

Underground Reading and Existentialism in the Swaying Seventies: An Analysis of the Narrative Prose Style of Bei Dao's Waves

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Abstract

In the 1970s, the private reading of so-called "Yellow Cover Books" and "Grey Cover Books" constructed a specific intellectual sphere. The internal circulation and reading of translated Western modernist works, particularly existentialist ones, were "swaying" in the face of enormous social pressure. This construction of a very harsh environment is echoed in Bei Dao's novel *Waves*, whose main character similarly encounters physical sensations of thirst, heat and contraction generate its peculiar narrative prose style. In this paper we analyze the text taking into account both the historical situation and the author's biography, integrating a consideration of its special literary and historic interest with diffe.

Keywords

"Cover Books"; The Seventies; Existentialism; Underground Reading; Prose Style.

1. Introduction

The decade of the 1970's is undoubtedly one of the most significant periods during which the development process of PRC took place and was considered to be the last stage of this special period; for Chinese literature writers: works which truly reflected the spirit of the time of crisis and showed a tendency towards overcoming the trauma, slow evolution appeared only in the late eighties approximately.

And so with all that in mind, when we reflect on these years behind us, do we not run the risk of having picked and chosen at what was important? Are they required to be revisited? That is, why are we reading the 1970s literature? Did we overlook, misunderstood, or maybe even ignored a portion of that worth?

Admittedly, whether viewed through the lens of historical periodization or explained by the lag effect of literary dissemination, the value of 1970s literature has often been largely subsumed into the ambiguous and nebulous space between works of this era and private writing, based on the demarcation of grand historical junctures. Recently, however, academia has gained a considerably clearer understanding of how to discuss the value of these literary works.

This is an extensive inquiry according to their "value as a source-point" [1] that goes beyond, in which the idea of considering novels as sources breaks down, to some degree, hard structures. To quote Prof. Cheng, it means knowing what is important about those novels from the 1970's in terms of their development [1].

Thus, coming back from the history of the 1970s, the principle "literature studies man", the digging up of underground literature is not any more two diametrically opposed rigid criteria [2]. Likewise, going back again into the text per se, but here in a corrective sense, that is not something which requires only that one weighs the double transcendence of the author above his own self and his epoch. After there has been secured this organic connection it is necessary

that we recognize in the work itself some independent worth instead of allowing ourselves merely to use it as a postscript to a previous epoch.

2. Waves and Bei Dao

Bei Dao is exactly this type of writer who always feels that he is ahead of his times. Though there are values in Bei Dao's poems, his new work, *Waves*, is still more important in relation to 1970s literature; it is closely connected to the formation and growth of underground literature and having some particular history in the national culture industries (here: the publishing and print industry). If all those factors have been taken into account then perhaps there is some truth to the lament that it "came too early" [3], and for the different interpretations of the prose in *Waves*, there could be a place, a means for expressing some sort of cumulative historical feeling.

The study of Bei Dao's *Waves* does not mean endlessly talking about the textuality of it – I believe that its tacit historicity has a legitimate claim on, and indeed plays an important role for, making it textually relevant to . I will reflect this observation in my corresponding argumentation. But again we have to emphasize that just because of the joint modeling and providing of this historical background as well as the author's private life is the literary quality of *Waves*, a point which can not be oversimplified.

2.1. From Reading to Writing: A Necessary Condition for Output

Bei Dao was born in Beijing in 1949. His father, Zhao Jinian, was a financial expert and one of the founders of the insurance industry in the People's Republic of China. His mother, Sun Meili, was a physician. Due to his family background, Bei Dao's works naturally embody a certain coloration reflective of his upbringing. Whether one categorizes him as a "talent" or judges him as a creator with "petty bourgeois" sensibilities rather than accumulating the comprehensive rationality brewing in the early days of the nation's founding, they cultivated, under a more purified ideological coverage, a purer and more intense democratic consciousness and fighting spirit. [3] This constituted the richest source of this poet's purity, and also one of the fundamental points that would later draw criticism from his contemporaries and posterity.

Bei Dao's literary journey resembles a pilgrimage of self-imposed asceticism, sending concentric ripples outward from the center of Baiyangdian Lake. This is not difficult to understand if we are familiar with the trajectory of his creative development. I am inclined to describe his sojourn at Baiyangdian as the first phase of his literary transformation: the shift from internalization to writing. It also marked the beginning of Bei Dao's departure from his family and his foray into the unknown tides of the era. Individual illusions and student conceits became things of the past; a mature core gradually took shape through the intertwined processes of production and reading.

It must be added that Bei Dao's writing had been achieved by means of an accretive process of reading (particularly via his involvement with the underground literary scene prior to 1974), involving exchanges of ideas in many different forms: salons, reading circles, casual drinks get-togethers, and one-on-one conversations. The poet came to Baiyangdian in 1973 [4]; there, his encounter with the poet Mang Ke transformed all the idyllic imaginings of a spring day three years prior into reality: youth, beauty, the capacity for thought. Poetry belongs to youth, and in the 1970s, Bei Dao's language was part of the intellectual torrent of fluctuating hormones, establishing the poeticized linguistic inclination of his creative work. It is clear that before joining the underground literary salon led by Zhao Yifan [5], Bei Dao had already, piece by piece, read numerous "internally distributed" books published after the 1960s by organizations such as the Writers Publishing House, People's Literature Publishing House, The Commercial Press, and Shanghai People's Literature Publishing House, in addition to the officially published works

of the 1950s. This accessibility pertained partly to the resources available through his original family environment, and partly to the underground reading and exchange that occurred during his time at No. 4 Middle School and his subsequent journey of political exile. While these two aspects can no longer be verified in detailed textual detail, relevant interviews and memoirs suggest that Bei Dao had read various "Cover Books"—including J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (and other works), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot—and that these readings were profoundly reflected in his subsequent works [6].

2.2. "Out of Place": A Spectral Presence of Existentialism

Bei Dao's poetic language has always maintained a uniquely cold and skeptical stance toward the world, subjecting rationalism and humanistic inquiry to relentless scrutiny. It has become increasingly evident that the philosophical concern of the youthful Bei Dao's centers on the question of "me"—an "I" whose entirety must be interpreted through the act of reading.

If we would like to understand the existential situation of a generation that is "displaced," then perhaps we should look back into the causes for such displacement in lived experience, more specifically, the facts plunged a whole generation into a maze of blind trial and error conditioned on a basic difference in the general environment. Therefore, one's feeling of not belonging—a feeling which symbolically points to the melting but is still palpable—is another level of individuation in artistic production. In terms of realism, one may easily grasp how the geographically dislocating of the sent-down movement, as well as the spatial condensation of the underground literature is an institutionalized subjugation made possible by this on-time foundation to be imposed onto the educated youths. This in turn leads to an appreciation for the shifting identity and tenuous feeling of belonging that has been felt through ten years but, when dealing with a young author caught up in an ambiguous situation, one can hardly separate his considerations of mankind, the future, the self and other concerns – with compassion, nonsense, meaningless – from what they suffered through persecution.

In this sense, as a poetic novel, *Waves* can be seen to extract personal experience out of its moment in history. It is not necessary here to dispute the basic essence of the value of the era and remove that basis for the text, we need to add a note on the influence of existentialism in China, when it came with certain force – especially for the younger generation who read it hungrily. It is on this basis that the core themes of Bei Dao's *Waves* can be articulated: on the one hand, it is grounded in the pain and endurance born of a decade marked by destruction and catastrophe; on the one hand, opens up another narrative line—that of the 1970s, with a firmly historicist fiction setting—which voices ideas, love, and freedom from the New Era onwards. The duality of themes is an enduring hermeneutic trail.

Let it be noted, though, that existentialism is an umbrella term for a general philosophical tradition. A possible progenitor of the term is the current movement which was considerably developed by German thinkers such as Martin Heidegger or Edmund Husserl but also later on by French thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus. What is most visible about existentialism in this text, *The Undulations*, seems to be a reflection on the French existentialism that the writer received through his reading experience of Camus's *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Nausea*. I would characterize it here as atheistic existentialism. The first, and perhaps the most basic effect of this current of thought upon *Waves* would be the suspension of "man," or rather, the expression of a deep nihilism, which is reflected in the narrative text by very fractured sensory impressions and a quick-paced, linear tempo.

2.3. The Beach and Thirst: The Construction of Detailed Text in *Waves*

On an aesthetic level, we see that Albert Camus's *The Stranger* has a richly layered text and what degree of processing takes place on the beach scene in this text. We see the components

– sea-water, sunlight, and sand—all are densely packed and dispersed throughout multiple parts of the text to make experiencing the beach an intensely sensory affair. The text employs extremely fragmented details—"yellowish rocks and the whitest asphodels" "the already hard blue of the sky" "the petals " [7] —juxtaposed with the language of the protagonist's companions, including trivial chatter and laughter, as well as the faint "sound of a motor" in the distance. These physically grounded auditory elements are stitched into an already fragmented assemblage of visual signs, constructing from the outset a textual atmosphere of precarity. The sun is an invisible central source of radiation from the beginning to end of the text. By means of heat and time – that is, the coming of noon—each element receives a kind of literal increase in temperature, and this slow suggestion of heat from nature at the same time increases the temperature of the act of reading itself. The accumulation and intermingling of psychological elements, combined with an almost hypnotic suggestive distortion, trap the protagonist in a state of meaningless agitation that knows no rest. Ultimately, in an extreme environment, he shoots an Arab, thereby completing an enactment grounded in the core of the absurd.

In *Waves*, the allocation of the beach as a core element of absurdist philosophy is manifested through its inheritance of sensory perception: "I lie prone on the scorching sand, staring unblinkingly at the sun. The sun's roar is deafening, drowning out the footsteps of the waves and the clamor of the crowd. I close my eyes and open them again; the colors shift rapidly." [8] "Scorching," "staring," "roar"—a dense integration of visual, tactile, and auditory sensations—is compactly distributed across just three sentences. Fragmented visual signs are interspersed with punctiform sounds, and that unsettling, agitated experience returns to *The Waves*. This method of constructing an extreme environment is directly continuous with that of *The Stranger*.

Nevertheless, in *Waves*, we still observe differences from *The Stranger* in the shaping of the beach scene: the freeze-frame moment and the discovery of the sun as a symbol. The beach scene first emerges from the fragmentary memory of the female protagonist, Xiao Ling, an orphaned victim of the Cultural Revolution from a family of intellectuals—what Li Tuo terms a "petty bourgeois." This predetermines that the shaping of the beach environment is stagnant: time is preserved in memory, and she participates only as an observer. Consequently, both the psychological and physiological realities remain at a high pitch—a state of scorching, extreme restlessness. Memory is mediated by experience, and the absurd narrative concerning the beach is founded on events. This itself indicates a form of preconceived cognition. In short, the absurd is endowed within events; it exists, but only as a slice, lacking a complete ecology.

The other thing that should be noted here is about how the sun is described. The sun is stared at directly to acquire its location in the case of *Waves*. As it turns out later in the text, its existence is even explicitly stated: "After all, the sun is rich". This contrasts clearly with the omnipresent sun of *The Stranger*. Exposed, receptive mode of experience—passive acceptance, unconsciously open to something—the text is moving toward a conscious awareness; the central things about the beach are excavated, decrypted, and translated. The image of the sun is removed from "sunlight." We cannot rule out that there may be a political allegory in the language world of that period, but from a genealogical point of view staring straight into the sun already has associations with an oversimplified procedure and a mnemotechnic cut, while at the same time creating a much more immediate and pointed style of narrative.

Equally valuable is that although *Waves* appears somewhat immature in its prose, it still embodies the construction of an extreme environment. It concludes an assertion of helplessness in the grip of matter, especially in the simul-constructed sensations of heat, heat, hunger, and shrinking. Turning back on other environmental constructs in the text, it turns out that besides this very model, the rest do not provide a radical formulation of the nature of the absurd. The environmental descriptions become a kind of footnote continue with 1950s literature, their function often explicitly linked superficially to the situation, action, or character's emotions.

Consider the opposite extreme: "Exhausted, I pressed my face against the cold iron railing. It's all over. Is he still standing under that poplar tree? Hate me, hate me, it will be better this way. The wind howled in the sky, the sky was so dark, the snow so white, what a stark contrast! I must fortify my heart, I must go on, enduring cruel wind's bite and burning sun's glory, and build little monument for me by the road's end..." Here in the description about the first snowfall of winter season, the personage has actually been tightly related with surroundings; accordingly, nature is just becoming-nature. The unfamiliar, embarrassed, oppressive narrative absent. Instead, it is presented as a typical form of environmental description that carries textual significance, is closely connected to the plot, atmosphere, and characters, and is capable of interacting with them at any moment.

We observe that, amid ongoing fluctuations in temperature and lived experience, and as a stable linkage steadily forms with what is normalized, everyday, and contemporaneous—especially a linkage that develops the plot through dialogic means—the textual features of absurdist narrative accordingly become latent." In the later parts of the text, most expositions concerning existentialist philosophy are conducted through character dialogue—which, of course, possesses its own considerable artistic charm.

3. Conclusion

Waves was conceived in the early 1970s, through several twists and turns before finally appearing in the journal *Today*. It can be said that *Waves* represents Bei Dao's early attempt at novel writing, as well as a comprehensive embodiment of his subsequent poetic creations. The novel contains explicit terms related to existentialist expression, yet it retains the paradigmatic construction of classic texts. To regard it merely as a love story might be too superficial; conversely, to label it as an early exploration of avant-garde fiction would be overly arbitrary. The text of *Waves* is profoundly marked by its era, revealing the underground literature's anguished resistance to isolated circumstances. On a deeper level, however, it preserves an independent exploration of numerous issues concerning life, love, and ideals. It bears the shadows of Scar Literature, Avant-garde Literature, and the literature of the New Era, while simultaneously retaining an independent and sober individual contemplation shaped by its time. It stands as a precious literary artifact, condensing a strong personal style.

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