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The Making of a Poem

Rainer Maria Rilke, Stephen Spender, and Yang Mu

One of the formidable challenges for comparatists today is the reconfiguration of Goethe's term *Weltliteratur* (1827) in the age of globalization. In analyzing the making of world poetry, Stephen Owen raised a point about the negative effects of Western influence on modern Chinese poetry in his essay "The Anxiety of Global Influence: What Is World Poetry?" (1990). He suspected that Bei Dao had been selling "the state's brutality" and "the suffering of oppression" in China to the West in a highly translatable language (Owen, "Anxiety" 29). In so doing, the poet sacrificed poetry to his own self-interest. Owen's views about the loss of culture and the decline in contemporary poetry from mainland China aroused heated debates and were harshly criticized, most notably by Michelle Yeh and Rey Chow, as symptomatic of Orientalist bias (Yeh, "Chayi" 94-96; Chow, *Writing* 1-26). Yeh found Owen's accusations self-contradictory, as a result of his desire for difference. In insisting on the cultural difference derived from his expertise in classical Chinese poetry, Owen in fact gave rise to a suppression of internal differences within the Chinese lyric tradition (Yeh 95). She saw in Owen's criticism his worries about the disappearance of the difference that clearly marks out contemporary poetry in China from that produced in the rest of the world (Yeh 96). Rey Chow followed up on this point and argued that Owen actually suffers from "an anxiety over his own intellectual position" as a Sinologist (Chow, *Writing* 3). From these critics' points of view, Owen's essentialist notion of "Chineseness" in poetry is common in Westerners' Orientalist biases, which imprison "the other" in the static past. In retrospect, although Owen's reading of the high translatability of some modern poems as a sign of deculturation is problematic, he did nonetheless remind readers of the cultural hegemony of the West. Instead of celebrating an innocent synthesis of all literatures in the world, he warned them of the pitfalls of taking for granted a local (Anglo-European) tradition as the universal literary model for developing world poetry (Owen, "Anxiety" 28).

Bearing in mind the controversy caused by Owen's provocative question, David Damrosch put forward a possible answer to the question "What is world literature?" based on a study of the "world" circulation of literary texts via translation. According to Damrosch, all works begin in their original language, but "a work only has an

effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch 4). He indirectly endorses Susan Bassnett's suggestion that translation is "a major shaping force for change in the history of culture" because it enhances the mobility of a text (Bassnett 10). To approach an understanding of "world literature," the questions contemporary discourse needs to address are not only about the longevity of a work, but also about its evolution across cultures.

Doubtless, our rapidly globalizing world of the twenty-first century facilitates speedy travel of literary theory and practice. In "Traveling Theory" (1982), Edward Said explicates the ways theories are applied in any mature writing and iterates the importance of "critical recognition" (Said, *World* 226-247). He sees this in Raymond Williams's way of using theory "consciously to qualify, shape and refine his borrowings from Lukács and Goldmann" (Said, *World* 241). In the manner of influence studies, Said traces how Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1920) and *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) affected his European students and readers, the more prominent among them Lucien Goldmann in Paris and Raymond Williams in Cambridge. Adopted in another place and at a different time, the theory appeared to Said to have lost its original revolutionary vigor and sedimented into a kind of dogmatic orthodoxy. Years later, Said admitted the bias in his early formulation and revised his arguments in his 1994 essay "Traveling Theory Reconsidered" (Said, *Reflections* 436-452). Said's belief that later imitations or "translated" versions of a theory are copies and therefore lesser works, and that their original power and impact are thus diminished, is in fact a common misconception in influence studies and translation studies. Whether a theory has acquired the authority of age in the course of its travel through time and space or has actually developed away from its original formulation and come out in a contrasting form in another site, Said's call for attention to the historical circumstances that connect the theory in its original state to its borrowings is of paramount importance in any critical inquiry.

In the two essays on traveling theory, Said stresses the importance of critical consciousness in analyzing the "geographical dispersion" of theory: "The point of theory therefore is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense of exile . . . [pulling Lukács] from one sphere or region into another. This movement suggests the possibility of actively different locales, sites, situations for theory, without facile universalism or over-general totalizing" (Said, *Reflections* 451-452). With due consideration of historical contingencies and political contexts, a central concern for comparatists is the study of the borrowing, adaptation, and transformation of literary theory and practice across cultures.

By bringing together the ideas of circulation or traveling of theory and practice suggested by Said, Bassnett, and Damrosch, this essay attempts a critical study of cross-national interactions between poets in Europe and Asia. The emphasis

will fall on the paradigm shifts in national literary cultures and different poets' responses to ongoing transcultural relations. What circulates between nations is the poetic notion of "making," as explicated by three representative poets from distinctly different cultures: Rainer Maria Rilke, Stephen Spender, and Yang Mu.¹ Their positions will have much to contribute to the contemporary discourse about the making of world poetry.

The theory of "making" is a Western approach to poetry that originated from Aristotle's *Poetics*. When Aristotle called poets by the name Maker, he recognized in them the creative power of making. This talent of using language in an original and moving way has often been described as a gift from a divine or mythical source. It is common to hear great Western poets appeal to the Muses or God for inspiration before they put their thoughts and feelings in words; but the creative process itself remains a mysterious, ineffable personal experience of the chosen one. From this myth of making emerges the view that the poet's profession is a vocation and that the art of poetry seems to deny a pedagogical approach. In literary history, apologies and defenses for poetry did appear from time to time, especially when poetry's social role was stigmatized. Yet few really confronted the theory of making except via a discussion of rhetoric, and books teaching the art of poetry writing did not flourish until the twentieth century. Democratization of education, literary formalism, and intercultural communication are the major factors that have called attention to the pedagogy of poetic art.

Rilke, Spender, and Yang Mu have all made an attempt to teach the art of poetry in their works *Letters to a Young Poet* (written between 1903 and 1908, collected and published in 1954), *The Making of a Poem* (1955), and *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets* (1989), respectively. An interesting coincidence is that the dates of composition for these texts are roughly forty years apart, covering the span of a century. Although the first two works are not directly related to each other, they both played a seminal part in the production of the third, as evidenced in its title and subtitle.² Between Rilke and Spender there is a common European culture, while Yang Mu's work shows the poet's indebtedness to Western poetics. Obviously, Rilke did not have any chance to read the works of the two younger poets, but Spender and Yang were both much impressed by his *Duino Elegies*. To Spender, the *Elegies* introduced angels that are "transformers standing above a human landscape, converting the energy of the divine and the traditional into power which flows over and redeems the banal life," and Yang finds in them "all the beauty of Western culture" (Spender, "Imagination" 9; Yang, *Yi Shen* 9). A salient proof of Rilke's influence on Spender is found in an editorial Spender wrote for *Encounter* entitled "Letter to a Young Writer" in 1954, a year before *The Making of a Poem* came out. Like Rilke's letters to Franz Xaver Kappus, Spender's editorial is an open letter to a young writer, in this case "Henry." He responds to Henry's challenge by saying that "youth was

not just 'being young.' Youth was measured by one's capacity to develop a contemporary mind and sensibility." And poets good at "new writing" are those capable of expressing a modern experience with an individual sense of life and values. He cited Rilke three times in this short essay as an exemplar of a great modern poet.

More than ten years before Yang Mu published his collection of letters to young poets in *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets*, he introduced Spender and his art in an essay "Yingguo shiren Shibande" [Spender, the English Poet] (1976) along with a number of Spender's poems translated into Chinese. Situated in different historical circumstances against diverse cultural backgrounds, the intricate relationships between the three works show the poets' concerted efforts to explicate the making of a poem. Although the authors hoped to help make a young apprentice a great poet, their works would in turn help readers understand how an established poet negotiates his position in a rapidly changing world. The making of a poem is no longer imprisoned within conventional disciplinary boundaries or geographically confined imagination. More than an aesthetic issue, the poetic notion of making is also read against the complex dynamics of cultural contestation and power hierarchy in the later half of the twentieth century.

THE MAKING OF THE WORLDS

To Rilke, Spender, and Yang, poetic worlds are worlds with exceptional depth and breadth that look both inward and outward. All these writers assure the young apprentices that poetry can be found in their surroundings if they are sensitive enough. In Rilke's opinion, no life is poor if one is "poet enough to call forth its riches" (Rilke letter 1, 19). Spender also suggests that a poem may be made more vigorous by a poet's mundane experience in the real world: "We have come to see that poetry may not altogether benefit from the poet's life and mind being so poetic: that a certain distance between the created work and the poet's existence, intentions and intellectual interests, may give poetry a vigour coming from seemingly unpoetic things—which are amongst the most living things" (Spender, *Making* 100). Likewise, Yang Mu cites many examples of great artists who can transcend the hustle and bustle of their surroundings. For example, he quotes Lorca as having once said "Madrid is right here" when he was in New York (Yang, *Yishou* letter 4, 41). Drawing on a famous Chinese saying, "Talents are nurtured in blessed places," Yang rectifies it by trusting that a poetic genius can make the best of his environment, whether blessed or cursed. Yang places his faith in man's spirit, which helps him transform his living environment (Yang, *Yishou* letter 4, 34).

In a spiritual sense, a Maker has indeed a poetic world to himself; but each poet is historically and culturally situated in a specific society too. Diverse though their backgrounds were, Rilke, Spender, and Yang Mu apparently shared the same con-

cerns about the condition of modern poetry in their times and were committed to safeguard its future development. When Rilke was himself at an impressionable age when writing the letters to Kappus, he was open to new stimulations offered by the centers of tradition in Europe. Instead of replying to a designated individual, Spender and Yang wrote to a reading public in view of helping them understand more about poets and poetry from a transcultural perspective. Skeptical about the American cultural influence in reverse, Spender states in "Apology," the opening section of his essay "The Making of a Poem," the purpose of his writing: "One poet's example is only his adaptation of his personality to the demands of poetry, but if it is clearly stated it may help us to understand other poets, and even something about poetry" (Spender, *Making* 45). In comparison, Yang is more aware of his role as a mentor to young poets, so he assures them with a sense of affinity: "Your [young poets'] passion makes me feel that you are no stranger to me; you seem to be me some years ago. Yet do I still remember this 'I' that has faded in time? Apparently, the 'I' today and the 'I' of yesterday need to communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other. . . . Let me be direct with you: Talk to me, I would understand" (Yang, *Yishou* letter 1, 1-2). Yang knew very well the plight of young Chinese poets when modern poetry had only a short history. Unlike Rilke, Spender and Yang were mature practitioners when they wrote about the art of their trade. Exposed to intercontinental travel and with a critical sense of literary history, they showed a keen awareness of the reshaping of the cultural map under way. With their strong national identities, they were able to point out the possible benefits and pitfalls of cross-national literary relationships. To avoid facile universalism or theoretical totalization, in this investigation I will take into consideration the historical concreteness in which each individual poet forges his way of making a poem, with the focus on how Spender and Yang have responded to the doubts about transculturation.

CROSS-NATIONAL TRAVEL IN EUROPE

From the perspective of world literature, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* appears rather regional in its cultural scope. After Rilke's first collection of poems came out in 1898, many young poets wrote to him and sent him their poetic works for advice and comments.³ Two of the most widely known of these were Franz Xaver Kappus and Marina Cvetaeva.⁴ Rilke's letters to Kappus are constructive in the sense that they offered Rilke a chance to rethink his own concerns and beliefs about poetry writing and about life. Between 1903 and 1908, he wrote ten letters of reply to Franz Xaver Kappus. The first letter was dated 17 February 1903 and the last, 26 December 1908. In fact, one may argue that only nine of these letters really addressed the concerns of a young poet. In the ninth letter, dated 4 November 1904, Rilke, who

had just turned twenty-nine, confessed to Kappus that he had little to add to what he had already said and would let his creative work say the rest. "That is all, dear Mr. Kappus, that I am able to tell you today. But I am sending you at the same time the reprint of a little poetical work that has now appeared in the Prague periodical *Deutsche Arbeit*."⁵ There I speak to you further of life and of death and of how both are great and splendid" (Rilke letter 9, 75). Four years later, the tenth letter appeared, addressed to Kappus, who had by now become a military officer. In Rilke's view, Kappus had chosen a "steady expressible existence" and together with it "that title, that uniform, that service, all that tangible and limited reality" (Rilke letter 10, 77). Himself a young man traveling across the continent for knowledge and exposure during these years of correspondence, Rilke was able to share with Kappus his recent discoveries and experiences. The references to his contemporaries, specific comments on Kappus's poems, and the discussion of particular complaints in the letters may be of interest only to the addressee. Put together, the letters also constitute a literary education: there are suggested readings and discussions of the use of criticism, literary judgment, and choice of models. The poet tells Kappus unambiguously that the nature of creative work is measured by its depth and timelessness.

Biographical data show the route of Rilke's journey in Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. After a brief involvement in Prague literary circles, in 1896 Rilke started traveling to Europe's cultural centers. He visited cities such as Munich, Florence, Rome, and Paris in Western Europe, went north to Moscow and St. Petersburg in Russia, and stayed briefly in Sweden and Denmark as well. From the date and the place mentioned in each letter to Kappus, one can see that Rilke was constantly on the move physically and intellectually, receptive to different national literatures and multiple artistic media and forms on the Continent. His acquaintance with the Worpswede artists at Vogeler's home, Barkenhoff, was especially fruitful. The intimate involvement with the group of visual artists deepened his skill at "seeing," and "the idea of *schauen*, of looking, seeing in an active, participatory way, was to become a crucial aspect of his own art" (Brodsky 9). Because Prague was situated in a cultural backwater of Europe, in order to break out of his provincial cocoon and capture the world accessible to him, Rilke traveled extensively. From literature in different languages and various theories about visual art and architecture, he learned many things that constituted his unique contribution to poetry, the *Dinggedicht* (thing-poem). Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* stands out among the three works for its courage and passion. His readiness to confront the unfamiliar and embrace the dangerous as an integral part of the world and his great appetite for adventure—"the future stands firm, but we move in infinite space"—certainly would appeal to young poets. For Rilke, it is the poet who travels and at the same time draws together all cross-national resources in disparate media for

making his own poetry. Indeed, the subsequent decades witnessed this urge toward mobility, realized in intercontinental migration, but few contemporary critics now share Rilke's affirmative attitude toward acculturation through openness to foreign influences; on the contrary, many, like Owen, are deeply concerned about cultural deprivation.

ANXIETY OVER INTERCONTINENTAL EXCHANGE

Transatlantic exchange in different aspects of life in the 1950s was the historical backdrop against which Stephen Spender's collection of essays *The Making of a Poem* was situated. At a time when translations of contemporary American literature were sweeping the Continent like an invasion, European writers were going through a crisis induced by material culture, which Spender named the "American malady . . . the commercialization of spiritual goods on an enormous scale" (Spender, *Making* 191–192). Spender was brought up with a myth in his mind of the Golden Age before the First World War. The myth of a paradise lost from his family materialized when Spender himself lived through the realities of a world war. Though he lost hope in political parties' ability to bring about peace and progress, his national pride in being a citizen of Great Britain was undiminished, and he earnestly offered to work in Germany after the war with a view toward propagating the policies of democratic nations in the German universities and through the press and other media. Instead of going to Germany, he ended up taking a few transatlantic trips to America. Between 1947 and 1949, Spender spent the greater part of each year in the United States, where he frequently stayed with Auden and Isherwood. These trips brought to him the awareness of another paradise lost: the decline of England and British poetry.

Spender's worries about the condition and the development of British poetry are conspicuous in *The Making of a Poem*. In "The Immigration in Reverse," Spender observes that English writers who had emigrated to America and returned had learned two things:

Firstly, that immigration in reverse is extremely difficult if not impossible because America more than any other country is a womb into which you have to be reborn. Secondly, that a fiction based on the breakdown of class barriers is something we need over here: but there is little comfort in this lesson, because it is not writers but the society in which you live that has to break down class barriers. (Spender, *Making* 205)

The poet's concerns about the decline of British literature as a result of British nationals' conservatism and class consciousness are indicative of his socialist political stance. Yet more disconcerting in his essays are the trends of "immigration in

reverse," which suggest that London is no longer the center of literary and cultural tradition for American pilgrims. Yet this drastic turning of the tables did not really disturb Auden, the renowned British émigré poet:

When, after his travels to Germany he [Auden] returned to England in 1929, he held the doctrine that "the poet" must not leave his own country. Now, in America, he had published an essay arguing that the modern creative writer must be international . . . and implying that the literary pilgrimage of Henry James to Europe was now reversed, for today the European writer should come to America. (Spender, *World* 300)

Spender was obviously disappointed by Auden's change of attitude, from placing the poet in his native British home to sending him across the Atlantic Ocean. That Auden seemed to be truly at home in the United States and helped young American poets with his teaching and his own poetry became in Spender a cause for worry and complaint. Auden's absence from England was considered a major reason for "the decline in intellectual effort and technical accomplishment by the younger English poets" (Spender, *World* 298). Worse still, Spender found that young British writers suffered the loss of their pre-American selves. To him, the threat was "the start of a kind of internationalism which for Europeans means Americanization but for Americans means taking America with you" (Spender, *Making* 195). The young English Anglo-American writers who read the work of Americans "belong to a new enlightenment, an international entente which in England is replacing the old *avant-garde*" (Spender, *Making* 198).

The increased Americanism of British poetry accelerated Spender's urge to defend his national identity against deculturation. Spender criticizes Auden's non-committal reply to the question "Which language do I write in?" Auden's ad hoc solution for retaining his national identity was to invent "a special kind of No Man's language which seems to have its origins in [the] mid-Atlantic, where it balances, without fusing, Anglicisms with Americanisms" (Spender, *Making* 199). The fear that once a British writer was absorbed into American culture his or her native English characteristics would sink without a trace was alarming.

Spender's negotiations with the Americanization of British poets are explicit in "Goethe and the English Mind" (1949). This essay is an attempt not so much to justify Coleridge's hostile criticism of Goethe's work as to view English poetry from a German perspective. The major difference Spender finds lies between Goethe's double act in poetry writing, which separates form and content, and English romantic poets' transformation of experiences into poetic language. Highlighting Goethe's "fruitful misunderstanding" of English poetry, he argues for the benefits of intercultural exchange on the Continent. Although Spender is much concerned about the decline of British poetry in the late 1940s, he rereads the significance of

Shakespeare and Goethe, the fountainheads of British and German literatures, by comparing their famous creations *Hamlet* and *Faust*. According to Spender's reading, the characters in these two works are real because their authors are able to draw from all the springs of literary achievements in their national traditions. Spender sees that there is yet much for British writers to learn from Goethe:

Goethe's own poetry, supremely German as it is, reaches out beyond the German into the world, toward a world literature. We are now living in that period when the writers of no nation enjoy that kind of cultural self-sufficiency which so beneficially produced a French, an Italian, and an English literature each with peculiarities of attitude which they instinctively protected from one another. . . . We are in each language prey to influences coming from the outside. It is enormously important that we should be influenced by what is strong. . . . There is none to whom we can look more trustingly as the father of a world literature than Goethe. (Spender, *Making* 134)

Spender senses the inevitability of influence and change, but the anxiety caused by American "cultural imperialism" drives him to turn to other national literatures in Europe. To enlist the German pioneer of world literature in the discourse is a subtle call to return to the center of European tradition in the course of internationalization.

The Making of a Poem clearly exhibits the tensions between Spender's nationalistic and literary concerns in the 1940s. To resist Americanization, Spender prefers the term transatlanticization, which can imply a two-way traffic between two Anglophone cultures, the American and the British. He wishes to see the future of poetry in English as part of world, rather than American, literature: "To me it seems unlikely that the great writing which may emerge from immigration in reverse will be part of American literature. It may well be something quite different, Anglo-American, international, or world literature" (Spender, *Making* 200). Although Stephen Owen was worried about the excessive import of Western influences on Chinese poetry and Spender felt anxious over the transatlantic export of the British cultural heritage, both scholars in fact reveal the complexities of poetry making or of self making for a poet within the context of a society at a specific moment in its development. Indeed, Spender's cautious reading of the literary relationships foreshadows much of the identity discourse in postcolonial Anglophone literatures in the late twentieth century.

EAST-WEST TRANSCULTURAL INTERACTIONS

From her overview of representative examples of post-European comparative studies by Chatterjee, George, Alonso, Jusdani, and Sakai, Rey Chow derives a new

notion of "comparison" "as a type of discursive situation, involuntarily brought into play by and inextricable from the conditions of modern world politics" (Chow, "Old/New" 301). Each critic's approach to comparative literature is "firmly located within a specific cultural framework," but is nonetheless "transcultural, with implications that resonate well beyond their individual locations" (ibid.). To Chow, a post-European culture in the field of comparative literature "needs to be recognized as always operating *biculturally* or *multiculturally* even when it appears predominantly preoccupied with itself" (Chow, "Old/New" 301-302; emphasis in original). The works of Yang Mu, the youngest of the three poets in this discussion, will throw into relief this bicultural approach to the challenges of transcultural interactions in his poetic theory and practice.

In fact, Spender's wrestling between national heritage and foreign cultural influence is nothing new to modern Chinese poets. Chinese writers' ambivalence toward foreign literature is a century old. Born in Taiwan in 1940, Yang Mu is much more conversant with classical Chinese literature than most Chinese poets now writing. After the Nationalist Party moved to Taiwan in 1949, children on the island were given a national education more formal and traditional than that received by those under the Communist regime on the mainland. Yang grew up at a time when the development of new literature that originated in the May Fourth period in 1917 was curbed in communist China; and those who fled the mainland to Taiwan were ready to revive it on the island. Yang caught the wave as a teenager in the 1950s, when the Modernist School was established in Taipei. Because he was academically trained in Western literature and comparative literature in his undergraduate and graduate studies, Yang is able to evaluate his national heritage from an intellectual distance.⁶ On the one hand, he senses the dangers of being well acquainted with classical Chinese works because influences from national masters may condition a poet's natural response to his own surroundings and mold his literary thinking. On the other hand, he is aware of the fact that the new era of vernacular literature began only in the 1920s, when the history of modern Chinese poetry was still in its embryonic stage. Artistic benchmarks and literary models are yet to be established while skills and thoughts introduced by his precursors await further exploration.

In the West, Yang Mu is widely acclaimed a "bicultural" poet. Stephen Owen highly commended Yang's easy mobility between the Chinese and the Anglo-American literary traditions (Owen, "Traditions" 38-41). Writing on the modern aspects of Yang's poetic language, Joseph R. Allen aligns him with the "international modernism of Baudelaire, Rilke and Eliot" (Allen 406). Yang's cosmopolitan outlook is exhibited in the interconnectedness he sees between foreign and Chinese literatures. One of Yang's major arguments can be summarized by the example he cites of Keats. Keats's sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," inspired

by the Greek classics in English translation, actually initiated the five most productive years of Keats's poetic career. His knowledge about literatures on the Continent was limited, but he nonetheless found enlightening resonances in his exaltation of a "wild surmise" in a Greek epic. Keats's encounter in October 1816 with Homer through Chapman's translation ignited the joy of discovery and drove him to write the sonnet, the work that first established his fame. To modern poets, the same discovery may be triggered by foreign literature (Yang, *Yishou* letter 9, 93-97).

To approach texts in translation, Yang promotes an attitude that is open, sincere, and enthusiastic. It is true that foreign literature is bound to suffer a loss in translation, and readers who do not read the original will get only an incomplete understanding of the text. Yet, as Damrosch says, "All works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only 'began' in their original language" (Damrosch 22). Yang, like Spender, welcomes "fruitful misunderstanding." He cares not so much about misreading as about exposure to new ideas and forms. To him, the Bible, for example, is a good store of amazing images for young poets. The poet's advice is: on encountering a "wild surmise" in a foreign poem, be possessed by it; the strangeness can help augment a poet's consciousness. When a foreign text can have an effective life in a literary system beyond its own, its participation in the making of world poetry begins.

Yang Mu is no rootless nomad wandering among different cultures; he is a cosmopolitan. But his deep reverence for his national tradition exhibits cosmopolitanism of a comparative kind (see Robbins). In a culture heavy with historical lessons from the past and idealistic visions of the future, there must be something for poets to revolt against and something for them to cling to. Yang holds a positive attitude to his society as well as to the activities pursued by poets in ancient times, in the recent past, and in the present. He has a strong sense of continuity that helps bridge the gaps in Chinese literary history. He has a clear mission to disseminate the art of poetry that he knows, and he believes what he says in the letters shows not only the making of a poem, but also the making of modern literature: "Based on these changing factors in our society and the unyielding aspiration to define art and literature in our age. . . . we, as readers and writers [of poetry], through reading and creating, are in fact making our modern literature" (Yang, *Yishou* letter 8, 88).

In letter 17, "Reputation," Yang helps young poets to locate themselves in literary history. He first places the contemporary Chinese poets in a temporal site more than 2400 years from *Shi-jing*, the first book of Chinese poetry, anthologized by Confucius (552-479 BC). He then evokes a pair of great cultural figures in China, Confucius and Li Po. In literary history, Li Po (701-762), of the Tang dynasty, is situated in between, 1200 years from both Confucius and contemporary poets. Despite their magnificent achievements in philosophy and poetry, Confucius regretted how sages decay like withering trees, and Li Po died miserably by the side of the Yangtze

River. Both Confucius and Li Po, of course, had no idea about their immortal fame. With full confidence in the Chinese lyric tradition, Yang believes one could find oneself a place in history by making great poems. Yet in the late twentieth century, a poet finds his place in a much broader horizon than that within the national borders.

Knowledgeable in both Chinese and Western cultures, Yang Mu is able to see the benefits of transcultural interactions. When Damrosch discusses the scope of a world poet's vision, he perceives world literature as it is described in Vinay Dharwadker's phrase: "a montage of overlapping maps in motion" (Damrosch 24). Both *The Making of a Poem* and *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets* show a reshaping of the cultural map experimented with by Spender and Yang Mu. As Spender places Shakespeare and Goethe, who are two centuries apart, together in his picture of the literary origins of Western literature, Yang goes further and imaginatively draws a trans-temporal and trans-spatial affinity between a pair of great poets, Tao Yuanming and Shakespeare. Tao (365-427), a famous Chinese poet of the Southern Dynasties, had a beautiful poem misread and discarded by eminent editors such as Xiao Tong and Zhong Rong. These critics-cum-editors missed the innovative analogy used by Tao:

How I wish I were her shadow in daytime
Wherever she goes, I am always by her side
How I wish I were the belt among her clothes
Guarding her slim waist, I to her as close
If I were a bamboo, how I wish I were her fan
Stirring soft breezes in her tender hand
(Yang, *Yishou* letter 17, 201)

Tao and Shakespeare lived 1200 years apart, but Yang Mu wittily juxtaposes Tao's sincere yearning for his lady with the wish Romeo makes while standing below Juliet's balcony:

See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch her cheek!
(Yang, *Yishou* letter 17, 202)

The coincidence can almost be read as an example of literary borrowing from the Chinese. But what Yang sees in this transcultural connection is that the gift of imagination is universal to poetic geniuses. The finely wrought images not only stand the test of time, but also transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries.

The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets is organized into eighteen letters plus one postscript. The last letter, titled "Poetry and Truth," begins with

an anecdote about Goethe. Yang Mu quotes extensively from the preface of *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* to explain how and why, at the age of sixty-five, and in response to the requests from readers and critics, Goethe started writing his autobiography. He set about putting everything in the twelve volumes of his complete works in chronological order and tried to bring together their relations to their extrapoetic aspects such as the circumstances of his life and poetic influences: "But the task soon grew more burdensome, as detailed notes and explanations were needed to fill gaps in what had already been published" (Oxenford 2b). So Goethe decided to use a different approach:

In my attempt to respond to the reasonable demands that had been made of me and in my striving to present, in the order in which they occurred, the inner promptings, the outward influences, and the stages I passed through both in theory and in practice, I was driven from my circumscribed private life to the world outside. . . .

In this manner, from such observations and probings, from memories and reflections, the present narrative was born, and it is from this view of its origins that it can best be enjoyed and used and most reasonably be judged. Whatever else might be said, especially with respect to the half-poetic, half-historical treatment employed, can well be left to the text that follows. (Oxenford 2c-2d)

To Karl J. Weintraub, the modest title of *Aus meinem Leben* indicates Goethe's attempt "to give his young life under one dominant aspect: the formation of the personality of the poet" (Oxenford xxiii). Weintraub sees the grand objective of the autobiography as to render "the account of the formation of a man who also was a poet—the history of an education" (Oxenford xxix). Goethe's view in fact echoes the Chinese notion that the writing tells much of the writer. Yang Mu explains to the young poets in his very first letter: "Your work is the essence of your conscience and integrity, evidence of the meaning of life you have committed to" (Yang, *Yishou* letter 1, 7). This demand for a "half-poetic, half-historical treatment" underscores Yang's approach in *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets*.

In order to find the meaning of life, one needs to see his historical position clearly. A poet's ability to locate his cultural roots in the global picture bespeaks his unique stance. One thing that makes Yang Mu a most prominent "bicultural" poet is the seemingly paradoxical attributes of cosmopolitan outlook and native Taiwan consciousness in his works. Drawing on T. S. Eliot's ideas of historical consciousness in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Yang delineates a manifesto for his nativist discourse (Yang, *Yishou* letter 6, 55-66). From a historical perspective, Taiwan's intricate relation with mainland China is analogous to the literary relationships between nations in the West. The tradition with which Eliot identifies

covers a thousand years of Anglo-Saxon culture as well as three thousand years of European literature since Homer. To Yang, the Chinese lyric tradition includes less than a century of modern Chinese poetry as well as the classical works dated from *Shi-jing*. Just as Western poets find their origins in Greece, it is natural that Chinese poets acknowledge theirs in ancient China. More important, what constitutes a distinct identity for young poets is local consciousness. Like the Anglo-Saxon culture to poets writing in English, the joy and sorrow of the four hundred years of Taiwan history is central to young Taiwanese poets writing in Chinese.

Well versed in both classical and modern literature, Yang Mu has published all his creative works in Chinese and seems predominantly preoccupied with the Chinese tradition itself. Immune to Owen's and Spender's anxieties about deculturation, Yang is by no means chauvinistic. A comparatist in academic practice and in his outlook, Yang's approach to literary works in different cultures reveals the possibility of a fruitful exchange in their artistic and historical concerns. Allaying fears about cultural impoverishment, Yang Mu takes a liberal, bicultural path that helps young poets better connect their worlds and conceive the meaning of world poetry.

CONCLUSIONS

When Said quotes Goethe's grand vision for founding the field of comparative literature, he admits that "the underlying and perhaps unrealizable rationale was this vast synthesis of the world's literary production transcending borders and languages but not in any way effacing individuality and historical concreteness" (Said, "Introduction" xvi). In *Letters to a Young Poet*, *The Making of a Poem*, and *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets*, three poets from different parts of the globe display a common vision of the Maker and their individual approaches to the making of poetry. Transcending national borders and languages, Rilke, Spender, and Yang Mu all find truth is a prerequisite for a poet. The truth to which a poet is committed is what he feels with his imagination and inner sensibility. This poetic truth awaits romantic inventiveness for its transcription, rather than a rendition in journalistic immediacy. When a poem is made, the poet will be overwhelmed with a joy shared with his unknown peers: "those who come together in the night and are entwined in rocking delight do an earnest work and gather sweetness, gather depth and strength for the song of some coming poet, who will arise to speak of ecstasies beyond telling" (Rilke, letter 4, 37). Similarly, Yang concludes his work with Prospero's epilogue in *The Tempest* by the mature Shakespeare. Having performed his craft, the magician bows to the audience before the curtain falls. "Finishing these eighteen letters, I feel as though I were completing a poem," says Yang in the

postscript. Prospero, Shakespeare, and Yang have done their job, and like most great artists, they know the worth of their art. They, like all poets who are true to themselves and their art, are happy.

However satisfying the making of a poem will be, the making of a poet is, as seems universally true, a thwarting experience. Owing to the artistic temperament, the concentration demanded by his work, and the exceptional art form he produces, a poet will constantly face conflicts and tensions. Alienation, frustration, and the lack of recognition would become a fact of life if one follows the vocation of a poet. *Letters to a Young Poet* is the result of Rilke's effort to comfort a solitary soul, probably his as much as Kappus's. On the other hand, the worries and anguish felt by Spender and Yang are historically and culturally specific. To negotiate a particular national identity for one's self and one's poetry seems more difficult since the mid-twentieth century. When English proliferates into Englishes as a postcolonial legacy and cultures, like people, jet across continents, national literatures are subjected to challenge and change.

Despite Spender's ambivalent admiration for American culture and his regret for the British inferiority complex that gnaws at some British writers of his time, Britain still holds as a center of tradition for American literature and, more important, for the rising Commonwealth literature. What Spender did not foresee when he wrote *The Making of a Poem* is that in the postcolonial world, the education of many successful contemporary writers of literatures in English was anchored by vigorous training in British literature of past centuries.

In *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets*, Yang Mu draws a grid for young Taiwanese poets situated at the crossroads of the traditional and the modern, the Chinese and the Western. Native to the place, Yang's shrewd insight into the local specificities of Taiwan in relation to Chinese culture and Western literature is unsurpassed by other poets writing in Chinese. His conception of modern Chinese literary history is unique.⁷ The eighteen letters addressed to burgeoning young poets constitute a great literary education that will help boost the proliferation of poetry writing in Taiwan and other Chinese communities. The comparative approach and cosmopolitan outlook introduced in the letters are indeed a solid contribution to modern Chinese poetics in the making.

The literary relations such as the influences of Rilke on Spender, and of Rilke and Spender on Yang Mu, vividly connect Europe and Asia on the map of the literary development of world poetry. Critically conscious of the challenges to the development of modern poetry in an age of transculturation, both Spender and Yang look to Goethe and Shakespeare for support or stimulation. In "Goethe and the English Mind," Spender says, "Sometimes I imagine to myself the languages of the world conversing." In his mind, the world expands to reach the other continent

across the Atlantic, but the medium of communication remains European. What is exhibited in Yang Mu's *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Young Poets* is the astonishing fact that the worlds across the Atlantic as well as the Pacific are really conversing—in Chinese.

Above all, in this discussion the three books written as "letters to young poets" about "the making of a poem" punctuate different periods of the last century and help readers trace the cross-national and transcultural circulation of poetic theory and practice. At its inception, comparative literature concerned itself with a centrifugal movement of influence outward from a European center, a logic that seemed to necessitate a unilateral trajectory, with Asia at the endpoint. If the point for comparative inquiry into the travel of theory and text is a critical predilection for alternatives, it is not difficult to imagine that in post-European culture, reading the Chinese and Western classics from a bicultural, binocular perspective is a refreshing alternative approach to the making of world poetry.

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NOTES

- 1 Yang Mu (b. 1940) has published more than ten books of poetry since his teens and is the most important Chinese poet now writing. As a professor of comparative literature, he has taught in the United States, Europe, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Owing to the ease of movement between the Chinese and Anglo-American literary traditions, Yang Mu has been highly commended for his "biculturalism" in creative writing and is considered "the largest hope for the future of Chinese poetry" by Stephen Owen. He received the National Award for Literature and Arts of Taiwan in 2000. English translations of his poems include Allen 1993; and Smith and Yeh 1998. The German translation is by Hornfeck and Wang, and the French is by Pino and Rabut. The Japanese translation *Kakkouazami no uta: Youboku shishu* by Tetsuji Ueda came out in Tokyo in March 2006.
- 2 One may also note that there is a famous example of epistolary writing for educational purposes in Chinese: Zhu Guangqian's *Gei qingnian de shier feng xin* [Twelve Letters to Youth]. These letters were addressed to secondary school students. They appeared in Chinese journals between November 1926 and March 1928 when Zhu was studying at the University of Edinburgh. The letters were collected and published by Kaiming shudian in March 1929.
- 3 Throughout his life, Rilke wrote about ten thousand letters, of which about six thousand have been published. Much of his time and energy went into these letters, which were written to a wide range of people, from his lovers to strangers he had never met. See the introduction to Schank, as well as Metzger and Metzger 12.
- 4 As for the correspondence with Cvetaeva in the last year of his life, the friendship proved stimulating to both, as shown by works they produced during the brief exchange. Out

of the friendship Rilke produced two poems, "Marina: Voici galets et coquillages" and "Elegie an Marina Zwetajewa-Efron," and Cvetaeva produced an essay and at least two long poems. See Brodsky 27.

- 5 *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Otto* [subsequent editions: *Christoph*] Rilke, commonly known as "the Cornet," was written in 1899 and reworked in Sweden in 1904. This tale about a soldier, written in rhythmic prose, established Rilke's fame when it came out in 1904. By 1969, more than 1,077,000 copies had been sold (Brodsky 44).
- 6 Having completed his undergraduate studies at the Department of Foreign Languages of the National Tung Hai University in Taiwan, Yang Mu went to graduate schools in the United States. He received a master of fine arts degree in 1966 from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1971 from the University of California, Berkeley.
- 7 Well educated in classical Chinese literature and widely exposed to modern literature in the mainland from the May Fourth period to the late 1940s, Yang Mu is most familiar with the current situation of modern Chinese poetry. Yang has written numerous essays on the history of Taiwanese poetry during the last four hundred years. The most recent is "Taiwanshi yuanliu zaitan" [Revisiting the Origin of Taiwan Poetry], *United Daily*, 27 November 2004.

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