and the latter’s examination into the structure and possibilities of irony as the interruption of narrative argues for:

parabasis not just at one point but at all points, which is how he defines poetry: irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted. Critics who have written about this have pointed out, rightly, that there is a radical contradiction here, because a parabasis can only happen at one specific point, and to say that there would be permanent parabasis is saying something violently paradoxical. But that’s what Schlegel had in mind. You have to imagine the parabasis as being able to take place at all times. At all moments the interruption can happen...²⁴

This interruption of narrative by irony is in itself ironically related to memory: memory is indeed the great ironical function of the mind. Our identities are constructed around and through memory, but our memory always and forever decomposes and reforms in our un/sub-conscious minds, in our language. For if memory is not an interruption, then what is it? Here we return to the (interrupted) narrative of *A Flock of Brown Birds* and the engagement with the literary subject.

The Avant-garde is not attempting to “smuggle” away the literary self, rather it seeks *that* engagement, which is indeed a meta-meta-fictional narrative, especially in the case of Ge Fei, whom not only engages in this renegotiation with the literary self on the textual level, but also invites the reader, either symbolically through the narrative structure such as in the character of the interlocutor *Qi*, or more directly, as in the works of Ma Yuan (马原) who actually speaks directly

²³ *ibid.* 178.

²⁴ *ibid.* 179

at/to his reading public. At one moment in the narrative, the narrator internally remarks to himself that, “To the best of my abilities I am utilizing a flat and real tone to narrate my story, because I think that superfluous accoutrements obscure and damage its purity.” (“我尽量用一种平淡而真实的语调叙述故事，因为我想任何添枝加叶故弄玄虚反而会损害它的纯洁性，”)²⁵ The narrator makes the quoted statement before he answers a question posed by *Qi*. The line is interesting for its meta-fictional suggestion: in whose direction is it aimed at? Is it aimed at *Qi*, the reader, and/or the writer-self? If it is only directed at *Qi*, it seems somewhat out of sync, since we have already been led to believe that the narrator has at least some faith in her intellectual abilities. The same can be said if the statement is aimed toward us, the reader, a point which Zhang Xudong unknowingly hints at when he suggests that the last line from our excerpt is reminiscent of the encounter with “time obliterates everything,” in another of Ge Fei’s short stories, *Remembering Mr. Wuyou* (*Zhuiyi Wuyou Xiansheng*). The autotextuality hinted at here, or “the author’s return to his own texts,”²⁶ not only suggests a dialogue of Ge Fei with the Ge Fei of *Zhuiyi Wuyou Xiansheng*, but also restages a readerly memory of (re-)reading, confirming Ge Fei’s belief that a fictional “character is a stage prop,” and that the “the writer has no reason to allow the reader to become emotionally attached to the characters, [rather], the purpose is to direct the reader to the *rear* of both character and event [my italics].” (“作者无意让读者在他的人物上作过多的”情感停留，”目的是要将读者导入人

²⁵ Ge, Fei, “A Flock of Brown Birds” in *Jinse*, (Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House, 1994), 178-79.

²⁶ Oppenheim, Lois, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor: Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 19.

物和事件背后.”)²⁷ This assertion clearly emphasizes Ge Fei's dispersion, or delineation of responsibility (for the text) to the reader as well as the writer. Then what of the writer-self? Here we can return to our act of *permanent parabasis*, where the recollection of the narrator's marriage is a figural manifestation of the power of memory to interrupt the narrative, but only *just*, since neither the reader nor the writer can be certain of the truth value of what he/she reads/writes. In other words, the reader *and* writer are thrust into a renegotiation with the literary self and the character and plot construction, which is, nevertheless, always interrupted by memory. This interruption of the text is similar to Lois Oppenheim's designation of “un-wording,” or “decomposition” in Samuel Beckett's drama and fiction, wherein “the notions of ego and body are continually shattered from one work to the next... each and every story is, in fact, another.”²⁸ This act of autotextuality in Beckett's corpus, or the fragmentation of texts/interruption of narrative, transcends through subsequent narratives not only within one confined textual space, but also over an entire body of work, is seen by Oppenheim as a *creative process*. This shattering of the “ego” and “body” can be directly related to the fragmentation of memory and its *figural* power, hence, memory and its re-utilization becomes the vehicle, or medium from which the literary subjective self is always in a state of *permanent parabasis*, or interruption, *and* it is precisely this interruption that is *creative*, in the sense of a process that locates its manifestation in the text, but which never achieves that goal, nor does it continue *ad infinitum*. This infratextual/autotextual matrix allows Wang Jing to

²⁷ Yin Guojun, *The Avant-Garde Experiment: Chinese Avant-Garde Culture in the 80s and 90s*, 133.

²⁸ Oppenheim, Lois. *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, 19.

state that “Ge Fei’s contrary epistemological vision is bound by a backward stance: it is through self-narration of the reinvented memories of one’s own past that the construction of identity is made possible in the first place.”²⁹ Wang’s problem is that she is not radical enough, she does not go far enough in using this interruption as *creative*, and instead claims that this movement in the Avant-garde attempts to do away with the literary self altogether. Ge Fei is not attempting such a maneuver; rather he is attempting a long overdue renegotiation.

Ge Fei’s *Hese Niaoqun (A Flock of Brown Birds) (II)*

When I went to rent a bicycle, the sky was already filled with snow. Snowflakes settled and flowed over spring shop signs and spring clothes. The road leading from the suburbs rapidly narrowed. Gradually, my bicycle tires began to slide in the mud-smeared road. People and cars grew fewer and fewer and the snow began to form a white blanket over everything. On either side of the road there suddenly appeared in front of me farm huts broken by long stretches of uninterrupted forest. The electric trolley in front of me was not moving swiftly, and I peddled furiously to prevent it from disappearing from my vision...

After the trolley stopped at a suburban station, she descended and began to follow an uneven road... It was as if she and I behind had walked for quite some time, and yet on this suburban snow enshrouded road, I was unable to ascertain an origin...

At this time, another bicycle rider appeared on the road, *it* seemed rather small and looked to be in quite a rush... Again I felt that she must be somewhere ahead of me, on the upcoming bridge...

Just at this moment, I stopped...

A person’s shadow, bearing a lantern, approached me...

“You cannot cross this bridge.”

“Why?”

“Twenty years ago the bridge was devastated by a flood...”

“Recently there was a woman who went pass.”

“No woman passed by here.”

²⁹ Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever*, 245.

“Who are you?” I thought he must be the bridge porter.

Again he said to me... “Perhaps it is possible that your eyesight has been obscured by this snow-filled night. The glare from snow can cause mistaken illusions, and such illusions will only lead a person into the abyss...”

我去车铺租自行车的时候，天空已经飘起了鹅毛大雪。雪花在春天的幌子下布下寒流的种子。城市通向郊区的路一会儿就变得非常狭窄了。渐渐我的车轮下露出泥土和煤屎混合的路面。路上行人和车辆渐渐变得稀少，雪花露在上面很快就积成白白的一片。大路两旁的农舍和绵延的丛林突然出现在眼前。我前面那辆电车开得不快，我的自行车全速追赶，使它不至于从我视野里消失...

电车在郊区站停下后... 她下车后就沿着一条低洼不平的路... 我们仿佛在路上走了很久，但是在郊外迷茫的雪原上，我很难直到它的尽头...

这时，我的前面出现了另一个骑着自行车的人，这个人驮伏在车上显得很小心，它也像是在车前急急赶路... 但我觉得她像是仍在我前面不远的桥上...

可就在这时，我站住了...
有一个提着灯笼的人影朝我走过来...

这桥你不能往前走了。

为什么？

它在二十年前就被一次洪水冲垮了...

刚才有一个女人从这桥上过去了。

没有女人从这过去。

你是谁？

我想他大概是一个看桥人...

老人又对我说... 你可能是在雪夜中看花了眼，雪的光亮会给人造成错觉，而错觉会把人领入深渊...³⁰

Earlier we mentioned how the narrator relates to his interlocutor *Qi*, the story of his marriage, in which the above scene of pursuit plays a pivotal role in situating/de-situating the narrative within the narrative. Who is the woman he is in pursuit of? His wife? Could it be a random infatuation with the woman wearing

³⁰ Ge, Fei, “A Flock of Brown Birds” in *Jinse*, (Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House, 1994), 182-186.

the “chestnut colored shoes” (栗树色靴子)? Is it, can it be *Qi*? Later, he does indeed encounter this woman, at least we as the reader are led to believe this, as the primary identifying signifier for her, the “chestnut colored shoes” is once again actantially present in the narrative (again illustrative of the “stage-prop (道具)” like nature of Ge Fei’s characters, whom are oftentimes devoid of actual names and instead only possess metonymic designations). This reappearance of the woman happens only after the narrator encounters her (again?) and her abusive husband, whom summarily attacks the intruder, our narrator, as he intervenes into their domestic dispute. The husband in turn exits the narrative, and our narrator is left to be comforted by *Li Pu* 李朴 (she has now been given a name, at least, that is what it seems, which, however, Ge Fei often never utilizes, preferring instead “this/that... woman (女人)). What follows is a bizarre and unreal account of their *supposed* marriage which is related in spurts of disjointed continuity and temporal latticing, with the interlocutor *Qi* as our, the reader’s, and perhaps the writer’s as well, only anchoring point. Interspersed throughout the narrative in the narrative, or perhaps our infra-narrative of marital mistrial, we constantly encounter disrupting textual actants: *Qi* accuses the narrator of weaving a circular story, that never develops, nor ends, and is only a means of satisfying some desiring impulse within himself as a producing- production narrator: “Your story, from beginning to end, is a circle, as it develops its plot, it also intimates its duplication. Only for your own happiness will you forever be able to continue telling [it] (你的故事始终是一个圆圈, 它在展开情节的同时, 也意味着重复. 只要你高兴, 你就可以永远讲下去 (201)).” The reading

experience also inundates the reader with constant intertextual ruptures/references, where the narrator directly questions the ir/reality of the story on both an infra-narrative level: “sometimes I feel that this is all a conspiracy (有时我觉得这也许是一个阴谋 (204)); that is just your imagination (那都是你的幻觉 (207)),” as well as on a meta-narrative level: “what comes next is somewhat unsuitable for an exhaustive description, but some things are not related to those types of minor issues, so that the narrative below, for the time being, can be our story’s end (接下来我们两做的事不便详尽描写, 但有一些和那种事本身并无太大关联的枝节, 如下所述, 权且当作这个故事的结尾 (204)).” The absurdity and disjointedness of the entire infra-narrative is amplified when upon the decision to marry, the woman abruptly dies: “On the day I said we were to be married, she died... she was thirty years old on that day... and continued to say one thing: “the light is out, the light is out...” her congested mind obscured her line of sight. I watched her reddened face turn candle wax yellow, nevertheless I knew it was too late to save her. (我说在结婚的当天她就死 ... 那天是她三十岁的生日... 她突然一连说几声 [灯灭了], 脑溢血模糊了她的视线, 我眼看着她红润的脸色转为蜡黄, 但我知道, 已不可救 (207)).” The event seems to be metaphorically tied to the expiration of light (and/or the dimming of memory?) and the world becomes shrouded in darkness. In all cases, the intricate latticing of overlapping narratives and intertextual ruptures/references and disjointedness all serve to emphasize again the state of *permanent parabasis* that Ge Fei utilizes through the vehicle or

medium of *memory*, which in turn is the creative thrust or construction of *neo-(infra-meta) narratives*.

The decomposition of memory and its subsequent (re)production continues our process of desiring, which, as mentioned above, is coyly suggested by *Qi*, whom we have also suggested is the metaphorical reader present throughout the entire narrative plot. If we read *memory* as the base structure for *identity*, and if *production* is, in the Deleuzian sense, a manifestation of *desire*, then we can suggest the following schema:

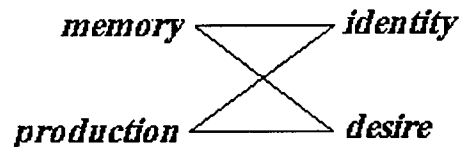
memory ————— *identity*

production ————— *desire*

Memory is the basis for the construction of identity and production is the manifestation of desire. If we then read from Deleuze that: “if desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality. [D]esire is the set of *passive syntheses* that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. [Then] the real is the end product, the result of the passive syntheses of desire as autoproduction of the unconscious,”³¹ and amplify it to the point where the writing of literature can be seen as the function of desire, coupled with desire as production, which in turn produces the *real* or the *material*, in our case, the text, which is, nevertheless, always interrupted or in a state of *permanent parabasis*, then, since production is a process unaware of its goal, or rather, is devoid of any such goal, the production of *memory* continues due to the *desire to produce*, or

³¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 26.

rather, we constantly recreate/produce our (new) memories, and hence, our identities. We are now left with a chiasmic relationship as follows:



This complicated chiasmic relationship becomes the internal structure of the entire narrative (miss-)development of *Hese Niaoqun* and can be read as Ge Fei's attempt to renegotiate the construction of the literary subject self vis-à-vis the desiring production of the *real* text. It must be noted that this entire process is played out within and through our narrative ruptures and symbolic use of *desiring* characters, which now brings us to the *bicycle* as vehicle of motion and its Beckettian sense of autoproduction/decomposition.

Ihab Hassan in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* talks on, dissects, and analyzes the drama and fiction of Samuel Beckett and its (supposed) postmodern trappings, giving a description of Samuel Beckett's trilogy *Molly, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, in which texts, at least the first two, the material *bicycle* is of the utmost symbolic importance for our later discussion, as well as for Beckett himself when he interrogates the relationship of character(s) mobility in nature, as follows:

The heroes are no longer simply recumbent like Dante's Belacqua—the prototype of Watt and Murphy [two earlier fictions by Beckett] —who spends eternity holding his head between his knees; nor are they gradually alienated from the world of men and clouds and tress. The possibilities of motion for them are severely restricted, and their exile from reality is from the start complete. Sealed up in their mental space, they move about, fading, changing

voices in the dark; constrained in all else, they lack the constraints of a particular identity. The fundamental category of time, extension, and being are called into doubt as the fluid ego of one speaker flows into another, threatening the dissolution of all selves.³²

This description is eerily apt to our narrator in *A Flock of Brown Birds*, where indeed he seems to be isolated/alienated from the external world, a sort of recluse in a riverside cabin composing/creating/producing fiction (for whom?). The interlocutor *Qi* is essentially his only contact with the peripheral reality outside his cabin, and yet, at the end of the meta-narrative, *Qi* has been dissolved into an unknown person, or rather, the narrator is no longer a person known by *Qi*. This poses serious questions regarding our above designation of *Qi* as the symbolic reader participating in the meta-narrative: if *Qi* has decomposed, or perhaps, has ebbed away and outside of the meta-narrative, what then of the reader relationship with the text? What of the tri-polar relationship of writer-text-reader? Who has really decomposed, who has really exited the meta-narrative? In all these questions there is the underlying stigma of alienation for not only the reader, but also for the writer, or rather the writer identity in the text, who has now become disrupted or ruptured by the unceasing production of memories/identity; he has fallen victim to the textual *permanent parabasis*. If this is the case, the literary subject self is indeed distanced and alienated from textual production, his/her *real* text, not because of a textual or object oriented lack of desire, since desire always and inherently possesses its object *of* desire, but rather, it is “the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject... Desire and its object are

³² Hassan, Ihab, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature 2nd Edition* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 224-25.

one and the same thing... Hence the product is something removed or deducted from the process of producing.”³³ But we do not want to end here, since this would indeed validate the stance that the Chinese Avant-garde was attempting a postmodern disintegration of the literary self, instead of a renegotiation; but where is that site for renegotiation? I would suggest that it is precisely in the *act* of autotextuality that we mentioned before, where the literary self, by means of remembering, re-interrogating, renegotiating those previous texts, is able to reengage in a relationship with the production of the *real* thus assisting in the reattachment of the self to a sense of identity within and through the *real* texts, if only in anticipation of a future rupture/interruption, which is, nevertheless, a *process*, hence its goal is always-already deferred and the process of *permanent parabasis* continues. Lois Oppenheim suggests the same when discussing Beckett’s work, which helps to extricate the more purely postmodern designation given to Beckett’s work by Ihab Hassan. She states that: “Beckett’s “method of distorted self-recollection”” is auto-analytic, the autotextual elaboration of “an ‘initial forgetting,’ it is at once *modernist subversion* and *postmodernist multivalence* and never only either one... it is precisely the resurrection, alteration, and elaboration of a previous text within a subsequent one that not only defies any possible fixity of art but also renders both works-in-progress, each as temporally resistant to objectification as the *pour-soi* itself.”³⁴ The decomposition of character/reader/writer is grafted onto a continual recuperation of the literary

³³ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 26.

* Quoted in Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, from Abbott, H. Porter, “Late Modernism: Samuel Beckett and the Art Oeuvre.” In *Around the Absurd*, edited by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990, pg 77), 21.

³⁴ Oppenheim, Lois, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, 21.

subject self, and while our meta-narrative “ends,” the seeds of an eventual resurrection is inherent within the textual producing matrix; the site of the subject’s desire, or the desire’s subject, is the *act* of autotextuality.

Where does the bicycle fit in? What is its actantial positioning? Deleuze asks this question concerning the bicycle in Beckett: “then there is the function of the bicycle in Beckett’s works: what relationship does the bicycle-horn machine have with the mother-anus machine? ‘What a rest to speak of bicycles and horns. Unfortunately it is not of them I have to speak, but of her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct’⁸”³⁵ I would suggest that the bicycle becomes the figurative extension of the Deleuzian “body without organs,” or the realm of “antiproduction.” It is the medium in which the unproductive body *sans* organs allows itself to be inscribed upon by the desiring machine, thus allowing *for* production: “The body without organs, the unproductive, the unconsumable, serves as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire, so that desiring-machines seem to emanate from it in the apparent objective movement that establishes a relationship between the machines and the body without organs.”³⁶ The “mother-anus machine” is likewise a site for production, however grotesque, just as the bicycle produces production: the production of *movement*, which not only initiates a satisfying impulse for desiring production, but also more figuratively, produces the text, or rather allows for the development of text; it “moves” the text along, so to speak. The fact that

⁸ Quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, from Beckett, Samuel, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1959, pg 16), 3.

³⁵ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 3.

³⁶ *ibid.* 11.

neither bicycle-riding experience, in both Beckett and Ge Fei, is entirely successful or free from stoppages only emphasizes the rupturing nature of the (meta-)fiction recurrent in our designation of *permanent parabasis*. The journey for Molloy on the chainless bicycle seems to be “part of the mythological present to Molloy who parodies the doctrine of eternal recurrence by his own solipsistic doctrine of eternal non-occurrence,”³⁷ which nevertheless produces production, if only in the production of *memory*. For the narrator in *A Flock of Brown Birds*, the bicycle is also a vehicle for production, or rather the vehicle of pursuit of a desirable object: the lady wearing the “chestnut colored shoes.” Hence, in the infra-narrative the bicycle can be read as the surface of production of desire and from a meta-narrative standpoint, the bicycle *moves* the text, or produces the text, which in turn satisfies the writer’s desire to produce that which is *real*, which nevertheless becomes alienated from the writer, only to become reengaged once more in the *act* of autotextuality. The bicycle, like the “mother-anus machine” produces and continues to produce; it is the site of the process of production, and it is necessary that these bicycles breakdown (the chainless bicycle in Beckett) or that these *adventures* on bicycles encounter stoppages (the decayed bridge prohibiting riding on for the narrator in *A Flock of Brown Birds*), since they are surfaces, or the medium, through which desire seems to emanate, and in order for desiring-machines to operate, they need to malfunction: “desiring-machines... continually breakdown as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly: the product is always an offshoot of production, implanting

³⁷ Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature 2nd Edition*, 226.

itself upon it like a graft, and at the same time the parts of the machine are the fuel that makes it run.”³⁸ This continual “malfunctioning” on the part of the desiring-machines is our interrupted narrative, the site of *permanent parabasis*, which happens both figuratively in the text as mentioned above, as well as externally, in the writer’s renegotiation with the products of his/her production. *A Flock of Brown Birds* is an intricately webbed meta-narrative of sleight of hand maneuvers and engagement with the authorial *process* of *production* that is figuratively played out in the realm of the infra-narrative by the constant production/recreation of *new* narrative actant-memories via the power *of* memory, but only just, since memories nevertheless require the jacket of language/narrative, which is always in a state of *permanent parabasis*.

In the subsequent section, we shall examine Ge Fei’s first novel, *Diren*, and continue our exploration into the actantial place of memory in Ge Fei’s text as well as expanding our investigation into the role(s) of history and perhaps more importantly, fate (命运), and how these two elements in conjunction with memory deepen the renegotiation of the literary subject self in the Chinese Avant-garde.

Ge Fei’s *Diren* (*The Enemy*)

All the elderly people in the village still remember the great fire of years past. It was the day of the Pure Brightness festival.* At night, the village residents burnt incense as an offering to their

³⁸ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 31.

* On or around April the fifth or sixth when one pays respect to a deceased relative at his or her tomb.

ancestors. Near the village river's edge, the small forest began to light up with sparks. The old village monk, whom every day wandered to the river's edge to go diving, at once saw the village house eaves skirted with flames and turned to a woman washing clothes upon the river rocks saying: "Whose house is that that wastes money? A massive blaze." The woman did not even raise her head: "Except for Zhao Boheng, who is there?"

The north western sky for half a day was lit-up by the flames, just like the scenic sky at sunset... A few young people from an ancestral hall emerged carrying a water hose... For a number of years the village had not experienced a fire disaster and the unused water hose seemed as if an unknown substance was obstructing it, as no amount of water pressure would facilitate its use. The gasping villagers took refuge in the forest perched upon the river's edge, with no recourse but to watch the flames swirl from rooftop to rooftop. The massive inferno raged from evening to the dawn of the second day.

The villagers throughout the passing years had already filtered through copious amounts of heartache, but upon sight of the tortured and twisted face of Zhao Boheng they could not help but weep... No one knew what he was thinking of at those moments... The very suddenness of the fire had, in one night, made him aged and decrepit. His shadow was an unreal and stationary scarecrow precariously planted amongst a field. In those first few days after the inferno, Zhao Boheng became a solitary figure under a white fruit tree going through the movements of shadowboxing, immersed in thoughts of the remaining last threads of his life... half a month later, Zhao Boheng was bedridden... his body decaying... as he waited the inevitable in a shadow-draped room. Only his grandson, Zhao Shaozhong, would sit with him in that foul room, a boy of only four. One evening, Zhao Shaozhong watched his grandfather struggle to prop his decaying body up into a sitting position, and peered as the elder scribbled some unknown thing across a piece of *Anhui paper* (宣纸).

"Are you writing a letter, master?" inquired a servant as she entered carrying a tray of tea.

"Writing shit!" ambiguously barked the elder Zhao Boheng, and once more returned to his contemplations.

After the funeral ceremony was over, neither member of the family wanted to clean the dilapidated and stagnant room, and despite it being winter, there was still a suffocating stench that hung about the inside of the room.

Zhao Jingxuan was Zhao Boheng's second son.

One morning, Zhao Jingxuan unexpectedly entered his father's dust en-caked room and under the bed he discovered a quaint wooden box containing only the piece of Anhui paper.

Upon the paper were scribbled thickly dotted names. Zhao Jingxuan had no idea as to why his father would, while on his deathbed, write down all the names of the villagers, and at this time, even young Zhao Shaozhong could recognize some of the characters. ... Although the young Zhao Shaozhong had no inkling as to the reason why his grandfather had written such a note, the doubts and suspicions raised by such an action would cling to his heart as the years past, until some satisfactory resolution... [After discovering the note] Zhao Jingxuan's face... gradually metamorphosized into the image of his aged father's on his deathbed...

[Later] an old family servant ruminated on the Zhao family, suggesting that, "if it is not the heavens that wish to destroy your family lineage, then there must be some unknown enemy that begrudges you and your family and it is he who set the fire. Also, how is it possible that such a fine water hose was discovered to be unusable? Perhaps it too was deliberately sabotaged..."

Zhao Jingxuan... seemed to suddenly realize the meaning of his father's scribbled note of names, and he spent the remainder of his life in a wasted pursuit to resolve the issue of that piece of paper. Zhao Shaozhong often watched his father pour over the contents of the note, watching him cross out names one after the other.

Ten years later, Zhao Shaozhong was married to a non-village resident, and the great fire of so many years before had seemed to become nothing more than a faded memory, but on that wedding day, the memory of the note swept across his mind, leaving him momentarily incapacitated from head to toe, and it was that from then on, that the happiness of his new marriage was forever entwined with a hidden terror that would continue to pester the deep recesses of his mind.

Zhao Jingxuan eventually died of dysentery at the age of fifty-five. On the day of the funeral, Zhao Shaozhong saw the faded and yellow scrap of paper once again, and noticed that his father had crossed out all the names save three, and as he watched the funeral procession march ever farther, he suddenly crumpled the piece of paper and deposited it in the funeral offering pyre.

村种上了年纪的人都还记得几十年前的那场大火。那是清明节的一天。天黑下来的时候，村里的人都忙着焚香祭祖。在村头的河边，小树林里到处都出现了星星点点的火光。村里的老和尚日复一日地来到河边跳水，当他看见村中黑压压的瓦楞上空窜出一丈多高的火苗，还对着正在水码头上洗衣服的女人说了一句：[你瞧那是谁家在化钱？那么大的火。] 女人连头没有抬：[除了赵伯衡还有谁啦？]...

西北方的半个天都被火光映红了，仿佛落日时的情景...几个年轻人从祠堂里抬来了水龙...这个村已经多年没有发生火灾了，废弃不用的水龙的喷水管像是被什么东西堵住了，怎么也压不出水来。人们叹息着隐伏在河边的树丛中，无奈的看着火焰卷起一片片店铺的屋顶，大火从傍晚时分一直烧到第二天拂晓...

这个村里的人们在岁月的更迭中早已滤掉了多余的情感，但他们看到赵伯衡那张由于痛苦而扭曲的脸都忍不住要掉下泪来...没有人知道此刻他究竟在想什么...突如其来的灾难使他一夜之间变得更加苍老。他的身影在晚风中像田野上矗立的稻草人一样显得不真实。在火灾后的最初几天里，赵伯衡依旧孤身一人在门前的白果树下打拳，他想积攒起残存生命的最后一丝光亮...半个月之后，赵伯衡终于卧床不起...他的身体就开始溃烂...他独自一人待在那间阴暗的房间里，...唯一能够和他常常待在一起就是他的长孙赵少忠。那一年赵少忠只有四岁。一天晌午，赵少忠看见祖父勉强支撑着身体在床上坐起来，在一张宣纸上写着什么。

[你在写信吧，老爷？]端茶进来的仆人顺便问了一句。

[写个屁！]赵伯衡含糊的吭了一声，重新陷入了冥想之中。

葬礼结束后，没有人愿意清扫那间不透风的房间，即使在冬天，屋子里也弥漫着一股令人窒息的恶臭。

赵景轩是赵伯衡的第二个儿子。

一天早晨，赵景轩突然打开了父亲的那间尘封屋子。他在床下的一只木箱中翻出了赵伯衡写过的那些宣纸。纸上密密麻麻写满了人名。他不知道父亲在临终前为何要将村里几乎每个人的名字写一遍，那时候赵少忠已经识得几个字...他虽然无法知道祖父抄录这些人名的用心，但几年来一直悬挂在心的谜团总算有了满意的解答...赵景轩...的脸上渐渐呈现出和父亲垂暮之年一样的神色...一个年老的家佣告诉他...[如果不是上天有意要灭掉这一族，一定有人故意放火。另外，好好的水龙怎么也压不出水来，也许有人用木赛将水龙头的喷水管堵住了。

赵景轩...似乎突然明白了父亲写下这些名字的缘由。赵景轩把他一生中剩余的几年光阴完全耗费在父亲遗留下来的宣纸上...赵少忠常常看见他坐在天井中的一株文竹旁，把那些人名一个个划掉。

十年之后，赵少忠在村中祠堂和一个外乡女子结婚，那场火灾的阴影已经变得模糊而遥远了，但是他的脑中一旦掠过那些宣纸上的任命，就感到浑身无力，新婚的喜悦和内心潜藏的恐惧纠合在一起形成了记忆深处的一个巨大的扭结。

赵景轩五十五岁时死于痢疾。在葬礼的当天，赵少忠最后一次看了看那几张发黄的宣纸，他发现父亲在一个个名字上划了横杠，只剩下三个名字没有划去。他看着走远的送葬的人群，顺手将它揉皱，丢进了燃烧的火盆。³⁹

In the above rather long excerpt, taken from the *yinzi* (引子), or introduction/foreword of Ge Fei's first full-length novel, *The Enemy*, the stage is set for the subsequent narrative expansion and growth throughout the remainder of the text. The fire disaster and the scribbled note of names Zhao Boheng (赵伯衡) pens upon his deathbed (a list of conjecture on the part of Zhao Boheng whom so desperately wanted to discover the person or persons responsible for the fire) become the underlying, or deep-structure *actants*, that directly and indirectly effect the entire cast of characters of the Zhao family and their immediate associations in the village of *ziwuzhen* (子午镇). Zhao Shaozhong, the grandson of Zhao Boheng, whom was only a small child of four when the latter expired, has his life forever enmeshed within the spectre of that disaster and the ill-fated note: "His grandson, Zhao Shaozhong (赵少忠), at that time was only four years old, but his life was already intimately entwined with the great fire" (他的长孙赵少忠当时虽然只有四岁，但他的一生已经与这场大火密切相联).⁴⁰ The very mysteriousness of the fire's origin, the peculiarity of the unusable water-hose, and the implication coming from the hired help, that, if the celestial heavens had not conspired to perpetuate such a disaster, then indeed there must be a more corporeal hand behind such devastation. Particularly of interest are the closing

³⁹ Ge, Fei, *The Enemy (Diren)* (Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House, 1993), 9-13.

⁴⁰ Xu Linzheng, "Zuojia Ge Fei: Xin Ban *Diren* Zhaolai "diren" yi Pian" (on *Qian Long* Internet site, 2001) (徐林正, "作家格非: 新版《敌人》招来 "敌人" 一片" (摘千龙新闻网, 2001).

lines of the foreword, when during the funeral march for his father Zhao Jingxuan (赵景轩), Zhao Shaozhong once again spies the faded scribbled note of names that had so tormented his father and after a cursory glance, wherein he notices that three names had yet to be crossed out, he disposes of the decaying paper by flinging it into the funeral fire pit. Why such an action? Can we read it as a symbolic refusal of the mantel of his family's torment; an attempt to extradite oneself from the spectre of that fateful event? Could it be a denial of suspicion concerning the villagers of *ziwuzhen* (with?) and the perpetrators of the fire? Can we read it as his attempt to *rescue*, at least in a figural sense, *his* family, both that of the present and of the past? Ironically, Zhao Shaozhong's destruction of the note allows for it to become even more powerful, in the sense that it has been freed from a more material existence, it has become a psychical actor, in a permanent process of re/de-construction via Zhao Shaozhong's memory (which as we argued above in our discussion of *A Flock of Brown Birds*, becomes the renegotiation and (re-)construction of the literary subject self through the medium of the text), and thus his destruction of the physical note actually initiates, or rather tethers his family to that historical lineage all the more forcefully. What seems abundantly clear is the manner in which both these codependent *actants*, the fire and the note, impact directly upon the narrative deep-structure of the novel, informing upon the figural manifestation of fate and its *collision* with the Zhao family, most notably in the figure of Zhao Shaozhong himself, and his almost slavish subservience to the spectre of family destiny, which he, ironically, sought to free his family from. This layering of irony becomes even more replete

if we were to actually interrogate the author's material inscription, or rather the selection of the characters for the note: *xuanzhi* (宣纸), as opposed to say *biantiao* (便条: a note), or more simply *yizhang zhi* (一张纸: a piece of paper), for the selection of the former carries with it the dictionary meaning of: "A high quality paper produced in Jing county, Anhui province, Xuan City, used for calligraphy and painting. The texture is soft and firm, and very difficult to destroy or be eaten by insects. It allows for an even distribution of ink, and is suitable to be left in someone's care."⁴¹ This very conscious decision on the part of the author necessarily carries with it the weight of the dictionary meaning, thus imbuing that scribbled note of names not only with longevity of substance and materiality, but also in the figural sense of it being passed from one person to the next, or rather, in our case, from one generation to the next. It cannot easily be destroyed, and while the physical note was indeed flung into the fire, it can figurally capture that element of nontextual memory, which is, nevertheless, textually inscribed in the character's memory by the author's *text*. We will return to this point in the subsequent pages, but for now it is just to "throw" this possibility "out there" for us to mull over, and, hopefully, for it to inform upon our own reading of Ge Fei's text, wherein we shall attempt to expand upon and interrogate more fully the *actantial* place of memory in Ge Fei's works, its inscription of the literary subject, and how it becomes manifest in the figure of fate in *The Enemy*.

The main narrative body occurs, as intimated above, many years after the *dahuo* (大火), and our central character, Zhao Shaozhong, is now an elderly man

⁴¹ 时代汉语辞典: 安徽宣城, 泾县出产的一种高级纸张, 用于写毛笔字和画国画。质地绵软坚韧, 不容易破裂和被虫蛀, 吸墨均匀, 适于长期存放, 1198 页。

and head of his own family, or perhaps more descriptively accurate, his own brood. Zhao Shaozhong's wife has already died, and the family makeup is as follows: the oldest son, Zhao Long (赵龙), whose wife has already left him for a "boatman," enjoys the life of gambling, despite his marvelous losses and heavy debt, which will eventually come back to haunt him. The second son is Zhao Hu (赵虎), a quasi-ruffian "boatman," whose deceptive, gambling, and illicit ways, which, however, are only alluded to in the narrative by reference to his travels up and down the river, eventually return with fatal consequences. Then there is the oldest daughter, Mei Mei (梅梅), who is rather unceremoniously given away in marriage to a drunken abuser from a nearby village, Ma Lianren (麻脸人). The youngest daughter, Liu Liu (柳柳), is the emotionally troubled member of the family whom seems to be somewhat psychically aware of the eminent danger awaiting Zhao Long, Zhao Hu and the others. Her premonitions, however, go unheeded, and she eventually exits the narrative deranged and seriously unbalanced, all the while harboring a deep sense of terror (恐惧). Cui Shen (翠婶) is the mother figure for the entire family, despite her prostitute past and her odd relationship with Zhao Shaozhong, whom had assisted her in escaping the life of the sex-trader and had brought her to the village of *ziwuzhen*. Like *Qi*, she acts as the readers' narrative anchor throughout the development of the text, as her status of insider-outsider allows for a unique perspective concerning the unfolding of the Zhao family fate, which is somehow hers, but yet somehow differentiated/alienated from her, wherein she bemoans a sense of dread which nevertheless does not fully impact upon her own body. Rounding out the main

cast of characters are Yaba (哑巴), the mentally challenged idiot and comic relief for the Zhao family; Qian Laoban (钱老板) and San Laoguan (三老倌), two village “friends,” who both harbor a desire for the Zhao family land; Wang Huzi (王胡子), an acquaintance of Zhao Long, whom vulgarly offers to purchase Cui Shen, and also harbors an introverted animosity towards the Zhao family men; and Zhao Liben (赵理本), a cousin who briefly enters the narrative attempting to collect monies owed to him by Zhao Long. Situated throughout these character narratives are two co-joined supplementary characters: the elderly woman witch/seer (女巫) and the blind fortune-teller (瞎子) who both intimate the Zhao family “fate” to Zhao Shaozhong, with, however, leaving the impetus for its emergence squarely within the hands of the latter (we will return to this point later). Neither member of the Zhao family adheres to a sense of filial devotion, nor their respective attempts to extradite themselves from the yoke of the Zhao family lineage are invincible and tragic defeats, which are acted out within the sphere and spectre of the *dahuo* and the “free-floating” note of names. The temporal trajectory of the novel is set in the early twentieth century, a time of intense internal and external difficulties for China, which can be symbolically read on a microscopic level in the predicament of the Zhao family, wherein the father can be read as the old traditional China still enmeshed within the concepts of filial devotion and *suminggan* (a belief in predestination 宿命感), with the younger generation of Zhao Long, Zhao Hu, Mei Mei, and the others representative of the transitional China, trapped between the traditional and the modern, the brutish and the sublime (which we will, nevertheless, read as being a

relationship susceptible to a chiasmic reversal , wherein brutish and sublime are equally representative of both tradition and modernity). This *fleshing* out of temporal and spatial markers in *The Enemy* becomes a common feature of Ge Fei's fiction, which is no longer constrained by the short story medium and thus the very expanded materiality of the long novel format allows for a much greater development of character and plot situating which becomes even more evident in Ge Fei's second long novel, *Bianyuan (The Edge)*, which we will examine more intimately in a subsequent section. For now, we will sketch-out the skeletal bones of the narrative in *The Enemy*.

Written primarily in the third person narrative, Ge Fei veritably entreats the reader to engage, experience, and perhaps even wallow in the tragic plight of the Zhao family with a sense of foreboding, dread, and comic-pity for those entwined within a web of fate. Indeed, Zhao Shaozhong is the near epitome of a man precariously perched or suspended on the lip of the abyss, the *mise en abyme*, with no less than Damocles' sword ominously dangling above in quiet anticipation. He is a character enmeshed within his figural past that is tragically aware of an *exit*, which, however, forever remains *unobtainable*. Like Clov and Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*, whom can both permit their visual optics to see a vantage point beyond the confines of their room, an *exit*, so to speak, and yet, they continue to "carrying-on," muttering: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished... I can't be punished any more"⁴², Zhao Shaozhong is likewise left to watch (and participate in) his family's disintegration, due to either

⁴² Beckett, Samuel, *The Collected Works of Samuel Beckett: Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 1.

a premonition of fate or to disinterested resignation to random events, the reader is left oscillating between both equally applicable scenarios. Embedded deep within the recesses of these events and layered upon the psyche of the father is the eternal spectre of the *dahuo* and the figurally indestructible note of paper bequeathed by a foul and festering grandfather to the ultimate extermination of the Zhao family.

The sedimentation of the Zhao family fate, or the *suminggan*, however, is initially only active within Zhao Shaozhong himself, with the remaining members of the family only subconsciously, or on a tertiary level, aware of impending trouble. Indeed, the full narrative thrust of the *co-actants* is not explicit in the death of Zhao Hu, as Ge Fei leads the reader to at least plausibly accept that this death is a concomitant result of Zhao Hu's somewhat reckless and hooligan ways; the ultimate outcome of a lifestyle of gambling and drinking. To substantiate and support the plausibility of the event's randomness, the earlier narrative introduction of a "shady" character approaching the Zhao family residence, whom then inquires as to the whereabouts of Zhao Hu, assists in intimating to the reader that the latter's death is simply a *matter of course*. Only the reactions of Zhao Shaozhong, who seems oddly complacent and apathetic, and Liu Liu, who becomes notably distressed, as if she herself were bearing the weight of these family troubles, contain a "tip-off" for the reader as to the deeper possibilities surrounding the death of Zhao Hu. Ge Fei does employ a narrative suggestiveness in the novel as to the sense of apprehension lurking about the Zhao family, and even the male members do seem to be at least partially aware of the disquiet: "In

his [Zhao Hu] impression, all the members of the Zhao family were enmeshed in a sense of gloom (在他 [赵虎] 的印象里, 赵家的人一生活在某种不经意的郁闷之中),⁴³ but either courageously or not, this sense of dread is most often brushed aside as female fancy: “Liu Liu wiped away her tears, “I heard Cui Shen say that a man...” Zhao Hu laughed, “I am leaving in a few days and then everything will be fine (柳柳擦了擦泪水: [我听翠婶说有人...] 赵虎笑了一下: [我过几天就要走了, 一切都会平安无事]).”⁴⁴ The subsequent lines of the narrative do suggest that Zhao Hu will indeed exit the story and leave the village by boat, and he even spends his last night in the village upon the very ship that will transport him down the river. However, on the morning of departure, Zhao Hu remembers a forgotten sack that Liu Liu had prepared for him to take with on his journey and he somewhat reluctantly decides to return home one last time to retrieve the gunnysack and have a few last words with his father; he never reaches his family residence. While trekking through the brush and even in sight of his family’s abode, Zhao Hu harmlessly pauses to remove an uncomfortable stone that has been hampering his progress home, at which time an unknown assailant emerges from behind and taps his shoulder: “He felt an unknown person tap his shoulder from behind (他感到背后有个人在他肩上轻轻的拍了一下).”⁴⁵ The character Zhao Hu exits the narrative as an active participant, and all that remains is a corpse, which, after being discovered by the father, is suspiciously, unceremoniously, and most importantly, secretly, buried by Zhao Shaozhong,

⁴³ Ge, Fei, *The Enemy* (Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House, 1993), 144.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 144-145.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* 146.

save but the shoe that was removed to empty out the stone. The other members of the family initially worry about Zhao Hu's "departure," fully unaware of the real nature of his leaving, and simply resign themselves to accepting the son's unfilial nature at leaving without parting words; aside from Zhao Shaozhong, who is directly involved in his son's disappearance, only Liu Liu initially suspects a foul end for her brother. Why the secretive burial? What does this murder instigate in the psyche of Zhao Shaozhong? How does it make more tangible the supposed Zhao family fate, especially for the father? Is it indeed this ominous fate rearing its head, or can it be simply read as a random event in the progression of the narrative? Why do we even talk of fate?

Above, I have already suggested that the sons, and the other members of the family, do not seem to be directly aware of the status that the *dahuo* and the note posses for Zhao Shaozhong. Indeed, within the narrative we can read how both Zhao Hu and Zhao Long consistently refuse to their father's traditional notions of fate and family that nevertheless seem to weigh upon the latter. But this is precisely how it ought to be, since the siting of the *suminggan* is Zhao Shaozhong, and it is only he that can be fully aware of the *actantial* nature of the *dahuo*. Of the family members, only Zhao Shaozhong directly experienced the trauma of the fire and the subsequent suspicions of the grandfather which in turn drove Zhao Jingxuan to his death in a *metamorphosis of aging*: the son becoming the father, the suspicions transmigrating from one generation to the next. Zhao Shaozhong is a transitional figure, interpellated with a desire for escape (his destruction of the physical note), and yet irrevocably tied to the material event of

the *dahuo*. This material event becomes the irreversible foundation for his psyche, which in turn performatively (re-)produces, or (re-)manufactures that sense of family fate. Why performative production/manufacturing? Using Jacques Derrida's reading of Paul de Man's material event, wherein the material event is an event without materiality, the *dahuo* and the inscription of the note, which indeed lacks a physicality/materiality, is performative in the sense of a textual event that deconstructs the psychical memory of Zhao Shaozhong and thrusts it into *process*, into constant *disruption* by means of continuous re/de-construction *in* memory; it becomes *permanent parabasis*. The figural manifestation of the fire/note in the text, in Zhao Shaozhong's memory, is indicative of memory as *just* power, which is on the order of event: "*first*, by reference to an *irreversible event* [my italics] that has already happened; *second*, as *productive* of event and archivation, *inscription* [my italics], consignment of the event; *third*, in a mode that is each time performative..."⁴⁶ For Zhao Long and Zhao Hu, the *dahuo* and the note do not exist in the present, rather, they are events forever transcribed in an history which is past. For Zhao Shaozhong however, these two events are intimately inscribed upon his psyche and are in constant renewal through and *in* his memory. And yet, both approaches can be read as cognizing movements: the former as an attempt to understand and thus archive the event; to come to terms with it, to relegate it to a synchronic history-past. The latter is an unconscious cognizance of the event, which inscribes the event not in an history-past, but within the archive of memory as repressed trauma, which we continue to read as

⁴⁶ Derrida, Jacques, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ("within such limits")" in Tom Cohen, et al., ed. *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 310.

in a state of interruption, in the (desiring) process of production (of identity). Both attempts are unsuccessful, with the latter being much more detrimental. Zhao Shaozhong's unconscious inscription of the memory of the *dahuo* and the note in his psyche and its reproduction via the present events (the death of his son) and the premonitions of the blind fortune-teller, produce in Zhao Shaozhong a need for rationalization; a need to site the terror. The convenient vehicle for the rationalizing movement becomes fate, however irrational that may be, which, nevertheless, is a traditional Chinese site for cognizing about the unexplainable. This return/retreat to fate for Zhao Shaozhong morphs into a facilitation of the (re-)construction of that fate on both a conscious and unconscious level within one's self, which in turn becomes Ge Fei's figural inscription for the enemy: "In *The Enemy* there is an extension of the terror of the "self," or rather, to put it in a nutshell, the "self" is that hidden enemy in the recesses of one's heart, this is an extreme proposition (在《敌人》中引申为对"自我"的恐惧,以至于可以归结出"自我"就是最内心的敌人,这种极端的命题)." ⁴⁷ The aforementioned secretive burial of his son instead of announcing it in an attempt to find those responsible, coupled with his almost inanimate or rather mechanistic preparation of the burial pit, the tying up of the old yellow family dog after it wanders home one day with a torn and shabby shoe, which is none other than Zhao Hu's lost shoe, all impart to the reader a sense of Zhao Shaozhong's complicity in the murder, which he nevertheless inscribes into fate. It is here that the reader becomes more fully aware of the *actantial* nature of fate in the deep-structure of

⁴⁷ Chen Xiaoming, "The Last Ceremony: the "Avant-Gardist" History and its Criticism" ("Zuihou de Yishi: "Xianfengpai" de Lishi jiqi Pinggu") (on White-collar. net, 1991), 8.

the novel and how it has been imbedded throughout the narrative events thus far. While Zhao Shaozhong resigns himself, indeed, gives himself up to, or rather sacrifices his identity *to* fate, the only other family member that likewise seems to be aware of a *hidden hand*, Liu Liu, has her identity and consciousness stripped from her as she edges closer and closer to dementia.

Throughout the narrative unfolding of Zhao Hu's death and the subsequent banter of suspicions and conjecture, Zhao Shaozhong becomes increasingly detached from the present event and is instead thrust into ruminations concerning the *dahuo* and the note, which have become more forceful and explicit in his consciousness: "His thoughts returned to that scrap of paper he had flung into the funeral pyre, and he felt that the spectre of that great fire was forever embedded in his consciousness (他想起那张在火盆为灰烬的宣纸, 感到意识中心被往昔早已逝去的那些大火中的阴影所占据)."⁴⁸ Once again we can read the *permanent parabasis* in the re/de-construction of memory. The spectre of the *dahuo* and the note become manifest in the process *of* fate that has been figurally and psychically (re-)constructed by Zhao Shaozhong himself, which, as we have tried to suggest, has been the latent *actant* throughout the entire narrative. We have once again entered into our chiasmic reversal relationship between memory-identity and production-desire that we first discovered in *A Flock of Brown Birds*, wherein the (newly) re/formed memories of the *dahuo*/note are (re-)activated in figural play in Zhao Shaozhong's un/sub-consciousness and the desiring process of production becomes a manifest desire for identity which in turn provokes a facilitation on the

⁴⁸ Ge, Fei, *The Enemy*, 152.

part of Zhao Shaozhong for the culmination of the Zhao family fate; in essence, Zhao Long must die. Zhao Shaozhong becomes his own self-fulfilling actor of fate, which is the metonymic substitute for the *actantial* memory in that this self-fulfillment of fate is the site for the (re-)constitution of his identity that has been inherently disrupted since that initial material event when he was only a boy of four. The “actual history”⁴⁹ of the event, the fire/inscription of the note on figurally indestructible paper are the *co-actants* of fate and memory, which are

⁴⁹ For de Man, *history* is power: an act, and not simply the power of “he who wins,” but rather in “he who wins *writes* the history books.” History also has a duality, i.e.: “history is, to the extent that it is an act, a dangerous and destructive act, a kind of hubris of the will that rebels against the grasp of time,” and also, “on the other hand it is temporally productive, since it allows for the language of reflection to constitute itself” (de Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 57). The materiality of “actual history” resides in its inscription in a mode of language that is *performative*; that involves power relationships, not just “that which has happened.” J. Hillis Miller, in “Paul de Man as Allergen,” sums up de Man’s “materiality of history, properly speaking, [as] the results of acts of power that are punctual and momentary, since they are atemporal, noncognitive and noncognizable performative utterances. History is caused by language or other signs that make something materially happen, and such happenings do not happen all that often” (Miller, in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, edited by Tom Cohen et al., 188). The event most discussed by de Man is Schiller’s misreading of Kant, where the latter’s discourse contained that irreversible event of history: the “shift from cognitive to efficaciously performative discourse” (Miller, 188), which Schiller and thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have likewise misread. Nevertheless, these misreadings are not of the same materiality, or rather, they are *not* irreversible events, like Kant’s. Thus, by demystifying such assertions and returning to Kant/*reading* Kant for the first time, a truer reading of history, the “actual history” of inscription, is possible by shifting our understanding of history through the performative mode of language. In the Chinese context, the material events of the twentieth century, such as the May Fourth Movement, the Cultural Revolution, and the Era of Reforms, become radically more powerful and fully inscribed as “actual history” when they are approached as performative *acts* of language. These events are true moments of rupture, centered *in* language, and are irreversible. The 1930s *Jingpai* made no attempt to return to the past, since a true return was impossible. Shu Shih-mei’s suggestion in *The Lure of the Modern* that Chinese modernity emerged without rupture in the early twentieth century denies the figural power of the May Fourth Movement, which forever altered the cultural landscape in China. The *Jingpai* were not *returning*, so much as they were identifying and utilizing a past through the spectrum of the *present* of history/of reading. The Cultural Revolution was likewise figurally powerful and performative in language, especially when one considers the plethora of *big character posters* (*dazibao* 大字报), and thus irreversible. Indeed, the traumas of those tumultuous years are still being reenacted throughout much of the cultural production. The Era of Reforms, the Search for Roots (*xungen wenxue*), the Avant-gardist experimentation, and so on, are in turn material events in language, which have forever altered the course of literary production. This does not intimate an *e/End*, but rather the irreversibility of returning, so, when we speak of a *return to the real*, the return is figural, and fully performative, thus material: the “actual history” of the event. In subsequent pages we will explore this possibility to a greater degree, but for now, it helps to situate the discourse concerning Ge Fei’s fiction.

verbally re/de-constructed within the textual consciousness of the main character. Why are these *co-actants* the “stuff” of “actual history” for the character Zhao Shaozhong? They are the “stuff” of “actual history” in that they are *performative*, i.e.: they are figurally formed by an *act* of *language*, wherein the site of inscription is Zhao Shaozhong’s (textual) memory. On a meta-fictional level, the *dahuo* and the note are “truly *historical* in the sense of being an actual occurrence necessary for any reading of the text,”⁵⁰ which allows us, following Kevin Newmark’s discussion of history in Paul de Man, to (re-)suggest that h/History is *not* natural, but rather linguistic: “History is a linguistic event, the arrangement of verbal buildings, a syntax of inscriptions that exist to be memorized and then read,”⁵¹ which is precisely what is *acted* out figurally by Zhao Shaozhong in the text of *The Enemy*. Ge Fei is playing with these verbal constructions, these buildings of syntax, in the psyche of our main character.

Above we mentioned that throughout the latter half of the narrative Zhao Shaozhong has morphed into his own self-fulfilling actor of fate, and indeed, he once more inquires after his family’s future from the blind seer, whom curtly informs him that disaster has yet to be abated; Zhao Shaozhong is again unable to extricate himself from these premonitions, and in turn he hastens their eventual climax. This last encounter with the blind seer not only impacts upon Zhao Shaozhong’s character and identity, in the sense of the desiring machine in the production of memory, but it also expands across the entire narrative foundations of the story. The *actantial* deep-structure is becoming increasingly manifest in

⁵⁰ Kevin Newmark, “Paul de Man’s History” in *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 132.

⁵¹ *ibid.* 133.

real-time action in the narrative. Not only does this impact upon the family members, such as Cui Shen and Liu Liu, but also on the members of the village, such as Qian Laoban, the covetous friend, who remarks on the calamities of the Zhao family as follows: ““I could never have imagined that Zhao Hu would so suddenly die.” After a moment, Boss Qian spoke again, “It’s almost as if you have aroused the ire of someone in the village.” “Aroused someone’s ire?” Cui Shen was stupefied for a moment. “There are many things that once said, are often hard for people to believe in, just as someone’s fate.” Boss Qian spoke again, “After all these years I still cannot forget that fire ([我怎么也想不到赵虎会死.] 过了议会儿, 钱老板又说 [你们赵家像是跟镇上什么人结仇.] [结仇?] 翠婶愣了一下. [很多事说起来让人难以相信, 仿佛命中注定的一样.] 钱老板说, [几十年来我一直忘不了那场大火.]).”⁵² Nevertheless, in the narrative real-time itself, Zhao Shaozhong continues to deny the impact of the *dahuo* and the string of misfortune, suggesting that things in the past are *of* the past, and that notions of fate are traditional superstitions, all the while, he is un/subconsciously acting as the instigator and servant of that very same (denied) fate. This expansion, or rather, this narrative exposition of fate, and the belief in some unknown hand crashing down upon the Zhao family in fits of rage and torment, becomes increasingly cognized by Cui Shen, whom, as we mentioned above, is our narrative anchor due to her unique positioning in the family. This in turn brings us back to the morphing of Zhao Shaozhong’s father into that of his grandfather, and the apparent metamorphosis *in process* of the former. The following scene also

⁵² Ge, Fei, *The Enemy*, 188.

illuminates some of that very oppressive past of the Zhao family and their status in the village. I quote at length:

Now, his appearance was more dejected and estranged, at times Cui Shen would intently watch his face. She realized that he had become a stranger to her.

"I always hear about that great fire," Cui Shen spoke while yawning.

"That happened over forty-five years ago..."

"It was intentional, wasn't it?"

Zhao Shaozhong's eyes swiftly spread across the table and over a jar of ointment. He did not utter a sound.

"It scares me to think of it," continued Cui Shen.

A shadowy cloud passed across his face as he smashed an ashtray, "Nobody can live that long..."

"There are many things you ought not to think about for long periods of time," muttered Zhao Shaozhong.

"What about Zhao Hu's death..."

"He probably owed money to someone from Jiangbei," Zhao Shaozhong interrupted, "or perhaps something else."

"How is it that you never thought that *someone* in the village could be holding a grudge?"

Zhao Shaozhong laughed bitterly, "Years ago, everyone in the village depended on my family for their very lives."

Cui Shen did not speak again, and instead, she picked up the ointment salve and began to warm it over an oil lamp. A haze blew in through a hole in the door, and the grounds outside were vacant of sound. The sun was already at midday.

现在, 他的外表日趋颓唐, 举止更加怪异, 有时翠婶在注视他衰老的面容的同时, 突然意识到他几乎变成了一个陌生人。

[我常常听人说起那场大火.] 翠婶打了个哈欠。

[那是四五十年前的事了]...

[是不是有人故意的火?]

赵少忠的眼睛迅速扫过桌上的那块药膏, 没有吱声。

[我一想起那件事就感到害怕.] 翠婶说。

[什么事?]

[我总觉得当初放火的那个人现在依然活在人世.] 翠婶说。

赵少忠的脸上过一片阴云, 将烟锅磕灭: [没有人能活得那么久.]...

[很多事你用不着想得那么多.] 赵少忠说。

[赵虎的死会不会.]
 [他像是欠江北什么人的钱.] 赵少忠说, [也许是因为另外的事.]
 [你难道没有察觉到镇子上有人跟赵家过不去?]
 赵少忠苦笑了一下: [几十年前, 子午镇上的每一个人都是靠赵家养活的.]
 翠婶没有再说什么, 她有一次拿起了那帖药膏, 凑在油灯下慢慢烘烤. 薄雾不时从门洞中飘进屋子里来, 院外听不到一丝声响, 月亮已经声到了中天.⁵³

The reader begins to suspect that there may be some truth to the claim of some village animosity towards the Zhao family, if for no other reason than their once dominating and privileged status within the village hierarchy. Perhaps there is indeed the cruel hand of fate that has swung the pendulum of karma upon a once (overly?) proud household? What is, however, of more importance here is the internal alienation sprouting up amongst the Zhao family, most notably in the metamorphosis of Zhao Shaozhong, who is increasingly distant and estranged from his family, especially since Zhao Hu's death, which he, nevertheless, had some complicity in. The compounding of tragedies and events seems to be reaching a crescendo, as Zhao Long's end seems near, Cui Shen seems increasingly nervous and frightened, and poor Liu Liu is progressively more alienated not only from her family, but also from her once stable self: "Liu Liu felt that her heart was being gripped by some never before experienced force... it was as if she already realized that she would soon come face to face with her fate (柳柳感到心脏正被一种她从未体验过的力量攥紧了.... 她似乎已经意识到了

⁵³ Ge, Fei, *The Enemy*, 200-201.

不久之后即将降临到她身上的命运).”⁵⁴ Her subsequent disappearance can only be read as an escape, even if it is an escape without a goal, without an objective. All these textual events and their increasing rapidity as the narrative progresses to its ultimate climax begins to entwine not only the characters within Zhao Shaozhong’s dementia of fate, but the reader as well, who is consistently carried through the *acting* out of the final stages of the Zhao family destiny, despite Zhao Shaozhong’s continual denial in the real-time narrative: ““It’s as if someone in the village beheld us a grudge,” [said Mei Mei]. “Cui Shen spoke thus, and now you,” Zhao Shaozhong shot her a glare, “no one in the village holds any animosity towards us...” ([镇子上像是有什么人一直和赵家过不去.] (梅梅说) [翠婶这么说, 你这么说.] 赵少忠瞥了她一眼, [没有人和我们过不去....]).”⁵⁵ While the reader is aware of Zhao Shaozhong’s duplicity, neither the members of the immediate family, nor the village friends, are able to say for certain what the relationship between these tragedies and the Zhao family history is, nor can they deny the increasing possibility that there is a direct correlation. Meanwhile, the position of the *dahuo* and the note continue to *act/perform* their game in the psyche of Zhao Shaozhong, re/de-constructing his memory, producing the desiring production of process wherein lies the unstable foundation of identity in *permanent parabasis*. This continuous and unstable state within the memory flux-machine, which instigates the need for a self-fulfilling destiny matrix-machine in Zhao Shaozhong, intimates the final end of Zhao Long, who is murdered in his own room on the family residence by an unknown actor. The reader is only aware

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 204.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 216-217.

of is the fact that Zhao Shaozhong himself unlatches the door to his son's sleeping quarters. Likewise, the reader is never informed as to the identity of the perpetrator of the crime, and is left to conjecture, just as we were when Zhao Hu expired. This very unidentifiable murderer is the nebulous *co-actants* of fate and memory, which have conspired throughout the entire narrative to exterminate the younger Zhao brothers, disrupt the family environment, and to identify the enemy as the "fear within" (自我的恐惧), which in turn expands and morphs into the fear of h/History, or history's/ies past. Ge Fei himself intimates such a reading in the preface: "To speak of *The Enemy* from the beginning, at its core, there was an attempt to express a feeling of terror. Terror is a thing that cannot be forgotten, just as it cannot be rationalized or logically explained. From a certain point of view, it is already history, and also reality (《敌人》创作的初衷而言, 它试图表达的核心是一种恐惧. 恐惧是无法被忘记的, 也无法通过理智与逻辑将其摒除. 从某种意义上说, 它既是历史, 又是现实)." ⁵⁶ If this fear, or terror, is the enemy within, which is that of history, or reality, in the sense that the "I" is the producer of history and reality, then the terror in *The Enemy*, played out in the characters of the Zhao family, operates as the site for a collective cultural memory of those tumultuous times in the early twentieth century when China was precariously perched upon that same abyss, that *mise en abime*, wherein the flux of tradition and modernity/ies conflate around, through, and in the identity structure of the "I," which is nevertheless in a state of irreversible and *permanent parabasis*, forever (re-)inscribing the trauma of an historical past in the cultural site of

⁵⁶ Ge Fei, *The Enemy*, 7.

memory. Or rather, any attempted recuperation of that historical trauma is simply an endeavor at reversing the irreversibility of the material event(s). It is the (failed) construction of the hyperreal. Ge Fei likewise seems to be progressing down this path, but with characteristic tangents, such as the sudden appearance of an elderly man sunning himself upon the village bridge, who remarks almost to himself, that: “Upon looking at him, I’m afraid he [Zhao Shaozhong] does not appear long for this life, the light in his eyes looks like those of Zhao Boheng’s upon his deathbed (看上去, 他 (赵少忠) 恐怕也活不长了, 他的眼神和赵伯衡临终时一模一样),”⁵⁷ which in turn hurls us back toward the metamorphosis of the son(s) into the father, and the final fulfillment of the Zhao family destiny, to which even Cui Shen admits to the omnipresence of the *dahuo*: “Even though Cui Shen did not see the old man’s death [Zhao Boheng], from the fragmented stories of the villagers she was aware of what transpired after the great fire. Those events became a dark and gloomy backdrop for the Zhao family, and she could almost visualize the spectral image of that fire (翠婶虽然没有见过那个孤独的老人的晚年, 但是能从村人零碎的叙述中依稀知道了那场大火之后的一些事, 这些事构成了眼下充满晦气的时光的深邃背景, 她的眼前一次次闪现出那场大火虚幻的光影...),”⁵⁸ Yet, there is no lasting metamorphosis, or perhaps no lasting recuperation of history/reality from the terror of the “I.” Zhao Shaozhong, after the near the destruction of his family, or rather, *the* destruction of his offspring, seems to have left the shell of his father and grandfather behind in the blood and

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 248.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 248.

madness of his children. The afterword of the novel has Zhao Shaozhong ostensibly unscarred from the tumultuous events of the novel, and instead is in bed with Cui Shen, who forever wished to escape from the Zhao family, and yet could never make the move, symbolic or otherwise, beyond the gate. What does this odd turn of events reveal? What is Ge Fei attempting to suggest concerning the literary subject as revealed to us in the character of Zhao Shaozhong? Where is the terror? Has Zhao Shaozhong reached, or obtained some degree of reckoning with his memory of that fire? But if so, then what of his identity, in the sense of a desiring process? Have the *co-actants* of memory and fate served their rhetorical and narrative function? What does this suggest for the collective cultural memory, in regards to its attempt at cognizing the upheavals of the early twentieth century, which are figurally manifest on a microscopic level in the plight of the Zhao family and the material event of the *dahuo*?

Perhaps it is herein where lies our (tentative) answer: the *dahuo* is a *material event*, in the full sense of de Man's materiality and the "stuff" of "actual history," wherein the event is no longer pursued from the vantage point of an attempt to cognize it; we no longer want to do that, indeed, we have moved beyond it, and it is this movement that *is irreversible*. De Man states the following:

I speak of irreversibility, and insist on irreversibility, this is because in all those texts and those juxtapositions of texts, we have been aware of something which one could call a progression—though it shouldn't be—a movement, from cognition, from acts of knowledge, from states of cognition, to something which is no longer a cognition but is to some extent an *occurrence*, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs. And there, the thought of material occurrence, something

that occurs materially, that leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such—that notion of occurrence is not opposed in any sense to the notion of writing. But it is opposed to some extent to the notion of cognition.⁵⁹

The movement from a cognitive mode has its ultimate destination in *performativity*, “the linguistic model I am describing, and which is irreversible, is the model of the *passage* from trope, which is a cognitive model, to the performative,”⁶⁰ which is, nevertheless, as de Man argues, not a *real* performative in and of itself, since the above performative is still enmeshed within the model of tropes, which is incompatible to de Man’s performativity. What is of paramount importance is the *passage*, which allows us to move from one “conception of language to *another* conception of language in which language is no longer cognitive but in which language is performative.”⁶¹ Ge Fei’s tangents can be read as performative acts that are nevertheless reinscribed in a cognitive system, which is a recuperation of sorts, but not a reversal, not the hyperreal. De Man describes this open possibility of recuperation as follows:

That process is irreversible... But that does not mean... that the performative function of language will then as such be accepted and admitted. It will always be reinscribed within a cognitive system, it will always be *recuperated*, it will relapse, so to speak, by a kind of reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition again. That relapse however, is not the same as a reversal.⁶²

⁵⁹ de Man, Paul, “Kant and Schiller” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, 132.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 132.

⁶¹ *ibid.* 132.

⁶² *ibid.* 133.

In the above analyses of *The Enemy*, we have, I think, successfully shown how memory and fate act as performative agents, or performative *actants* throughout the deep-structure of the narrative. The designation of the *dahuo* as a material event allows us to read it as a *linguistic performative act* that conveys its force and power in language, and its *actantial* impact in the narrative. What then of the literary subject and the collective cultural memory of history shown on its microscopic level? Again we will have recourse to de Man, wherein the material event of the *dahuo*, symbolic of the cultural tumult of the early twentieth century, is indeed history, but not history as progression or regression, but rather, history as inherently based on the power structure, or performativity of language, where “at that moment things *happen*, there is *occurrence*, there is *event*. History is therefore not a temporal notion, it has nothing to do with temporality, but it is the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition.”⁶³ We have tried above to illustrate how both the younger generation of the Zhao family (the modern) and the father (tradition) attempt to cognize the *dahuo*, and how both fail, since its cognition is only a relapse into tropological systems which will continue to be in a process of moving from language as cognition to language as performativity, which is the permanent disruption, the *permanent parabasis*, and therein also the site of history. Then, if we read history in this fashion: as disruption, and if we attempt to renegotiate the collective cultural memory as process, or as a passage to performativity, the desiring production of memory (identity), then the entire narrative thrust of the novel becomes this figural movement of language, or the text, from cognition, to performativity, wherein the

⁶³ *ibid.* 133.

literary subject is rethought within the realm of this disruption, within this performativity, which is process, which is the production (of memory) of identity.

Once again Ge Fei is not attempting to destroy the literary subject, rather, he is embarking on its renegotiation within the text and through the text, and it is this renegotiation that is likewise a process; it is the flux-machine, that creates our text in *permanent parabasis*, that produces the desiring production of identity/memory, and then helps to re/de-define a sense of the literary subject self vis-à-vis the text and the author/reader. In our next section, we will delve more deeply into this passage of language from a cognitive model to a performative model, and examine its structural manifestations in *The Edge*, wherein the literary subject self is dispersed to an even greater degree through this process of language (in our flux-machine) and wherein the *actantial* place of history and memory is morphed more fully into the concept of the de Manian *material event* (without materiality) and how they in turn continue to produce the literary subject in *permanent parabasis*.

Ge Fei's *Bianyuan* (*The Edge*)

Unlike our earlier exegesis, this present section shall not begin with a lengthy extract from the novel under consideration, Ge Fei's second major fiction *Bianyuan* (*The Edge*), and yet this should not be interpreted nor *misread* as a

defensive withdrawal on our part, indeed, the choice to abstain from lengthy quotations is central to our impending examination and pivotal to our (non)designation of this work as a (modernistic) *montage*, wherein a dissection of such, or the separation of minutiae components would destabilize the effectiveness and *power* of the whole, reducing it to so many postmodern fragments as to bleach the image of the whole totality of a montage-fiction. We are making these claims despite the positioning of Ge Fei under the umbrella of postmodernism, or at least that of a Chinese pseudo-postmodernity, most noted in the critical works of Wang Jing, Zhang Xudong, and Yang Xiaobin.⁶⁴ It is our

⁶⁴ The former, in her work *High Culture Fever*, discussed to some degree above in the section on *Hese Niaoqun*, designates Ge Fei as a pseudo-postmodernist, and again in her edited work, *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology*, she contends that the late 1980s movement in literature, or the "aesthetic game of narration" undertaken by the younger generation of Chinese writers (the avant-gardists), was "the proposal of [a] new generational logic [that] also meant for them the dawning of an epistemological revolution that bid farewell to humanism and the philosophy of representation in pursuit of the cultural logic of postmodernism" (9). While she does suggest a return to more historically based fiction in the early 1990s, the *designation* of a (undefined/unexplored) postmodernity is still layered throughout her introduction. In *Postmodernism and China*, edited by Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, the latter, like Wang Jing, also makes the claim for a *Chinese* postmodernity, but with a greater theoretical awareness and with a greater problematization of modernism. It is in modernity's "resistance to the postmodern that the Chinese modern reveals itself not as a totality, but as a differentiated, fragmented, and contradictory experience" (405). Zhang utilizes the designation of postmodernism as a spatial siting for the critique of state political and cultural hegemony, but it is a spatialization without *materiality*, or rather, of conflicting material(s), such that "Chinese postmodernism, like all varieties of this cultural trend, is made possible by and almost exclusively dependent upon the technology of reproduction and representation, not that of production, where China has gained a reputation of being the world's biggest labor-intensive, heavily polluting workshop, instead of a significant player in the amazing contemporary advancement of science and technology. In this sense it might not be grossly inaccurate to call China a probational, virtual postmodern society" (424). While such an elaboration is interesting, Zhang tends to read the postmodern as *too much* of a redemptive site for criticism, and his insistence on reproduction instead of production harks back to Jean Baudrillard's *simulacrum* or the hyperreal; Baudrillard laments that global culture is in the process of rewriting history itself, regardless of the (de Manian) materiality of an irreversible historical *event*, and "all that has happened this century in terms of progress, liberation, revolution and violence is about to be revised for the better[sic]" (Baudrillard, Jean. *The Illusion of the End*, 13). This "revising" is simply that which cannot *be*, if we adhere to the irreversibility of the historical event, which is invulnerable to rewriting, but which still can be susceptible to relapse. De Man suggests that this sort of relapse was precisely what Schiller un/intentionally did to Kant in the former's allegorical misreading of the latter, but in either case, we must not submit to cautionary tales about the simulacra, but instead vigorously engage in demystifying such simulations *with continuing production*, and *historical awareness*. In *The Return of the Real* (Hal

not to be situated in the local-global (Chinese) postmodern, at least not in an ideological sense, and nor does this refusal of positioning Ge Fei place him in the praxis of an unfinished project of Chinese modernism. Rather, Ge Fei's artistic project is nebulous and resistant to theoretico-ideological designations in the sense that it is *in process* (Deleuze): it is in the passage from a cognitive model of language to a performative model (de Man); it is an individual return to (a) real (Foster). And it is in this reading that we can deny a perhaps quaint *naming* of Ge Fei's works, and instead suggest that they are in a state of oscillation between temporal-ideological-social-historical registers: neither an *a posteriori* stance vis-à-vis modernism, nor an *a priori* stance vis-à-vis postmodernism. What I am suggesting is a Beckettian "antipathy to such absolutist theorizing"⁶⁵ wherein: "The danger is in the neatness of identifications. The conception of Philosophy and Philology as a pair of nigger minstrels out of the Teatro dei Piccoli is soothing, like the contemplation of a carefully folded ham-sandwich." And:

Foster), we are witness to an investigation into Baudrillard's "structural chiasmus between commodity and sign" where, for Baudrillard, the "structural chiasmus has now become *actual*: we have entered a political economy of the commodity-sign, with epochal ramifications for political economy, art practice, and cultural criticism" (92) that Foster argues was the prevalent ideology of the 1980s in the West. For Foster however, this ideology has been undermined during the 1990s as many artists attempt "to break with the textualist model of the 1970s as well as with the conventionalist cynicism of the 1980s" (124). What Foster designates as a response to the "crisis of the artistic sign," and "an emphatic turn to the bodily and the social, to the abject and the site-specific. From a conventionalist regime where nothing is real and the subject is superficial, much contemporary art presents reality in the form of trauma and the subject in the social depth of its own identity. After the apotheosis of the signifier and the symbolic, then, we are witness to a *turn to the real* on the one hand and a *turn to the referent* on the other. And with these turns come different returns—different genealogies of art and theory" (124). In this (problematic) *return of the real*, Foster argues that the author is reborn, the subject is both "evacuated" and "elevated" co-terminously in the "discourse of trauma," since, while paradoxically there is no subject of trauma in psychoanalysis, in the realm of pop-culture, trauma is the site which *guarantees* the subject, thus allowing for an "absentee authority," and a new form of subjectivity is produced (168). I would argue that this unique development in the West during the 1990s, the rebirth of a (literary) subject, is paralleled in Ge Fei's fiction, in his *renegotiation* of the literary subject self, which becomes its own return to the real, if however problematic.

⁶⁵ Oppenheim, Lois, *The Painted Word*, 5.

“Must we wring the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of the pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers? Literary criticism is not book-keeping.”⁶⁶ We want to avoid pigeonholing Ge Fei into a modern/post-modern register, especially in regards to the novel under consideration, as any designation would be the macroscopic equivalent of a fragmentation of the fiction, as well as of Ge Fei the writer himself.

Then, how do we proceed? In the closing remarks of the last section, we suggested how the re-negotiation of the literary subject vis-à-vis the production of (material) texts can be read manifestly on the structural level of *The Edge*, and how this in turn directly figures the *actantial* position of history and memory and their mutual textual narrative sitings. Indeed, the entire novel, read simultaneously as montage, i.e.: as being a *montage totality*, wherein one man’s life is contradictorily presented in so many inter/dis-connected, synecdochal-monads spanning the twentieth century,⁶⁷ and as a latticed narrative, or rather dual

⁶⁶ Beckett, Samuel, *Disjecta* 19, quoted in Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 5.

⁶⁷ Yu Peng (于彭), a Taiwanese painter of the eighties and the nineties, painted a commissioned montage picture of a Guomindang Ambassador, titled “In Memory of Wellington Ku (1986).” The ambassador’s children requested the painting after their father’s death, instead of the more contemporary photograph, or the portrait used in ancient times. Yu Peng painted a fantastic image of the Ambassador’s life, and not just the moments of his adult life, but rather Gu’s entire life, all on a single canvas. The shattered temporalities allow for the fragments of Gu’s being to be presented co-terminously, while still being connected in a larger totality by the canvas. The result is a visual representation very much similar to the narrator’s life in *The Edge*, which experiences the ruptures in temporality of the level of the inscribed character/letter. In the painting, there is a juxtaposition of traditional and modern motifs and images, an extravagant use of color, with the temporal moments of Ku’s life simultaneously co-existing together within the totalizing form of the canvas, all of which allow the viewer to be drawn into the image; to experience all the moments of one person’s life in all the varied nuances. *The Edge*, utilizing the medium of memory, likewise permits the reader to experience the narrator’s life, if on a somewhat less tangible plane. In any case, there is a striking similarity with each work’s respective use of temporality and memory, to varying degrees of success, and it is interesting to note the parallels in cultural development between China and Taiwan, even if it is through a somewhat Westernized spectrum. A copy of the painting is included in the Appendix.

narrative: infra- and meta-narratives co-terminously existing on the structural level, *is* a manifestation of memory produced by the literary subject in the form of a disjointed re-remembering narrative that impacts upon both the characters and the reader himself/herself. The novel is a figural journey through the (un/sub)consciousness of an unnamed narrator, eerily similar to Beckett's *Unnamable*, wherein to possess a name becomes the movement of death, as "expressiveness is "fatal," the Unnamable tells us, knowing full well that, as soon as something is named, it is no longer as it was."⁶⁸ And yet, like Beckett, Ge Fei is intimately engaging in the referential status of one's self, or rather believing "that one *is* one's language and, in desperation, we seek the word through which we can *be*,"⁶⁹ i.e.: the narrator of *The Edge* is speaking *his* story in language as a means of reminiscing on one's *being* (in time). We will return to this point shortly, but for now, a brief synopsis of the narrative, illustrated by Wang Dewei in *After Heteroglossia: Critical Reviews of Contemporary Chinese Fiction* (Zhongsheng Xuanhua Yihou: Dian ping Dangdai Zhongwen Xiaoshuo 众声喧哗以后: 点评当代中文小说) would be helpful in situating the narrative and the narrator himself:

The central character of the narrative is an elderly man whom has endured the rough course of [twentieth century Chinese] history, and the difficult position of being amongst China's lower classes. It is with this elderly figure that the reader accompanies as he reminisces on past times and past events... Overly romantic and draped in oceans of sorrow, the old man's recollections swerve and eddy about, all the while lingering on certain events and people in the past: his gloomy childhood, the difficulties encounter upon his

⁶⁸ Oppenheim, Lois, *The Painted Word*, 26.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* 26.

leaving home at a young age, the war(s) and revolution, several unforgettable women, a strange and unusual friendship [etcetera...].

故事的中心人物是一个历史经坎坷, 困处社会底层的老者. 随着老者对往时往事的追忆... 几许浪漫, 无限忧伤, 老者的追忆千回百转, 却总萦绕着祖人旧事: 阴森的童年, 少小离家的艰难, 战争与革命, 几个难忘的女子, 一段奇般的友谊...⁷⁰

In the same paragraph, Wang suggests that Ge Fei is attempting to inscribe or at least site the fiction within the major events and upheavals of twentieth century China, continuing the same historical appreciativeness evident in Ge Fei's other works, while his disjointed narrative technique places it in juxtaposition, or opposition to, the traditional narratives of twentieth century China, i.e.: socialist realism, which Wang somewhat vehemently attacks in other scholarly works.⁷¹ His remarks can be taken as accurate and do suggest one possible reading of this text and its conflicting construction vis-à-vis traditional (socialist) semi-historical/historical fictions. However, like Wang Jing, Wang Dewei does not go

⁷⁰ Wang Dewei, *After Heteroglossia: Critical Reviews of Contemporary Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongsheng Xuanhua Yihou: Dian ping Dangdai Zhongwen Xiaoshuo*) (Taipei: Maitian Publishing House, 2001), 247.

⁷¹ In Wang's other works, notably *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*, its Chinese counterpart *Xiaoshuo Zhongguo: Wan Qing dao Dangdai de Zhongwen Xiaoshuo*, and his preface to the third edition of C.T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, there is a somewhat distinct and yet subtle support of a more conservative viewpoint regarding Chinese literature, first brought to the fore in American sino-academia by the aforementioned book by C.T. Hsia. In essence, this viewpoint promotes recognition of works done by Chinese authors prior to 1949, while downplaying the significance and value of those works published in Mainland China after the Communist triumph. Arguing that these later works were (still?) too closely monitored and censored by the official Cultural Bureau, Hsia admonishes scholars to closely scrutinize mainland works while praising works done in the so-called "free" areas (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the overseas communities). Wang, in the late twentieth century, while not circumspectly disregarding all mainland works, prefers to praise particular books and essays that have been censored or banned, all the while lamenting, much like Chen Xiaoming, the vulgarization and commercialization of the literary industry. In either case, there is an attempt to belittle the significance of works written and published in mainland China for no other reason than that they do not incur the wrath of the Cultural Bureau. Such a position denies the significance of these works in the broader spectrum of Chinese literature, while valorizing a select few. If our discussion of the works of Ge Fei can be taken as a case in point, there is indeed very important literature being written in China that does not necessarily provoke the state Cultural Bureau into retaliating, and it deserves an equal position within the diaspora of Chinese literature.

far enough; he does not interrogate further the narrative structure of *The Edge* and how the unnamable narrator paradoxically displaces and re-positions the literary subject all within the triumvirate relationship of writer-text-reader. It is here that we shall begin.

The novel figuratively opens up and sites itself in the rural village of *maicun* (麦村), and subsequently expands through one man's recollection of his life. The exegesis is sheltered under the controlling rubric that one's history is simply *just* (recollected) stories or memory, which in turn can be read as one nodal-monadological fragment of a collective's unconscious scaled down to a microscopic level. Such a controlling rubric, or matrix (memory flux-machine), facilitates and invests history, both on an individual and collective level, with nodal weak-points: a destabilizing characteristic, wherein history can be read as subjective *stories* re/de-constructed by memory; or rather these *stories* (history) become susceptible to memory's inherent fallibility. The nodal weak-points are the areas where history opens up to being re-conceptualized, re-contextualized, in essence, re-told, in monadological moments of *now-time* that have been blasted free from the linear illusion of a progressive history. These moments, or stories/memories, are psychical objects of history, whose first constitution is realized through this very rupture in a person's nonlinear (re-)telling of one's history. In turn, we can now read these psychic objects as possessing a dual nature, or rather as Benjamin's "fore-history" and "after-history," wherein:

As fore-history, the objects are prototypes, ur-phenomena that can be recognized as precursors of the present, no matter how distant

or estranged they now appear. Benjamin implies that if the fore-history of an object reveals its possibility (including its utopian potential), its after-history is that which, as an object of natural history, it has in fact become. Both are legible within the “monadological structure” of the historical object that has been “blasted free” of history’s continuum.⁷²

Ge Fei’s narrative structure in *The Edge* makes visual this conception of nonlinear history, and directly engages the reader in the juxtaposition of moments of memory: each chapter can be read as nodal-monadological (material) events, or fragments in the fictional retelling of one’s past, that nevertheless remain connected by the montage-like structure of the novel as a whole. We simultaneously have Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* perched upon an anonymous *Hill of Skulls*, wherein “history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation,”⁷³ which is precisely the task undertaken by Ge Fei’s unnamed narrator. It is within this “retrospective contemplation” that Ge Fei once again sites the *terror* (the undercurrent narrative trope existent in nearly all of his works): the terror of the self (自我的恐惧). Indeed, if the self was the terror/enemy in *The Enemy*, as we have illustrated above, then this has now been amplified in *The Edge* by the very act of reminiscing, since this mental function is played out on both intra- and meta-narrative levels and is always-already in a state of re/de-construction. Hence, the recollection of the past becomes the self’s “fore-history” blasted free from the historical continuum and allowed to inform upon the present moment of retelling, which, nevertheless, comes with a price: the recollection of the past as “fore-

⁷² Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, 1999), 219.

⁷³ *ibid.* 219.

history” in the present means that these past moments are refigured by the present act of re-remembering. Herein lies the pivotal paradox: “one cannot interpret the truth of the present reality without past texts [which we will read as memory manifested in the material text], but this reality transforms radically the way these texts are read.”⁷⁴ The tropological terror in Ge Fei’s fictions metamorphosize from the terror of one’s own memories into the terror of being *retold*, or perhaps *mistold*, which can be transcribed not only in the individual’s self, but also into that of the collective unconscious. Hence, the narrator in *The Edge* is engaging in his act of *retelling* as a means to (re-)solidify one’s own past and identity that has been radically displaced over the course of twentieth century China, and it is within this character that Ge Fei *images* China’s identity if only on a microscopic level. However, Ge Fei is not attempting some grand maneuver of redemption, since, as we have been attempting to illustrate throughout our analysis, this re-remembering is also a priori a destabilizing movement, as the (re-)production of memory is that process *sans objectif*, and therefore the desire for (re-)production (of memory) continues within the state of *permanent parabasis*; it is enmeshed within the passage from a cognitive mode of language to a performative mode, which is nevertheless the site of the displaced (literary) subject. The *actantial* place of history in the narrative of *The Edge* is spatially present in the disjointed retelling of the narrator’s past and thus becomes affective upon the entire cast of characters that are, in essence, being retold *by* the narrator. Indeed, theirs is a true *terror* since they are *being* retold by the narrator, the very thing that the latter fears and which, in turn, prompts his recollecting of the past. And yet, this past,

⁷⁴ *ibid.* 233.

this *history* is unknowable and unknown; it is unobtainable, or rather, it is resistant to cognition: it is subjective and subjected to the fallacy of memory, all the while informing on the present narrative literary subject.

The positioning of the tropological terror in the infra-narrative, or rather its continual repositioning from chapter to chapter, which indeed are the symbolic recollections of memory as an almost senile old man (re-)tells his life to unknown interlocutors, becomes the dual act of re-remembering in the meta-narrative. This structural expansion of an infra-narrative retelling impacts directly on the reader and his/her *act* of reading. Indeed, each chapter functions as a *breach*: the reader is forced into reorienting himself/herself at the beginning of each new chapter/memory. The rupturing of a progressive, linear narrative, wherein temporal markers are continually abused and assaulted, traditional techniques of flashback and foreshadowing are consciously struggled against, manifests what Derrida designates as “writing as breaching,” which emerges from his reading of Freud’s psychoanalysis and the act of writing. This “breaching” is a “psychical repetition of this previously *neurological* notion: [it is an] opening up of its own space, effraction, [a] breaking of a path against resistances, rupture and irruption become a route”⁷⁵ from which the recollection of memory(-ies), i.e.: one’s past existence, becomes re-presented in the present, which, nevertheless, radically transforms them by the *present* reality so that they can no longer be *read* as purely past events. Indeed, like the note in *The Enemy*, they have become free-floating *actants* in the disjointed narrative being *read in the present*. This *reading in the*

⁷⁵ Derrida, Jacques, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference* (Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 214.

present is the dual spatialization of the *act* of reading, wherein the narrator is in essence reading (or recreating) his past in the fiction itself, which manifests as the *breach* in writing: the rupturing of a linear narrative progression, and secondly, this *breaching* acts as a destabilizing agent in the tri-polar relationship of writer-text-reader, wherein the *breaching* transcends beyond that of a figurative *breaching of memory* on the part on the narrator and becomes performative in its impact on the reader: the reader is required to continually reorient himself/herself vis-à-vis the text; or perhaps, the reader is required to re-remember himself/herself *in* the *act* of reading, with all the concomitant unreliability of memory therein. If the reader himself/herself is thrust into this continuous act of remembering what has just *been* read (which is now in the past), he/she is then required to recall that past, which nevertheless becomes unreliable *as* the past, since it has been transformed by its (new?) present. Reading is now a suspect act, or is it? If writing is breaching, and that in turn transcends into the act of reading, where is the figurative hand of the text? What then of the literary subject self and *its* memory?

If we have been suggesting that the literary subject in Ge Fei's fiction has been intimately entwined within the functioning of memory, and that that same memory is a priori in a state of permanent disruption (or breaching), a continuous passage or process in the (re/de-construction) of language in the text, it is not to suggest that memory *is* language, but rather it is to suggest that memory is a *medium* by which the past can be explored *in* language. Benjamin states that: "language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an *instrument* for

exploring the past [either a local or global collective past], but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced... He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter... For the “matter itself” is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation.”⁷⁶ Thus, if “one is one’s language,” memory becomes the medium by which we explore ourselves in language, but this memory is constantly being re/de-created, and hence it is enmeshed within the passage to a performative mode *of* language. Since memory is no longer a simply stative and cognized functioning medium in language but is continually performing either textually in the infra-narrative, or manifestly in the meta-narrative, this returning “again and again to the same matter” is that process of continual re-remembering. Like Zhao Shaozhong in *The Enemy*, who gravitates again and again to the (material) event of the *dahuo* to interrogate further the image of the fire and the note of scribbled names, the narrator in *The Edge* likewise returns continuously to episodes in his life. One example is the return to his episodic childhood in the village of *maicun* and the bizarre reverse-Oedipal relationship with his father, whom plays the docile role in the family, in contrast to the overbearing and violent mother, whom is draped in the figurative “no” of the male. Yet, there is still the male fascination with the naked female form, as his quiet staring at his mother’s nude body while the latter is bathing is testament to. The “reversal” of the Oedipal relationship occurs when the reclining female form of his mother,

⁷⁶ Benjamin, Walter, “Memory and Excavation” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. II* (Translated by Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 576.

whom almost seemed to be intimating an invitation to her son as the reclining Renaissance *Venus of Urbino* by Titian is wont to do, becomes Manet's *Olympia* of the nineteenth century: a prostitute whom performs a marketable service, indifferent to warmth and uninviting, wherein the female form is the (fetish) commodity and almost in a confrontational mood. This uninviting female form is evident in the mother's imperative to her son to exit the washroom. Indeed, the narrator's mother becomes outright hostile and aggressive (the commodity is fighting back, an ultimate reversal of the submissive commodity/female form) and flings a pail of water at her son, who in turn, beats a hasty retreat to the *inviting* warmth of his father's study. Ge Fei seems to be attempting to invert the traditional familial code of the dominant male—submissive female paradigm, which was still in use in *The Enemy*. Our designation of a reverse-Oedipal relationship should not be construed as an uncritical imposition of a Western mode of thought onto a Chinese context, as the male superior-complex is prevalent in the Chinese situation, wherein the female takes on the role of the comforting family reconciler. Our use is more due to the pervasiveness of Freudian concepts in contemporary Chinese scholarship (a point we shall return to later). For what purpose is Ge Fei inverting this familial code? How does this relationship affect his later life? Indeed, the death of his father is seen as a very traumatic event, and yet there is a fascination with the smell of death. What position does the narrator's olfactory senses have within the narrative? In any case, we must first question the reliability of these very episodic memories, and how they in turn have been reread during the present. It is precisely *in the present* that

we read these events, wherein the narrator's interlocutor(s) is a young female "80s child" of the reforms, who engages him in a playful manner. It is a relationship not of an elder man with a young granddaughter or niece, but as in a same-sex relationship on a level of mutual understandability. In fact, the only area of misunderstanding is centered in a generational divide, where the aged narrator remarks on the attitudes of the young and their displacement from the events of history that have so impacted upon him, notably the Revolution and the Cultural Revolution. The narrator is never seen as a (stereotypical) male protagonist who is active in the events around him, but rather, the contrast is true: he more or less bumbles along in the docile role of the *acted upon* character, in contradistinction with the often seen *actor* of (male) history (note, for instance, the "grandfather" in Mo Yan's (莫言) *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱 and his explicit male-active subjectivity).

To further emphasize this docile (stereotypical female) nature, we now move to the episodic hotchpotch (re-)telling of the narrator's (disjointed) time during the war periods. Throughout both the Resistance War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949), the narrator constantly encounters the spectre of death and the *terror* of death, the siege on the communist fortress as a case in point, wherein the very ground surrounding the fortress seemed to bleed in an anthropomorphic transmigration. In fact, the ground was spongy in a macabre sense, due to the enormous number of bodies unceremoniously buried amongst the still living. The entire scene is permeated with death and foreboding and yet, the narrator does not seem to really engage *with* it, which begs the question of

why? In Ihab Hassan's discussion of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, the bullfighting character of Romero "functions as a symbol," rather than a character, and it is in the arena, where death is like the ever-watching spectator, that the experience of life can garner "meaning," or rather "only in confrontation with death does life acquire meaning and lose its *terror* [my italics]." ⁷⁷ In Andre Malraux's *The Royal Way*, there is likewise the validation of life through the encounter and confrontation *with* death. The narrator in *The Edge* is likewise given this opportunity to confront death in the theatre of war, wherein the tropological terror would have the avenue provided for its dissipation, but he recoils in fright and retreats to a nearby ravine to await the battles end. Absurdly, a Guomindang (GMD) officer, if for no other reason than the fact that he is still alive, rewards him for his (non-) bravery. But what kind of life is it? His eventual capture by the communists (where, ironically, he and the other prisoners are mercifully released on condition that they "repent" their so-called "evil-ways"), his persecution during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and his alienation during the New Era of Reforms, all transpired with a sense of dread and terror that continues unabated within the heart of the narrator. It seems his docile and non-confrontational nature has continued the (re-)existence of the terror he felt during his childhood years. Indeed, his relationships with Zhong Yuelou (仲月楼), a morbid doctor during the wars, is one of a submissive child to a dominant alpha male; his curious relationship with Hu Die (胡蝶), whose virtue he is unable to rescue from Japanese aggressors, all substantiate and support his position as the

⁷⁷ Hassan, Ihab, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 98.

docile beta male. What becomes even more disturbing is the fact that the narrator seems to be transforming, or at least mimetically becoming representative of, his father, which was a development we witnessed in *The Enemy* to a more explicit degree. Wang Jing hints at such a “nostalgia for the missing sign of the father” and suggests that it is a “return to the tropes of historical discourse,”⁷⁸ and while this does make note of the reemergence of *history*, it is not a return, but rather, as we have been attempting to suggest, a re-negotiation played out in the spatialized literary subject. Indeed, if the “missing sign of the father” were to be read as an “historical origin,” as Wang suggests, Ge Fei’s use of docile and *non*-active male father figures would seem to disenfranchise the entire search for an “historical origin” in the sense of a male dominated Chinese subjectivity. Zhong Xueping, in *Masculinity Besieged*, takes issue with this very point, suggesting that since the May Fourth Movement Chinese intellectuals have been consciously engaging in this problematic of male masculinity and Chinese history⁷⁹, which, I would suggest, prevents reading the avant-garde’s development in the 1990s as a “return” to history. Instead, the reemergence of history is a re-utilization, and/or a rediscovery of history in the medium of memory. Why then does Ge Fei continue to use this docile and submissive male protagonist? Why is the narrator read (by the reader) in a submissive manner and mode? Why a *submissive mode* of reading, especially after we have been making claims to the performativity of language manifested in the structure of Ge Fei’s fictions?

⁷⁸ Wang Jing, *China’s Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

⁷⁹ Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 15-51 and 119-170.

If we are reading the performative in language in the de Manian sense mentioned above, wherein words of power, or action, such as war, not in the material sense, but rather as in the inscription of the letter (of actual history), indicate the *performative* possibilities (emerging) in language, or rather the passage *of* language as cognition to language as performing, then we ought to be able to construct a negative dialectical image of such performative indicators (war), wherein *submissive* can be read as a *non-active/acting* performative: an inverse formulation of *pro-active* inscription. In this sense, the performative mode has been amplified and expanded to include a plentitude of *non-active* performatives, which negate their antithetical position in the same fashion as the performative is “recuperated” in a “tropological system of cognition.”⁸⁰ The antithesis becomes illusionary, since these *non-active* performatives become recuperated or reinscribed in a mental cognitive system: the psychical terrain of reading, and thus the site of their performativity. We have come full circle in regards to our reading of *The Edge*, which requires, on the part of the reader, a continual mental/psychic re-remembering of that which has just been read; it is the continual reorientation vis-à-vis the reading self and the text. In essence, the reader becomes the companion of the narrator in the latter’s persistent re-telling/re-interpreting of his memories which are inscribed as text, and which performs on the level of reading as that which is *being read in the present*. The reader in the tri-polar relationship is required to be active in his/her act of reading, even if that is in a *submissive* mode, which is sometimes more *persuasive* than a direct engagement. The “now-times,” or fragments of the narrator’s past allow for

⁸⁰ See above, page 39.

the reader to (*submissively*) interpret the present of the narrator, which is nevertheless radically transformed by the very re-reading of the fragments in the present, thus returning us to the sober fact that these fragments cannot be *rewritten*. The result is an antagonistic relationship between the reader, the text, and implied author, wherein the *submissive* mode of reading, while still performative, allows Ge Fei to (re)assert authorial control over the text, which can be imaged, in the persistent disorientation inflicted upon the (helpless?) reader. This relationship between the (implied) author and (implied) reader can be seen to be revolving around the inherent nature of the textual product/production itself, and the question of superiority concerning the act of “writing” vis-à-vis the act of reading. This, in turn, thrusts us into the hermeneutic question of “what does the text mean?” as opposed to “how it constructs its meaning?” If a confrontation with *death* imbues life with “meaning” in the infra-narrative, or the fiction itself, then how does that relate with the world outside of the text? Is there a concomitant need for this confrontation *outside*, and if so, whose death is it: the Barthesque “death of the author” or a more postmodern death of the reader? This fixation with death is suggestive of the *death instinct* mentioned above, which auto-referentially returns us to our desiring for production/our production of desire, and the chiasmic relationship illustrated in the section on *A Flock of Brown Birds*. And, since “death is not without a model, [f]or desire desires death also,”⁸¹ the question of what the text “means,” and as to whether or not this “meaning” can only be obtained in a (figural) confrontation with death is a priori *deferred* (in process). The act of interpretation seems to substantiate our “system,” since

⁸¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 8.

interpretation seldom yields the desired (libidinal) meaning for any one interpreter. Concurrently, the exponential multiplication of interpretations further divorces the writer from any sense of authorial control or supremacy. The “meaning” of the text is diffused and obfuscated *ad infinitum*. But, if this is the case, why bother to read, let alone write? It is here that we can now return to Ge Fei’s problematization of the act of reading, wherein his intentionally disorienting narrative, while representing the disjointedness of memory, challenges the reader to interpret the monadological fragments at the same time as he/she is submissively carried along. This author constructed fiction, which dispels any and all conventional experiences in reading, is Ge Fei’s movement for the reassertion of control over the textual product, which becomes indicative of the antagonism inherent in the tri-polar schema of writer-text-reader. Talking about Heinrich von Kleist’s aesthetic formulations, de Man views the development of this antagonistic and yet vital triumvirate as follows:

The superiority of reading over writing, as represented by the superiority of the reading bear over the fencing author, reflects the shift in the concept of text from an imitation to a hermeneutic model. From [the “meaning”] being openly asserted and visible in the first case, meaning is concealed in the second and has to be disclosed by a labor of decoding and interpretation. This labor then becomes the only *raison d’être* of a text for which “reading” is indeed the correct and exhaustive metaphor. This also implies that the relationship between author-reader and reader-reader now becomes in a very specific sense antagonistic. For the meaning that has to be revealed is not just any meaning, but the outcome of a distinction between intended and stated meaning that it is in the author’s interest to keep hidden.⁸²

⁸² de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 281.

In this never-ending battle, the goal is mastery of the text, which the author indeed wants to retain, but which is nevertheless *deferred in process*. If this formulation of the act of reading becomes destabilized/is destabilizing, then concomitantly the act of writing, as a dialectical (mirror) image, is likewise in a state of flux. We read (and write) in order to confront the disorientation of the referential world outside by engaging in a figural battle on the psychic or mental plane. It is here in this flux (-machine) that the re-negotiated literary subject locates its reinterpreted medium of expression, the only problem is: what kind of subject is it?

Throughout this analysis of Ge Fei's literature, we have been discussing the re-negotiation of the literary subject vis-à-vis the text and the formers' production *of* and *in* the text. If we were to broaden our horizons, so to speak, and draw back into the problematic of situating Ge Fei as either a modern or postmodern writer, taking into account the claims, critiques, and dismissals of such critics as Wang Jing, Zhang Xudong, Chen Xiaoming and others, then, in essence, at the (non/hermeneutic) core of it all, we have been discussing what Ching-kiu Stephan Chan designates as the "displacement of subjectivity at the margins of modernity,"⁸³ even if we are not using it in quite the same fashion. Chan, like Yang Xiaobin, seems to be too personally enmeshed in a (Western) psychoanalytic critique of literature, and while it must be admitted that we have indeed had recourse to such a method, it has always been done with a great amount of trepidation. What is problematic in the above two scholars works is the

⁸³ Chan, Stephan Ching-kiu. "Split China, or, the Historical/Imaginary: Toward a Theory of the Displacement of Subjectivity at the Margins of Modernity" in Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing, ed. *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 86.

near wholesale imposition of overtly Freudian paradigms of mental-cognitive functions in their respective critiques, begging the question of its applicability. If we start from the maxim that art is not autonomous, i.e.: that it is directly influenced by its indigenous culture as it simultaneously acts as an influencing agent, then it seems plausible that the same can be said of theory, thus utilizing any such suspect methods of critique a priori requires that there be a measure of reservation and critique of the critique. In any case, Chan and Yang, and to a lesser extent, Tang Xiaobing and Chen Xiaoming, ironically⁸⁴ tend to resort to Freudian schematics in a somewhat uncritical manner, which is not only a fault (unwillingly?) initiated by them, but is a problematic in the very nature of any psychoanalytic critique. A failure to investigate, or at least postulate reservations in using Freudian psychoanalysis is a de Manian *blindness*, or an intentional forgetting which overlooks critical problems in psychoanalysis, “for psychoanalysis considers artworks to be *essentially* unconscious projections of those who have produced them, and, preoccupied with the hermeneutics of thematic material, it forgets the categories of form, and, so to speak, transfers the pedantry of sensitive doctors to the most inappropriate objects [my italics].”⁸⁵ Indeed, Adorno continues this questioning of psychoanalysis by stating that: “In artistic production, unconscious forces are *one sort of impulse*, material among

⁸⁴ Ironical for the fact that all these scholars, while trained in the West, are Chinese subjects themselves, and the wholesale utilization of a Western theoretical method and its applicability to the Chinese context is left untouched, as if the hermeneutical “sameness” of the early Clifford Geertz was awaiting the spiraling critique, and theory can be used simply as autonomous theory dissociated from culture and useful in any context. This utopian thinking is what first needs to be questioned and dispelled, and then, and only then, can theory be textualized wherein its non-autonomous nature can be interrogated.

⁸⁵ Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

many others. They enter the work mediated by the law of form; if this were not the case, the actual subject portrayed by a work would be nothing but a *copy* [my italics].”⁸⁶ While this criticism of psychoanalysis as a mode of aesthetic critique is useful and to the point, we likewise have to tread carefully and not be enamored with the critique of *form*, which far too often can lead to a similar faith in an hermeneutic center.⁸⁷ Shih Shu-mei also illustrates how many May Fourth intellectuals were skeptical regarding the value and usefulness of Freudian psychoanalysis, positioning that skepticism in the collective (un-)consciousness, wherein “psychoanalysis did not appear to have any greater collective significance. It did not really promise a better future, nor did it open itself easily to instrumentalization for the immediate improvement of society...”⁸⁸ It is ironic that the very same theoretical paradigm that was so vigorously examined at the beginning of the twentieth century would find a beneficial afterlife in late twentieth century (overseas) Chinese scholarship. In any case, what all this questioning of psychoanalysis seeks to illustrate is the very problematical, but vital negotiation of the (literary) self/subject in the realm of culture, politics, and history that has preoccupied the collective Chinese (un-)conscious and which has informed upon the praxis of any and all theoretical implementation. Ge Fei’s renegotiation is likewise situated in this twentieth century critique of (Chinese) subjectivity, if only with a slight shifting in the emphasis that became more

⁸⁶ *ibid.* 9.

⁸⁷ See de Man, Paul, “The Dead-end of Formalist Criticism,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 229-245.

⁸⁸ Shih, Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing in Semicolonial China 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 63.

evident in the late 1980s during the emergence of a (misnamed) avant-garde movement.

In our discussion up to this point, we have been penetrating into the positioning, *actantially*, of memory and history in Ge Fei's fiction, ever more explicit in *The Edge*, but essentially we have been dealing with the status of language in these texts and how it acts as a medium for memory in the exploration of one's past/a culture's collective past. Ge Fei, in the short story *Gong'an* (公案) alludes to that power in language, when the elderly monk in the story, after reading, and being disturbed by, a diary of an unknown girl, comments to his disciple that: "I never thought the words in a book could also have their own intelligence (想不到书中文字竟然也有灵性...)." ⁸⁹ This imbuing of language with an intelligence/spirit is precisely that ontological problematic concerning the origin and status of language in both a cognitive and performative mode, and any passage therein. And, this ontological problematic is based specifically in the referential ambiguity of the *sign*, which, reading from de Man, "does not actually say what it means to say, or, to drop the misleading anthropomorphic metaphor of a speaking sign with a voice, the predication involved in a sign is always citational," which automatically pre-designates a predicative sentence, "what in scholastic terminology is called an *actus signatus*: it presupposes an implicit subject (or I)," ⁹⁰ that is always-already intimated in any use of language, due to the citational sign. In de Man's discussion of the subject in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, or rather the examination of the problematic of the subject, which, in Hegel is

⁸⁹ Ge, Fei, "Gong'an" in *Jinse*, 52.

⁹⁰ de Man, Paul, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, 96.

entwined in the mutual animosity between the sign and symbol, de Man suggests that Hegel differentiates between a “thinking subject” and a “perceiving subject” that are mutually distinguishable just as *thought* is in contradistinction to *seeing*. This distinction, de Man argues, is “reminiscent of (or that anticipates) the distinction... in the differentiation between the sign and symbol,” and “just as the sign refuses to be in the service of sensory perceptions but uses them instead for its own purposes, *thought*, unlike perception, appropriates the world and literally “subjects” it to its own powers [my italics].”⁹¹ This *power* of *thought* is not cognitive, but performative, just as the image of the sublime in Kant is beyond that of cognizance. This performative, or active element in language is manifested in a dual performativity in *The Edge*, wherein the infra-narrative “now-times” of re-remembering the past on the part of the narrator are no longer *just* moments of remembering, but rather, they become superimposed, indeed, they transcend the boundaries of the infra-narrative and become *performative moments* that cause the *submissive* reader to (re-)memorize each moment (chapter) in order to access any kind of cognitive formulization/conceptualization of the entire montage whole (this attempt at cognizing is the same *recuperation* or *reinscription* of the performative in a tropological system of cognition mentioned above). In this act (on the reader/writer), the novel satisfies the “paradigm for art,” which is “thought rather than perception, the sign rather than the symbol ... memorization rather than recollection.”⁹² *The Edge* manifests the performative mode of language on the structural level in that it requires the (*submissive*) reader to perform the act of

⁹¹ *ibid.* 97.

⁹² *ibid.* 103.

memorizing the disjointed and episodic narrative; it thus expands the renegotiation of the literary subject vis-à-vis the text in that it makes the tri-polar relationship the performative axis of its future developmental processes. All the nodal points, the writer, the text, and the reader, become participants in the renegotiation of the subject with the outside world through the *medium* of memory by allowing us to explore that past which has been blasted free of history's continuum. This entire relationship likewise comes under the rubric of our chiasmic relationship discussed in the section on *A Flock of Brown Birds* and fulfills the desiring production of identity/memory that allows us to investigate those moments of "fore-history" in the *present of reading*, since we are reading the text/art as "of the past in a radical sense, in that, like memorization, it leaves the interiorization of experience forever behind. It is of the past to the extent that it *materially inscribes*, and thus forever forgets, its ideal content [my italics]."⁹³ And while a movement of this sort in Hegel divorces art from the aesthetic, or rather "occurs at the expense of the aesthetic as a stable philosophical category,"⁹⁴ as de Man indicates, it is the engagement of the text, or art, with the reader as a thinking subject, that reactivates an aesthetic by utilizing the agent of language, which is where one's own being resides and which is a priori in the passage from the cognitive to the performative mode, the *permanent parabasis*. Ge Fei has broached a level of investigation into the status of the literary subject that does indeed have *praxis*; it does engage in the avant-garde project of re-injecting art into social praxis by interrogating the very institution and

⁹³ *ibid.* 103.

⁹⁴ *ibid.* 103.

conceptualizations of the subject that have plagued the Chinese intellectual throughout the twentieth century. *The Edge* is enmeshed in a game of high-stakes, textually active and performative in its mode of language, implementing on the structural level the materiality of the letter inscribed (without materiality) as the “stuff” of actual history. The self/subject becomes manifest in this materiality and thus enters *into* real history, in the sense of a *history* that is no longer confined to the misconstrued boundaries of linearity, but a *history* that is free of the continuum and thus is active; it is a *performative history*. Why then, after such an achievement, does Ge Fei “pull out,” or rather make a strategic retreat into the more conventional and “well” structured novel *The Banner of Desire*? What happened? After interrogating the status of the subject in literary production, indeed, (unconsciously?) suggesting a new paradigm from which the literary subject can be positioned, wherein that positioning is an *active* agent in the triumvirate of writer-text-reader, why the withdrawal? And, what is yet to come?

POSTSCRIPT: *Yuwang de Qizhi (The Banner of Desire)* and Ge Fei's

“Retreat (?)”—A Conclusion

In the post-New Era literature is *divorced* from social *utility* and the mission of enlightenment in the general climate of consumerism, commodification, mediatization, and entertainment... Since the post-New Era coincides with the last decade of the [Western] twentieth century, its literature reveals a *fin de siècle* sensibility, and the following features represent departures from the fundamental premises of the New Era: the *reestablishment* of *subjectivity*, the return to humanism, and the quest for aesthetic autonomy independent of political constraints.⁹⁵

Sheldon H. Lu sums up rather succinctly the (perceived of) development of Chinese fiction in the 1990s, the post-New Era and perhaps more (traumatically) important post-Tian'anmen China. He later states that the “literary avant-garde largely withered and faded away during the 1990s, or else its practitioners adopted more popular styles of narration. “Pure literature” (*chun wenxue* 纯文学) has suffered considerable decline and retreated further to the margins of society.”⁹⁶ This “retreat” is eerily similar to Stephen Chan's positioning of subjectivity at the “margins of modernity” mentioned above. Indeed, this summation is unfortunately close to the point, as many avant-garde writers have left the pursuit of “pure” literature to follow other paths of creativity, noted in the revival of the essay, while others have simply abandoned writing all together, or at least only engage in writing fiction as a leisure activity. Ma Yuan, the noted forerunner of avant-garde or experimental fiction, seldom writes and

⁹⁵ Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 239.

⁹⁶ *ibid.* 240.

when he does, it is rather the essay *about* writing than actual fiction. Ge Fei likewise has traveled this route with the publication of two collected volumes of essays in 2001 indicate. Those in the second category, most notable Can Xue, have disappeared from the literature world, and in essence only surface when her works are the topic of scholarly criticism. The majority of writers in the 1990s have indeed “adopted more popular styles of narration,” and Ge Fei’s *The Banner of Desire*, his last fictional work (for now), falls into this category. Another noted work that likewise illustrates the (re-)turn to a more popularized form is *Huozhe* (*To Live* 活着) by Yu Hua, the writer of macabre violent fiction in the late 1980s. And while this novel still possesses the dark existentialist touch of absurdity and the gruesome, it most definitely fails to *live up to* the standards of violent *shock* horror of the author’s earlier and more confrontational and interesting works. In fact, the novel was adapted, with the assistance of the author, into the Zhang Yimou film of the same name, which in turn was heralded on the international film circuit as another great work from China’s Fifth Generation of filmmakers. Or, rather, it became a true artistic commodity in the world of international capital and cultural exchange.

For Ge Fei, *The Banner of Desire* marked an abrupt roundabout for China’s “archexperimentalist,” and a major departure from the author’s last major work, the already discussed *The Edge*. Unlike the latter work, *Yuwang de Qizhi* does not actively challenge the reader, and instead reads more as a conventional “well-made” novel. This is not to say that the novel was poorly written or unworthy of critical attention, and it does indeed have flashes of the more

engaging and antagonistic Ge Fei of the earlier examined works, rather, the major difference between all the former novels and short stories and this later work is the specific lack of *reader engagement* and *participation*, which was of vital importance in the early Ge Fei. In *The Banner of Desire*, Ge Fei is no longer re-telling a story that requires the reader to participate, to performatively re-remember episodic “now-times,” as we saw in *The Edge*. The narrative structure of the novel is more straightforward in terms of linearity, wherein past events are related in a more conventional “flashback” mode. Likewise, the recurrence of an event or scene in the narrative does not have the same impact or connotation that was prevalent in *The Enemy* and *The Edge*, i.e.: the continuous *excavation* of “fore-history” which, in turn, informs upon the present (*of reading*) while concurrently is transformed by that very same present in a radical sense: the attempted re-inscription of that past into the present of memory. Instead, it is the same event seen from a different character viewpoint, a rather conventional stylistic tool in the contemporary pop-cultural scene. Even the setting, that of a university campus, the underlying subplot of a university conference in dire straits due to a lack of funding, and the primary character, Ceng Shan (曾山), a disaffected, apathetic university professor stumbling through the ruins of a failed marriage and an ill-fated love affair, is the proto-typical postmodern antihero awash in a fragmented and hyperreal world. In essence, the novel is conventional, almost to the point of being passé in our shortened attention span (global) culture. There is the flare of a David Lodge, aside from his scholarly works, and Don DeLillo, or any other so-called postmodern writer in the West. There is the almost

inherent postmodern angst over money, love, and life, that seems to be swirling by so fast that we can barely hold on, not to mention attempt to grasp the ever-present absurdities of an over commodified existence. The location of the novel, that of urban Shanghai (Ge Fei's first foray into urban based fiction), assists in placing it in the (global) postmodern cultural landscape, wherein the collective psyche of the populace is always-already under constant assault by the plentitude of hyperreal commodities and *over-aggressive* commercial advertisements. It also points to the growing urbanization of China and the concomitants effects that this will have on Chinese society as a whole, wherein the failed project of Chinese socialism will be engulfed in a sea of McDonald wrappers and Hollywood movies. What this all intimates however, is China's (belated) arrival on the international scene, in terms of both economic and cultural power. The Venice Biennale in 1993 marked the first establishment of a Chinese pavilion of *modern* works, instead of the usual exotica of the *ancient Far East*. The awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to Gao Xingjian (高行健), a self-exiled writer living in France⁹⁷, further attests to the growing emergence of a Chinese (post)modern

⁹⁷ In regards to the Venice Biennale in 1993, it is true that modern works were on display, notably Xu Bing's (徐冰) installation *A Book From the Sky* (天书), but they were still promoted by the organizers as so much Eastern *exotica*, which in turn left a foul taste in many of the Chinese artists present. Not until more recent international exhibitions in Europe, Japan, and the U.S., did Chinese artists become more *foreign savvy*, and better suited for the inevitable insincerity of some non-Chinese organizers and art-buyers. As for the selection of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (灵山) for the Nobel Prize, it was a rather dubious selection, especially when one considers that the translator was a member of the very same selection committee. While there are those that praise the awarding of the prize to a Chinese writer as a long overdue acknowledgement of modern Chinese literary achievements, the fact that it was awarded to a self-exiled dissident, who is part of the global culture of commodity exchange, *and* who criticizes the mainland Communist government, taints the award with a suspicious political brush. Eerily similar to Wang Dewei's position, the award seems to disregard the works emerging from China, unless they are politically sensitive, and instead praises those that attempt to undermine the position of mainland China, waving her aside as an old and outdated communist. Also, to say that there is a difficulty with translating Chinese is no longer a legitimate excuse, as numerous Western and *Chinese*

culture that is evident and affective on the global stage. And while this selection was bemoaned (unofficially) or ignored (officially) by the Chinese in the People's Republic, a recent voluminous collection of 80s and 90s writers, titled “走向诺贝尔,” or in English, “*Walking Towards the Nobel Prize*,” indicates that such an (superficial) international award is indeed on the minds of China's cultural producers. In essence, writing in China has truly become a commodity in the 1990s, wherein writers have to swim with the current, write *shock literature* (or, what is more commonly known as *hooligan literature*), or simply get “washed away,” “recede like the tide,” or any number of euphemisms which all intimate the eventual *footnoting* of such authors in nostalgic twentieth century anthologies of modern fiction. The former path of writing is one of economic success and the latter is that of economic ruin. The avant-garde project of the late 1980s, the attack on the institution of art with the ultimate goal of reintroducing art back into social praxis was an unintended success: art was reintroduced into praxis, but not *as* art, rather *as* the commodity. Chen Xiaoming continuously remarks and laments this turn in literature, and bemoans it as the *end* of *great* or important literature in China, accusing the writers of the 1990s as surrendering to the hyperreal world of a commodity-based culture. In his essay, “After “*The End of History*,” the *Crisis in 90s Fiction* (“*Lishi Zhongjie*” *zhihou*: *Jiushi Niandai Wenxue Xugou de Weiji*),” he positions this negative development in literature in the experimentalism of the avant-garde and persistently claims that they have

scholars are equally functional in several Eastern and Western languages. To still disregard the cultural production in Mainland China *because* of its governmental structure and the “strangeness” of its language is precisely what *is outdated*, a relic of Cold War divisions, and which ought to be surpassed sooner rather than later.

exhausted the possibilities for “pure literature,” in turn suffocating and thus prematurely ending the development of future great literary works. Chen’s pessimism is evident throughout much of the scholarly work being written on literature in China, wherein the 1990s are seen as a vulgarization and submission to mass consumerism, and a retreat from serious literature.⁹⁸ Stephen Lu’s comments above are an example of the same phenomenon in a diasporic setting. Is *The Banner of Desire* this same kind of submission? Is it really a retreat on Ge Fei’s part? Or perhaps, can we read this last work of fiction by Ge Fei as a cathartic experiment that transcends the moment of writing *that* work and thus figures the present writing/reading of now?

Above we illustrated some of the characteristics that the novel contains which situates it in the conventional postmodern “buzz” literature, in a globalized commodity culture of literary production. Its publication in 1996 firmly ensconces it within the general cultural malaise and fin de siècle sensibility of the mid-nineties, regardless of Western or Eastern spatialization. The ambiguous (non)ending, wherein Ceng Shan walks off into the receding horizon with his estranged daughter is indicative of avant-garde literature in the late 1980s, and its lack of an ending (有头无尾), but the novel itself does not build up to this sort of

⁹⁸ The authors accused of this vulgarization of Chinese literature are mainly those born in the late seventies, after the Cultural Revolution, and who came of age during the heyday of the reforms. Han Dong, Zhu Wen, Wang Wei, Chen Ran, and others, all come under Chen’s somewhat harsh criticism. He bemoans the fact that they have no *historical trauma* from which to write from, which in turn pushes them towards over individualization and superfluosity. The triviality in Wang Wei’s works in particular raise his ire and cause him to somewhat chauvinistically lump many female writers under the umbrella of over-indulgent romanticism. Chen seems inclined to attack the nineties authors, instead of appreciating the possibilities within them; the possibilities opened up by the avant-garde experimentation. This is not, however, meant to belittle Chen Xiaoming’s criticism, as he does have some very unique insights into contemporary Chinese culture. Rather, our goal is to engage in dialogue by constructive criticism, and suggest that there is still hope in the future for Chinese literature, and we ought not to summarily disregard the accomplishments of the nineteen-nineties.

reading, especially if one is unaware of Ge Fei's earlier works. Indeed, the climax of the novel seems rather too postmodern-esque, as so many other works without endings; it seems contrived. What is of more interest for us, at this conjuncture in time, at this *moment of reading*, is the republication of the novel in 2001, which was soon followed by the aforementioned two collections of essays, *Ge Fei's Collected Essays* (*Ge Fei de Sanwen* 格非的散文) and *The Siren's Song* (*Sairen de Gesheng* 赛人的歌声). These publications were also companions to a number of interviews done by Ge Fei in the years leading up to 2000, which likewise saw publication, either in book form or on the internet. The topic of these interviews would often lead to direct questions concerning the place of *The Banner of Desire* in Ge Fei's corpus, and ironically, the book least recognized by critics, engendered the greatest number of questions. In fact, even with the original publication in 1996, Ge Fei, in the afterword, states almost emphatically that the characters in the novel had no intended likenesses to living persons, and any such therein were simply coincidences. Again, it seems somewhat contrived. It is in 2001, in the collected essays, that Ge Fei's denial may rather be a figural apparition, and not the entire truth; or perhaps a conscious denial of an unconscious act, it is difficult to be sure. In the novel, Ceng Shan's supervisor, Professor Gu (贾教授), commits suicide by hurling himself from his apartment balcony. The latter's death has more of an impact on the funding for the conference than incurring any emotional trauma on the part of his wife or colleagues. Ceng Shan's fellow post-graduate student, Song Zijin (宋衿子), eventually has a nervous breakdown and refers to Ceng Shan as god, on the

latter's day of visiting the asylum. Both of these events have precursors in real-life, and while not involving Ge Fei on a directly personal level, they were nevertheless tertiary events that did have an impact. This (disguised⁹⁹) act of autoreferentiality returns us to the autotextual practice/movements discussed before, wherein a text is always in a state of decomposition, or rather, of being interrogated and deconstructed by later texts; the story is never *finished*. In Ge Fei's interview with Zhang Ying (张英), he explicitly states that *The Banner of Desire* was an experiment, "*The Banner of Desire* is an attempt on my part (《欲望的旗帜》是我写作上的一个尝试),"¹⁰⁰ and that its use of conventional narrative structure and form was a literary *project* to write a *well-made* (postmodern/popular) *fiction*. While such assertions may seem presumptuous, if we take into account the republication of the *same* novel in 2001, coupled with the essay collections and their personal referencing material, and also the other fragments of interviews and quotations, then a larger schematic begins to emerge, wherein the reader, or at least the conscientious reader, is being engaged in a similar fashion to *The Edge* but in a much more dispersed and indeed fragmented sense. The engagement, instead of taking place within the realm of a single text, has been transposed over many texts (autotextually), wherein the republication and the collected essays become the *actant*: they require the reader to return to the past of reading and bring it forth into the *present of reading*, i.e.: to blast that past

⁹⁹ "Disguised" for the fact that only those intimate with Ge Fei and his situation would realize that the events in *Yuwang de Qizhi* were not entirely fictional in the original 1996 edition.

¹⁰⁰ Zhang Ying, ed., *Literature's Power: Interviews with Contemporary Writers (Wenxue de Liliang: Dangdai Mingzhu Zuojiat Fangtan lu 文学的力量: 当代名著作家访谈录)* (Beijing: China Publishing House, 2001), 317.

moment free of history's continuum, which has been (unconsciously) informing upon the present and which will, nevertheless, be radically transformed by its re-memorization in the present now. The cathartic experiment for Ge Fei was, either consciously or unconsciously, intimated in 1996 and only brought to fruition in late 2001. In this formulation, the novel was not a *retreat*, but rather a *real* experiment, or a "return to the real," which no more precipitates the death or end of the avant-garde, nor heralds a rebirth, since it was always in a state of *process*. While this may seem a rather grandiose suggestion to make, prior knowledge of Ge Fei's works and his conscious effort to destabilize and question the entire enterprise of reading and writing literature, at least allows some minimal support for our formulation. It was cathartic for Ge Fei, as it allowed him the opportunity to write a *well-made fiction*, to be just a *writer* and not an *experimentalist*, or *avant-gardist*, while nevertheless allowing him, by sleight of hand, to transpose his destabilizing move in literature over textual and temporal boundaries; to indeed blast history from its continuum, realized in both the text and in time. His "return to the real" moves him beyond simple designations of a postmodern or avant-garde writer, and even Ge Fei himself shirks the labeling of his works as avant-garde, insisting that such labels are the purview of critics, "I have never believed that my writing and myself were avant-garde, that is merely what critics have concluded (我写作从来没有认为我是先锋派, 这是评论家们所归纳的),"¹⁰¹ while nevertheless allowing for such "labels" to grace the covers of his recent publications. It is an ironic denial and simultaneous affirmation: a "return

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 318.

to the real” which is never really a return, but again an attempted recuperation of performative language into a tropological system of cognition. Indeed, Ge Fei makes similar contradictory claims throughout various articles and interviews, simultaneously insisting on the perseverance of the avant-garde: “The avant-garde exploration should be maintained (先锋探索应该坚持),”¹⁰² while suggesting that the avant-garde has disappeared: “The avant-garde, as a group of works, has already disappeared (先锋作为一个群体已经不存在),” and that he feels no responsibility for this disappearance: “Personally, I feel no responsibility in carrying on the mantle the avant-garde (我个人也没有对先锋小说承担什么义务).”¹⁰³ Ge Fei is playing with language and the reader/listener, performatively acting out power relations in interlocution (both textual and auditory), and continually re-negotiating himself as a literary subject vis-à-vis (desiring) production. If we suggest that Ge Fei will continue to write, which seems most likely, then to read *The Banner of Desire* as a retreat would deny it its afterlife in autotextual decomposition, which will always take place in the *present of reading* which is nevertheless in the process of becoming the *past*, i.e.: it is always being disrupted, always in a state of *permanent parabasis*. The literary subject (in Ge Fei’s works) will constantly be engaged and re-negotiated vis-à-vis its moment of production in the text, which is its past, which in turn will be blasted free to inform upon the (new) present which requires that it be radically transformed at the moment it likewise becomes *a past*. The conceptualization of an end to “great”

¹⁰² *ibid.* 318.

¹⁰³ Xu Linzheng, “The Need for a New Name for the Avant-garde” (on *Qian Long News* internet site, 2001) (“Bixu dui Xianfeng Cong Xin Mingming” 徐林正〈必须对先锋重新命名〉摘千龙新闻网, 2001).

literature and its fall into the hyperreal and the reversal/rewriting of history, is simply a last ditch effort to *recuperate* language into a system of cognition, which, as de Man makes clear, is never really a return, as we have moved, are in the process of moving, radically into a performative mode of language and a (non)materiality of the inscribed letter wherein the “stuff of actual history” resides: the subject *as* history.

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