

STUDIES IN CHINESE LITERATURE
AND SOCIETY

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Voices from the Iron House

A Study of LU XUN

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In my opinion, this either/or reading tends to simplify the artistry which creates the ambiguity of the story's ending. One could in fact look at the scene from several perspectives. But the imagery of the crow elevates the perspective of the text to a certain cosmic height and imparts a sense of irony approaching the Taoist concept of the unfeeling cosmos—"Tian di bu ren." Measured against such a scale, a human individual's suffering and sacrifice ultimately hold no meaning beyond this world. The crow, so to speak, flies in the face of any human attempt to find easy solutions and comfort, including that of the ever-eager ideological reader. The crow's message, in my opinion, is ultimately indeterminate, but it certainly cancels out the mundane optimism that the flower wreath has forced upon the ending.

On this "abstract" level, therefore, one might argue that Lu Xun seems to be conducting a spiritual inquiry of a different sort. Some of his short-story texts, such as "Medicine," are more "obscure" than others because they are impregnated with multiple meanings. Since most Lu Xun scholars have already extensively deciphered the realistic, ideological, and satiric components of Lu Xun's fiction,⁴¹ it only remains for me to undertake a more allegorical approach by seeking to compose a typology of spiritual configurations—that is, a structure of relationships constituted by certain metaphors or abstract motifs which tend to recur in Lu Xun's fictional texts. They may also be called Lu Xun's "philosophical" obsessions, which lie at the inner core of his intellectual exploration into self and society through his art.

Chapter 4

The Stories, II: The Loner and the Crowd

A few months after Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" appeared in *New Youth*, he published in the same journal a "random thought" essay, which begins with the following revealing statement:

The Chinese always have an air of ego-mania—unfortunately it is not the "ego-mania" of an individualist, but the collective kind of "patriotic ego-mania." This is the reason why after her failure in competing with other cultures China still cannot strive to improve.

The individualist kind of ego-mania is eccentricity; it means to declare war on the mundane crowd. With the exception of those suffering from the psychological disease of paranoia, this kind of egomaniacs are men with considerable talent—according to Nordau, with some air of madness. They must feel that their knowledge and thinking are above the mundane masses and beyond their comprehension. Consequently, they are cynical and gradually become cynics or "enemies of the people." But all new ideas originate from them, and all political, religious, and moral reforms begin with them. How blessed, how fortunate are a people who can count in their midst such ego-maniac individuals.

"Collective mania" and "patriotic mania" means to forge group unanimity against dissidents, to declare war against the small minority of the talented. . . . They themselves have no special talents to boast of, so they turn their country into their double image: they elevate its customs and institutions to great heights for praise. In glorifying their national essence, they naturally glorify themselves. When they are attacked, they don't have to fight back, because those glaring and twaddling under the shadows of their own image constitute the largest majority and win merely by their mob skill of sound and fury. . . ."¹

One could read the above statement, especially its second part, as a typical tirade against the conservative advocates of the so-called "national es-

sence." At the same time, however, Lu Xun's anti-traditional rhetoric seems to rise above the May Fourth polemic, as it also contains a larger "philosophical" conceptualization: the juxtaposition of "ego-mania" and "collective mania," of a very small number of eccentric individuals who are intellectual originators and the large majority of the "masses" who are noisy mediocrities. This archetypal configuration of the loner vs. the crowd lies at the conceptual base of his fictional art as well; in fact these two types of figures recur so frequently in his stories that we can reconstruct a fictive genealogy which provides a certain "inner content" beneath the narrative surface. The "messages" to be derived from such an "allegorical" reading do not yield the usual confirmations of Lu Xun's manifest purpose of fiction-writing; rather, they bring out a somewhat different profile which in my view more truly characterizes Lu Xun's mentality as a creative writer.

1

The intellectual origins of this configuration can be traced to Lu Xun's 1907 essay on "The Power of Mara Poetry," in which he celebrates a number of Western individuals—"warriors of the spirit"—who in their struggles against stagnant forms of mediocrity proved to be the voices of prophecy that shaped the pattern of history. These lone individuals are also the ones who swung the historical pendulum of "cultural extremities" (the subject of another long essay written at the same time) by reacting against the material cravings of the masses. The central thesis of these essays is the signal importance of these individualists and the power of their unconventional intelligence. Lu Xun's youthful idealism, which informs both pieces, casts a positive light on this vision of Western history: he is convinced that these exceptional individualists had the power to bring history to their side, that they in fact succeeded in changing the course of history. Perhaps he wished to emulate them vis-à-vis his own country as his feelings of incipient nationalism grew more intense. His evocations of Byron, Shelley, Pushkin, and Petöfi were intended for a contemporary Chinese audience—a vaguely defined collectivity which constitutes the Chinese nation and people. Thus he hoped to convey the sentiments of a lone patriot to his compatriots at home by seeking to originate ideas of change (to "reform society") through his literature.

As Lu Xun renewed his literary career in 1918, after some fiascos in Japan, the loner image was very much in evidence in his creative work. The diarist in his first story can be seen as a direct descendant, albeit in a psychotic guise, of the Mara poet—a rebel and a "warrior of the spirit." However, the way in which the story is told (as analyzed in Chapter 3) makes

us no longer so sure that the Madman's insight and message can reach the crowd for whom they are intended. For, as we recall, the Madman's profound perception is also taken to be the defining symptom of his "disease." As he becomes more insightful he also looks more insane in the eyes of other people—including his family members—and so is more harshly treated. Near the end of the diary, he is virtually imprisoned in his house by his family, the external world hemming in on him and enhancing his paranoia of enclosure. Thus the Madman's gift of critical consciousness does not really liberate him from the grip of the cannibalistic crowd; rather, it merely causes him sharper agony for knowing that he too has eaten others and will in turn be eaten. A tragic corollary is attached to the story's "external" message of the need for intellectual enlightenment: the more enlightened a loner is, the more restricted are his movement and speech, and the less likely he is to be able to effect changes in the crowd's thinking. On the contrary, the Madman's enlightenment becomes the curse of his existence and dooms him to a paradoxical state of alienation—to be rejected by the very people whose minds he wishes to transform.

In the diary's introduction the implied author announces that the Madman is eventually cured and later leaves to "seek office": as he returns to normalcy and mediocrity, he also forfeits his enlightened status as an original thinker. Hence in providing this reassuring "happy ending" in the very beginning of the story, the introduction in fact accentuates the underlying theme of failure. The only way out of this impasse, artificially, is contained in the diarist's final plea—"Save the children!" But even this act of closure itself is intriguingly ironic: since the introduction which frames the diary already annuls the true meaning of its content, even this last sentence loses its intended didactic validity, because given its textual placement inside the diary itself it becomes merely a last faint echo of madness (the diary ends in fact with ".....," which indicates both its incompleteness and, visually, retreating echoes) as we—the readers—close the book on *his* diary.

In Lu Xun's third story, "Medicine," the motif of the loner forms the inner core of the narrative. The plot in the story's "foreground" concerns the misfortunes of a rural couple, the Huas, who nevertheless become enveloped in the cruelty of the larger crowd. This is sketched out in the story's impressive beginning: we see Old Shuan running into a ghastly gathering of onlookers at the scene of an execution who sweep past him and almost knock him down. Later in his tea-shop, he becomes their passive listener as they expound on human blood as a panacea for curing consumption. And it is through a member of the same crowd, Uncle Kang, that the story of the revolutionary's martyrdom is told. This device of indirect narration puts a veil, as it were, over the inner story of the lone martyr in the

background: the details of the revolutionary's suffering are never fully known (since Uncle Kang, via hearsay, can never understand it) and can only be inferred, but the narration intensifies the irony of the martyr's interlocking relationship with the people for whom he has sacrificed his life. Yet even his final expression of forgiveness and pity is misunderstood by his crucifiers: the customers at the tea-shop talk about him as if he were another madman ("He must have been crazy!"²) and perhaps a lesser figure than the paranoid diarist.

What lurks inside the story is another vision of the alienating confrontation between the gifted and insightful loner and the cruel and senseless crowd. The tragic sense inherent in this vision lies in the same paradox: the lone genius, alienated and persecuted by an ignorant crowd, cannot define the meaning of his own existence except by attempting to save his persecutors, even to the point of sacrificing himself. Yet the crowd is incapable of comprehending his intention. Instead, they report on the revolutionary, have him imprisoned, robbed, beaten, and executed; they witness his death and then sell his blood to an ignorant couple of their own kind.

As these two early stories illustrate, if the fictional loner embodies the characteristics of Lu Xun's individual egotist, then the crowd—both subject and object of his alienation—must be a fictional enactment of "collective mania," an artistic representation of Lu Xun's, deep-seated ambivalence toward his countrymen. In a speech given in 1923, Lu Xun made the following remarks about the masses in China:

The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes, they are watching a comedy. Before the mutton shops in Peking a few people often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment. There is nothing you can do with such people; the only way to save them is to give them no drama to watch.³

In this description of mass behavior we notice some persistent characteristics: the crowd is a loose gathering of spectators—an image reminiscent of that of the news slide—who need a central victim for their enjoyment; the animistic reference to the skinning of sheep implies that their passivity also contains a proclivity for violence. A number of Lu Xun's stories are devoted exclusively to portraits of crowds by focusing on a few choice human "samples" for pointed satire or caricature. In some other stories, he tends to play a different variation of the loner vs. the crowd by putting one of the crowd's members at center stage, thus elevating the victim to the position of a loner as if to gauge the crowd's reactions. It is in these pieces that Lu

Xun employs his narrational technique to attain an ironic distance. His depictions of the true loners are less distanced and more lyrical; with a few exceptions, they also tended to occupy his creative energies when his own mood was at a low ebb.

2

Lu Xun's story "Kong Yiji" offers a contrary case to "Diary of a Madman": it depicts a victimized loner *manqué* whose misery is compounded by his inability to think. In contrast to the prophetic Madman of the "Diary," who is perhaps ahead of his time, Kong Yiji is outmoded by history: he deludes himself by clinging to the old ways of traditional literati in a society in which his kind of literacy no longer guarantees a ladder of success. His loneliness becomes all the more pathetic as Kong Yiji is thrust into the midst of the crowd—the noisy, jeering customers at the Prosperity Tavern who tease and mock Kong Yiji as if he were a jester in a circus, and the local gentry who beat him up repeatedly for his petty thefts. Even after he has been beaten into a cripple and has to crawl to the tavern, the crowd shows no sign of compassion. Their entertainment is, therefore, at the direct expense of Kong Yiji's suffering. At the end of the story, the grown-up waiter reports matter-of-factly that this misfit has disappeared: "I have never seen him since—probably Kong Yiji is really dead."⁴ The very callousness of his attitude betrays both the completion of the protagonist's failure and the narrator's unawakened state: even as an adult thinking back on this episode of victimization, he remains a member of the insensitive crowd.

Another example of the crowd's insensitivity to a member of its own kind is "Tomorrow." In the story, a poor widow, called Fourth Shan's Wife, finds herself at the center of the townsmen's attention because her child is dying. As she tries desperately to save her child, each of the townsmen she encounters seems to offer her help—some out of dubious motives (Blue-skinned Ah Wu harbors a subdued sexual feeling toward her). Yet their words and deeds on her behalf only serve to accentuate her solitariness. After the child finally dies, she is hurried into buying a coffin, and when she is too grieved to have the coffin lid closed down, the neighboring woman "grew tired of waiting, hurried indignantly forward and pulled her aside. Then they hastily closed it up."⁵ In juxtaposing the widow's house and the Prosperity Tavern, Lu Xun purposefully brings out both their association (the only two places in town that have lights burning all night long) and their ironic contrast: the revelers next door in fact show very little genuine concern for the widow and her sick child. Her misfortunes, on the contrary, have set her apart from her fellow townsmen.

The theme of group persecution of its own kind reaches a peak in "The New-Year Sacrifice," written four years later when Lu Xun's fictional technique was more secure. In this story—one of the most popular for latter-day readers—the character of Fourth Shan's Wife is more fully developed into Xianglin's wife, who has been twice married and twice widowed. She too has just lost her child, who died more violently—he was eaten alive by wolves. To be burdened with such misfortune is enough misery for any peasant woman. But Xianglin Sao must in addition suffer the social consequences her personal misfortune has incurred. Being a widow, she is seen according to prevalent superstition as accursed: not only is she believed to carry the ghosts of her dead husbands—she is believed to have caused their deaths. Accordingly she has great difficulty finding employment. And because of this social stigma she is, step by step, slowly persecuted and finally driven to death.

Lu Xun's carefully drawn plot makes it quite clear that her ostracism and eventual death are caused by her fellow villagers, both gentry and commoners. Their initial reaction to her sad recounting of her son's death seems sympathetic, but the village woman's tears are no different from the customers' laughter at Kong Yiji's Prosperity Tavern—a form of cheap catharsis at the expense of her misery. Lu Xun shows with consummate skill that even the gruesome death of her child becomes boring to her audience after repeated retelling (the text in fact tells her story twice). Sarcasm and ridicule replace supercilious pity as the villagers begin to find new material for their entertainment. They pick on the scar on her forehead—the residual wound of a suicide attempt during her second marriage—as a mark of shame and accuse her of having easily succumbed to her second husband's sexual assault in the first place. They invoke another kind of popular superstition to frighten her with the prospect that even in death her two husbands would fight over her. She is urged to buy a doorsill at the local temple to be her substitute, "so that thousands of people can walk over and trample on it, and you can atone for your sins in this life and avoid torment after death."⁶ The real victim of this sadistic orgy is, of course, Xianglin Sao herself, who is trampled on and tormented to death by this village crowd of her human victimizers. The coincidence of her death on the eve of the lunar New Year pinpoints further the tragic irony of the story's title: she has become, in fact, the villagers' first "sacrifice" of the new year.

Xianglin Sao may be the most unfortunate and accursed loner in Lu Xun's fiction. But she does not possess the gift of original insight characteristic of Lu Xun's true "egotists." She has submitted herself to the persecutions of her fellow villagers without fully realizing the extent of her oppressors' brutality. Despite her accumulated misfortunes, she always returns to the

village because she has no other recourse for her livelihood and nowhere else to go: in a way she wants to belong to her group. It is only after she has lost everything, after she is almost driven insane by all the psychological penalties imposed on her by her superstitious fellow villagers, that she begins to search for some source of spiritual comfort beyond her immediate reality. The questions she has raised, though stemming from popular superstition, have a strange ring of intellectual profundity as they are framed in the form of a dialogue with the intellectual I-narrator:

"After a person dies, does he still have a soul?"

"May be . . . I think," I told her falteringly.

"That means there must be a hell too?"

"What hell? . . ." I faltered, quite taken aback. "Hell, logically speaking, there should be too—but not necessarily. Who cares anyway?"

"Then will all the members of a family meet again after they die?"⁷

Xianglin Sao's questions, prompted by her desire to reunite with her dead child, nevertheless afford a striking contrast to the evasive and vacuous responses by the intellectual narrator, who should be in a more privileged position than she is to ponder the meaning of life and death. In focusing on a peasant woman's mental misery the story's narrative structure also reflects negatively upon the intellectual's crucial flaw—his reluctance to think deeply and with compassion. In a strange sort of role reversal, the narrator has become the passive spectator, whose position is not so different from that of the crowd.

"The New-Year Sacrifice" remains one of Lu Xun's most intensely wrought portraits of a tragic heroine. In the gently satirical stories, his approach is more "relaxed" and comical: rather than creating tension-ridden scenes of confrontation, he tends to build his plots around a single character or set of characters whose specific traits are then brought out for ridicule. But even this comic treatment of the crowd has an ironic edge: often without the visible presence of an engaged or disengaged narrator, the implied author seems to take the point of view of a somewhat condescending external spectator. Thus the normally voyeuristic crowd in the story world are themselves being "watched." The story "Storm in a Teacup" is a typical example. A group portrait of some select members of the crowd, the story line is built around a false rumor of a new Manchu emperor's enthronement, which triggers a chain reaction among several rural characters, with the main action centering around Sevenpounder's quarrel with his wife concerning his untimely decision to cut off his queue. It soon becomes clear that all the villagers' sound and fury really signifies nothing of importance, as they live in an enclosed world of rural ignorance: the entire

village is separated from the outside by a glaring communication gap, and information from the cities is filtered through rumor and hearsay.

"Storm in a Teacup" may have also been the basis for "Divorce," the last piece in *Panghuang* and technically the more accomplished. Here a mature Sevenpounder, now called "Seven Uncle," presides over a divorce case involving another peasant woman, Aigu. In placing Aigu at the center of the divorce court, it seems as if Lu Xun intended to see the reactions of the crowd by setting one of its members against the whole group. In so doing, the central character becomes a naive reflector whose "naiveté sets off the pretensions and hypocrisy of the principals in the divorce settlement."⁸ In the other satirical pieces—"Soap," "A Happy Family," and "Master Kao"—the central characters are much less naive and more laughable. In employing what Hanan calls a "lowering" technique of irony—the technique of "lowering something in the audience's estimation while appearing to raise it"⁹—Lu Xun exposes the folly of their behavior to open ridicule: an old hypocrite's strange attraction to a poor girl in "Soap," the would-be writer's silly storybook fantasies about creative writing in "A Happy Family," and the pomposity of the pedant teacher "Master Gao." Yet while serving as a "center of consciousness" in the story's narrative structure, each of these satirized characters becomes ironically lacking in true consciousness—the distinguishing hallmark of Lu Xun's egotist-loner—because none is ever fully aware of his own faults or willing to admit them (thus Siming in "Soap" simply does not realize why he suddenly wishes to buy new soap for his wife). They become, in fact, worse reflectors of the crowd's incapacity for self-reflection. Lu Xun's consummate treatment of the crowd in this manner remains "The True Story of Ah Q," the longest story he has ever written and clearly something approaching an intellectual summation.

According to Lu Xun himself, the idea of Ah Q had possessed him for many years before he actually put it to writing in 1921.¹⁰ The story is certainly not a casual portrait of a minor rural character; it is rather a composite characterization—an ambitious representation of a national type. In an elaborately written preface, a device similar to that used in "Diary of a Madman," the implied author gives detailed reasons for his inability to trace a surname for his subject: the Western letter "Q" is supposed to refer to the sound "quei," but as Zhou Zuoren has informed us, in its capitalized form Q gives a visual resemblance to a featureless face with the tip of a queue behind it.¹¹ Thus, both literally and figuratively Ah Q is something of an Everyman in rural China, and the most vacuous "typical character" Lu Xun ever invented.

The story's ironic structure is as much an imitation of Sienkiewicz's

Charcoal Sketches and *Bartek the Victor*¹² as it is a devastating mockery of the convention of traditional Chinese biography. After the pseudo-preface, the author devotes five chapters to establishing Ah Q's character with a series of anecdotes which reveal a life singularly devoid of the "illustrious deeds" befitting a traditional biography. Instead, it is but an account of the trivialities of life revolving around Ah Q's biological instincts for food, lodging, sleep, sex, and a way simply to survive in an environment which he does not pretend to understand. It is through these trivial incidents that Ah Q's composite character is satirically etched out. As most Lu Xun scholars have pointed out, Ah Q's character traits encompass a long catalogue of glaring defects: cowardice, greediness, ignorance, spinelessness, a fence-sitting attitude, a penchant for bullying the weak and cowering before the strong, and finally, an affinity for self-deluding rationalizations which can turn physical defeat into "spiritual victory."¹³

It is clear that Lu Xun's portrait of Ah Q is a fictional fleshing-out of the able-bodied Chinese spy in the news slide incident. He is, in short, a body without an interior self, a face in the crowd, and the crowd's summary mirror-image. And the spirit of Ah Q is, ironically, a total lack of spirit and self-consciousness. Lu Xun has chosen to encase the meaningless life of this small man in a mock epic structure: the last four chapters of the biography catapult this most unheroic and insignificant figure into the chaos of revolution. By becoming a revolutionary without any knowledge of what the revolution is all about, Ah Q thus becomes an inevitable victim of the chaotic forces which the 1911 Revolution has unleashed.¹⁴ In the grand finale of the story, entitled "A Grand Happy-Ending," Ah Q is sentenced as a criminal and paraded to the execution ground. As he is watched by a cheering and jeering crowd—a lone victim besieged by his own type—he comes close to gaining the first intellectual insight of his life: he becomes suddenly aware of the fierce, wolf-like eyes of the spectators, his fellow townsmen:

And now he sees eyes more terrible even than the wolf's—dull yet penetrating eyes which not only have chewed up his words but are eager to devour something beyond his flesh and blood. They have always been following him, not too far and not too near.

These eyes seem to have merged into one, biting into his soul.
"Help . . ."¹⁵

The outcry of cannibalism from the Madman's diary finally leaves a faint echo in Ah Q's ears. But it is already too late: before he can realize that he has been turned into the crowd's sacrificial victim, he is shot to death.

Lu Xun once said that he decided to "execute" Ah Q because he had

become impatient with continuing the story, which was serialized in a newspaper.¹⁶ This is perhaps meant in jest, as a conscientious artist such as he would not impose an arbitrary ending on a story the conception of which had taken him many years. It is more likely that Lu Xun had carefully designed Ah Q's death in order both to satirize the conventional happy ending in traditional fiction and to dramatize a personal message. On the more explicit level, the story represents an answer to a long-standing question first raised in Japan: what is lacking in the Chinese national character? Ah Q's negative traits combine to form a "slave mentality" which, according to Xu Shoushang, is attributed by Lu Xun to China's recent historical experience of being twice enslaved by barbarians (presumably under the Yuan and Qing dynasties). Lu Xun, in Xu's recollection, had apparently remarked that this slave mentality lacks two basic moral qualities: honesty and love.¹⁷ But the story's symbolic conception of the crowd penetrates even deeper: Ah Q's fate seems to indicate that the Chinese masses, enslaved and persecuted in history, are even more capable of enslaving and persecuting their own kind.

I have discussed "The True Story of Ah Q" at some length not only because it is the longest story but also because it marks a certain end to Lu Xun's fictional inquiry into the nature of the Chinese national character. After this summary treatment, it remained only for him to single out certain specific traits for satire in some of his subsequent stories: for instance, "Soap," "Master Gao," and "Divorce." Only in one unique piece, "A Public Example" (sometimes translated as "Peking Street Scene"),¹⁸ did he return to a collective depiction of the crowd. By this time (1925) he was more assured of his technique and, as if to challenge and surpass himself, chose to rework the crowd scene in "Ah Q" in much greater detail. The piece is a brilliant example of his technique of "pure description" (*bai-miao*); he dispenses with both plot and interior psychology, simply concentrating on exterior surfaces. The scene is presented as if by a film camera as it pans across a mass of onlookers who gather to watch a criminal being paraded. Some members of this crowd—peddlers, students, maids holding babies, children, policemen—are then picked out for special "close-up" shots which linger on the grotesqueness of their physical features. The intentional superficiality of these portraits becomes an apt reflection of the spectators' inner vacuity. They seem to pay no attention to the notice hanging on the criminal's vest listing his crimes; they are merely watching a "spectacle." And when they see nothing is about to happen, they lose interest and rush away to gape at a rickshaw accident. It is a typical narrative of Chinese crowd behavior, which reminds us again of Lu Xun's famous analogy about the spectators at the mutton shop.

3

The confrontation between the loner and the crowd seems a more pronounced feature in Lu Xun's first story collection. In the second collection, he still sometimes juxtaposes the two to create scenes of dramatic tension (as, for instance, in the story "The New-Year Sacrifice," discussed earlier), but more frequently he tends to pursue the fate of the loner and the behavior of the crowd separately. Toward the latter he continues to adopt a mode of biting satire, but his attitude toward the former undergoes some revealing changes: the fiercely defiant madman and the martyr of the early works are gradually replaced by the embittered cynic, the mellow "researcher" of a lost personal past, and finally the brooding misanthrope whose erstwhile egotism has been transformed into a disillusioned sentimentality. These differing portraits seem to mirror an increasing tendency as his mood shifts from "calling to arms" to "wandering."

The first inkling of a personal dimension can already be discerned in a lesser piece in the *Nahan* collection, "The Story of Hair," written in 1920 on the occasion of the "Double-Tenth" anniversary of the 1911 Revolution. This public holiday, an occasion for national celebration, seems to have elicited an extremely negative response: Lu Xun's distaste for Republican politics is carried over from his *zawen* into his fiction. The story reads in fact very much like an essay, except that it is in the form of an oral monologue transcribed by an uninvolved narrator. The technique is similar to that in "Diary of a Madman," with the utterances of the protagonist framed by the distancing device of an interview. The protagonist, who is identified simply as Mr. N., seems to be a survivor of an earlier generation of intellectuals whose members may have included the revolutionary martyr in "Medicine." But this genealogy does not reconfirm an earlier revolutionary ideal; rather, it betrays a profound disillusionment. In fact, Mr. N. has become an aged cynic "with an odd temper, often given to meaningless anger and to utterances which are improper to society."¹⁹ But he has lost the Madman's didactic zest to protest and to warn. By the end of his tirade, his words begin to sound "more and more bizarre" to the passive narrator (and perhaps to the conventional reader of the time as well), as they contain verbatim quotations from Nietzsche and Artzybashev, two of Lu Xun's own favorite authors:

Let me ask you by borrowing the words of Artzybashev: You have promised a golden age to the offspring of these people, but what to do you have to give to these people themselves?²⁰

Distrusting any promise of the future (a stance contrary to the Madman's final plea), the cynic becomes instead a valetudinarian of the past. His only

sincerely felt words are reserved for his dead predecessors—the loners of an earlier generation:

They lived their lives amidst sneers and vituperations of a society that persecuted and ruined them. Now even their graves have gradually crumbled out of neglect and forgetfulness.

I cannot bring myself to commemorate them.²¹

Rather than commemoration, it is an utterance of commiseration for the futility of effort—a hallmark of all cynics. Still, Mr. N.'s words strike a familiar chord if they can be read inter-textually as a response to the grave scene in "Medicine": with the passage of years, not only is the flower-wreath gone but the martyr's grave has crumbled "out of neglect and forgetfulness." Remembrance amidst general forgetfulness is the source of his particular pain. As Lu Xun says in the beginning of his *Nahan* preface: "For although recalling the past may bring happiness, at times it cannot but bring loneliness." In his portraits of the loner in the lyrical vein, it is no longer the loner's confrontation with the crowd which besets him; it is rather his bearing the burden of a past which involves "matters of personal conscience and even guilt."²²

Three lyrical pieces—"My Old Home," "In the Tavern," and "The Misanthrope"—are set in the same mood of personal remembrance. They all begin with a narrator undertaking a journey to his old hometown, where he encounters figures from the past who in turn release past memories and emotions. The nostalgic, and often painful, unraveling of a shared past between narrator and protagonist forms the center of action.

In "My Old Home" the I-narrator (who is also a deceptively autobiographical persona for the author) meets Runtu, his childhood playmate, who once initiated him into the simple joys of rural life. At the first mention of Runtu's name, the narrator conjures up a highly idyllic scene:

A golden moon suspended in a deep blue sky and beneath it the seashore, planted as far as the eye could see with jade-green water-melons, while in their midst a boy of eleven or twelve, wearing a silver necklet and grasping a steel pitchfork in his hand, was thrusting with all his might at a *zha* which dodged the blow and escaped through his legs.²³

This remembered idyll is almost mythic in its beauty: it represents the most alluring evocation of the past in Lu Xun's fiction. Its colorfulness serves as an obvious contrast with the drabness of reality: the appearance of the grown-up Runtu immediately shatters this rosy image. The god-like hero of his childhood memories has now turned into a stupefied victim of rural circumstances—a typical member of the crowd. Runtu's life thus becomes a sober

reminder that the past is but a mirage against the grim realities of the present. The narrator's sense of alienation is caused not merely by the gap of social status but also by the irony of time and memory. The very environment of his childhood may not have changed much; what has changed, however, is his perception. In the latter half of the story, the narrator himself has turned into a protagonist as he wrestles with the problem of Runtu's entrapment in a world which he can no longer reenter and from which he has no way to extricate his former friend. Yet one senses that the narrator no longer has the passion to change the world. His alienation is qualitatively different from that of the Madman, for he empathizes with the likes of Runtu but feels impotent to do anything. The result is depression: "I only felt that all around me was an invisible high wall, isolating me from others, and this depressed me thoroughly."²⁴

Near the end of the story, the narrator forcibly hopes that their offspring should no longer be like them—"they should have a new life, a life we have never experienced."²⁵ And the closing image of a road being created by many people treading on it has been cited by many Chinese admirers as evidence of Lu Xun's positive faith.²⁶ Yet it sounds forced in the context of the despondent mood of the story (and of Lu Xun's subsequent writings)—a refrain from the Madman's final plea to save the children, but without the force of ethical belief.

A similar mood pervades "In the Tavern," in which the narrator, drinking alone in an old wineshop after he returns to his hometown, encounters an old friend whom he has not seen for ten years. The two men share the same intellectual background of radical idealism and its attendant consequence of deflated ambitions; their mutual rapport in the course of the chance meeting is akin to identification. Thus when the involved narrator elicits a monologue from the protagonist, it seems as if the two loners are partaking of the same experience. It has been suggested by Zhou Zuoren that the protagonist, Lü Weifu, is a composite characterization of Lu Xun himself and his friend Fan Aijong.²⁷ One of the incidents recounted by Lü Weifu—his reburial of his deceased little brother—is apparently taken from Lu Xun's own experience.²⁸ The obvious presence of personal elements gives the story a sense of intimacy not normally evident in most of his ironic pieces. But the story should not be considered an autobiographical reminiscence. Rather, it presents a unique fictional structure in which the recounting of a past becomes an inward search for life's meaning on the part of both protagonist and narrator.

Written three years after "My Old Home," "In the Tavern" seems to have incorporated the earlier story into its own plot by referring to it as an incident of the protagonist's past: Lü Weifu even says at one point, "the year

before last I came back to fetch my mother"²⁹—a reference to the I-narrator's central motive for his return in "My Old Home." As "enveloped" in the present story, the incident involved his meeting Changfu, an aged boatman very much like the grown-up Runtu, who offered him a bowl of buckwheat gruel cooked by his daughter; he finished it with some effort so that she would not be disappointed. A revealing passage of introspection follows his rendition of this story:

So that night, although indigestion kept me from sleeping well and I had a series of nightmares, I still wished her a lifetime of happiness and hoped that for her sake the world would change for the better. But such thoughts were but the residue of my old dreams. The next instant I laughed at myself, and promptly forgot them.³⁰

The sentiment expressed in the beginning part is strikingly similar to the I-narrator's in "My Old Home." Yet Lü Weifu then makes a sudden turn-about: he finds this "residue" of old dreams laughable and decides to forget. Thus even the faint gesture of future hope contained in an earlier story is now rejected by a slightly more aged and certainly more despondent loner. As Lü proceeds to recount what happens to the daughter (the same one who wanted so much to have a red velvet flower), we begin to see, with the story's narrator, the unfolding of the sadder tale of her unfulfilled life and premature death. The red flowers after all are undeliverable to their rightful recipient; Lü can only give them with reluctance to her younger sister—this time in order not to disappoint his mother.

In both stories, the narrator/protagonist returns to his home town because of his mother, who triggers his encounter with figures from a personal past. We could regard this as an act of *filial piety*. In fact, as Lin Yü-sheng has forcefully argued, the incidents contained in "In the Tavern" represent moral gestures Lu Xun himself deeply treasured: they epitomize the traditional sentiment of "*nianjia*" (cherishing old ties).³¹ In a fictional context, it seems that Lu Xun has brought this moral act to a deep end by bringing its consequences to bear upon the meaning of the actor's own existence. In the first incident, Lü Weifu follows his mother's concern over the damage to his little brother's grave and has the coffin dug up for reburial. The action brings him to a surprising confrontation with a figure from his past: the nearly rotted coffin has nothing left—"bedding, clothes, skeleton, all had gone," not even a trace of the dead boy's hair.³² He is literally confounded by a great void that renders his original purpose meaningless. Still, he continues with the ritual by wrapping some soil from where the dead body used to be, putting it in a new coffin, and burying it near his father's grave. "In this way I can count the affair ended, at least enough to

deceive my mother and set her mind at rest."³³ He has completed his filial act with deception.

At this point in Lü Weifu's recounting, the narrator notices that "the rims of his eyes were rather red, but immediately attributed this to the effect of the wine."³⁴ Obviously, Lü is emotionally shaken, but the narrator, in one of his few uninvolved postures, refuses to admit it. The reader is made aware, however, that Lü Weifu's account has woven a web of gentle melancholy which shields the two individuals from the cold world outside. From an outsider's point of view, Lü Weifu's act may indeed be meaningless, but within the world of his remembrance he must wrestle with certain consequences: Is he merely deceiving his mother or is he also deceiving himself? Can he find meaning merely in his "cherishing act" itself without regard for anyone else's opinion? What is there to do in life after the closure of his own tale?

At the end of Lü Weifu's account of the second incident—after he realizes that Ashun, the girl for whom the flowers are intended, is dead and he has to give them to her younger sister—he again says: "Since that was the case, my business was finished too. . . . I have only to tell my mother that Ashun was delighted with them and that will be that. Who cares about such meaningless trifles anyway?"³⁵ Again he attempts to shield the possible meaning of his act in meaninglessness: the term he uses is "*wuliao*," which commonly refers to both meaninglessness and boredom. There is no longer any gesture of hope for the younger generation, nor even a cynical effort to justify himself. He is tired of life and reveals his true nihilism—a final gesture of negating his own earlier beliefs—by admitting that he has been "muddling through life" by teaching youngsters the old classics of *The Book of Odes* and *Mencius*. Thus, by the story's end, the protagonist is well on his way to becoming a *misanthrope*.

The misanthropic tendency of Lu Xun's loner reaches its culmination in one of his last stories (completed in October 1925), appropriately titled "The Misanthrope" (literally, "The Loner," "*gudu zhe*"). Though not one of Lu Xun's best stories in technique, it is in length second only to "The True Story of Ah Q." More than any other story it gives an elaborate account of the process of a former radical's "degeneration" and provides the fullest profile of the loner turned misanthrope. Thus, despite its artistic flaws, the story deserves a careful analysis, as it occupies a summary position comparable to that of "The True Story of Ah Q."

That "The Misanthrope" represents both a follow-up to and a summation of certain sentiments developed in "In the Tavern" is self-evident. The correspondences in biographical data between Wei Lianshu, the story's protagonist, and Lu Xun are numerous. Wei studied zoology (cf. Lu Xun's

medicine) but teaches history (cf. literature). He is a modern intellectual, like Lu Xun, and a "follower of modern creeds," and upon returning to his hometown he is treated "as if he were a foreigner." Though not a collector, he loves books. He has taken to "writing for magazines," for which he has been attacked in newspapers, and "in the schools rumors spread about him."³⁶ Even his features are similar to Lu Xun's: "He was a thin man with an oblong, angular face, hidden to a certain extent by his disheveled hair, dark eyebrows and moustache. His eyes gleamed darkly."³⁷

This portrait is drawn by the narrator as he watches Wei Lianshu going through the traditional ceremony of his grandmother's funeral with orderly care—much to the surprise of his relatives, who are worried that a modern-thinking intellectual may refuse to obey such conventional rituals. His action is obviously comparable in significance to the reburial of the protagonist's dead brother in "In the Tavern." The incident, which is again entirely based on Lu Xun's own experience, is depicted as culminating in a scene of emotional outburst which seems totally out of Wei's character and, for some Lu Xun scholars,³⁸ out of place:

The disgruntled mourners seemed about to leave, but Wei was still sitting on the mat, lost in thought. Suddenly, tears fell from his eyes, and then he burst into a long wail like a wounded wolf howling in the wilderness at the dead of night; anger and sorrow mingled with his agony. This was not in accordance with tradition and, taken by surprise, they were at a loss. After a little hesitation, some went to try to persuade him to stop, and these were joined by more and more people until finally there was a crowd around him. But he sat there wailing, motionless as an iron statue.

With a sense of anti-climax, the crowd dispersed.³⁹

Zhou Zuoren comments that in all of Lu Xun's works of prose and fiction which incorporate autobiographical elements "none has been written so authentically."⁴⁰ Obviously this is one of the rare scenes which are terribly close to Lu Xun's heart—the revelation of an emotional truth. Interestingly, this crucial scene is also presented in the archetypal structure of the loner surrounded by a crowd. The crowd's reaction is typical; its incapacity to understand the depth of Wei Lianshu's feeling adds merely to the pathos of his alienation. But the solitary stand of this loner—sitting "motionless as an iron statue"—indicates that his alienation is total: he no longer possesses any spirit of active confrontation or any eagerness for enlightenment vis-à-vis the crowd, as did the Madman. He does not even feel the need, as did the protagonist in "The Story of Hair," to offer a cynical sermon.

If we compare this later work with "Diary of a Madman," it is apparent that the loner's entrapment here is self-induced, rather than imposed from the outside. As the narrator remarks at one point to Wei Lianshu: "You have

woven a solitary cocoon with your own hand and wrapped yourself up in it."⁴¹ His grandmother's death has apparently triggered a process of self-reflection which leads to a central question afflicting all misanthropes: what is left in life that is worth living? The bulk of the story, told from the narrator's point of view, depicts Wei's pathetic efforts to "live a little longer" while burdened with a feeling of life's increasing meaninglessness. Interestingly, he initially places his faith on children—an apparent reference to the final message in "Diary of a Madman": "Children are always good. They are so innocent. . . . I think China's only hope lies in this."⁴² But even this residual faith is rebutted by the narrator. After this last shred of life's purpose is wrenched from him, and after the narrator fails to find him a teaching position at another town, the misanthrope is bent on a process of self-destruction. His final act of "degradation"—leading a life of living death—is another reminder of the outcome of the Madman who, after being "cured," decided to "seek office":

What a joy! Wonderful! I am now doing what I formerly detested and opposed. I am now giving up all I formerly believed in and upheld. I have really failed—but I have won.

Do you think I am mad? Do you think I have become a hero or a great man? No, it is not that. It is very simple; I have become adviser to General Du. . . ."⁴³

This is in fact Wei's farewell note to life before he actually dies of self-induced dissipation and illness. After "The Misanthrope," Lu Xun wrote no more about loners in his stories; Wei Lianshu's death seems to have completed the fictional genealogy which begins with "Diary of a Madman." A paragraph in one of Lu Xun's letters to Xu Guangping, his common-law wife, provides an apt summary of their fate: "The destiny of this kind of people—now or in the future—is this: they want to save the masses but are persecuted by the masses. Eventually they become loners who, in their outrage, turn around and hate everything; they fire at anyone and are themselves killed."⁴⁴

The story of "The Misanthrope" is told consistently by an involved narrator whose empathy toward the protagonist approaches total emotional identification. But even more so than "In the Tavern," the narrator in tracing the steps of Wei's tragic life has become his "double" and seems on the verge of turning himself into another misanthrope. The plot implies a dual structure, as it involves at least two cycles: it begins with Wei Lianshu attending his grandmother's funeral and ends with the narrator attending Wei's; the descriptions of their respective responses to the deceased are almost identical. This indicates that the pattern of the loner is repeated from the grandmother to the protagonist to the narrator. Wei seems quite aware of

this curious “eternal return” of the fate of the loner when he tries to confront the narrator’s charge that he has woven his life into a cocoon:

“Perhaps so. But tell me where does the thread for the cocoon come from? Of course, there are plenty of people like that; take my grandmother, for example. Although I have none of her blood in my veins, I may inherit her fate. But that doesn’t matter, I have already bewailed my fate together with hers.”⁴⁵

Thus the genealogy is not biological but almost mythical: there is something special about the species of loners who, so to speak, form a mythic bond across generations. One senses Nietzsche’s influence in Lu Xun’s design, and in the curious correspondences between his fiction and prose poetry. For the grandmother has already appeared as a striking mythic figure in the poem “Tremors of Degradation” (written four months earlier). Here we have an extreme instance of Lu Xun’s strange subjectivity—by turning figures from the most intimate personal experiences (his real grandmother’s death) into “fantastic” projections—a bizarre embodiment of certain aspects of his philosophical thinking. The story of “The Misanthrope” thus contains more than “a conflict between social ideals, one’s duty to the broader society, and the bonds of family love and obligation.”⁴⁶ It concerns the meaning of individual human existence itself, on the personal and somewhat abstract level, which rises above the realm of concrete reality and the didactic demands of realism. It is Lu Xun’s peculiar metaphor of the self as an awakened loner caught in an impasse who must suffer and brood in the face of death.

4

This somewhat allegorical reading of Lu Xun’s fiction has obviously been inspired by the famous metaphor of the “iron house,” which he conjured up as a response to his friend Qian Xuantong’s request for his literary contributions to the journal *New Youth*:

Imagine an iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible, in which there are many people soundly asleep who are about to die of suffocation. Yet from slumber to demise—it does not cause them to feel the sorrow of impending death. Now if you raise a shout to wake up a few of the relatively light sleepers, making these unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you really think you are doing them a good turn?⁴⁷

In a way, the “iron house” may be taken as a symbol of the structure of traditional Chinese culture and society. But it carries a more generalized and philosophic meaning than just a specific reference to traditional China.

Insofar as it forms a response to a specific request to write, it may refer also to the issue of intentionality. The creative act of writing, in this case, becomes almost inevitably the act of awakening, of bringing into life those few special individuals who somehow stand out from the mundane crowd. In a more public frame of reference, they are indeed the minority of farsighted reformers and revolutionists whose unconventional views meet with resistance and incomprehension from the ignorant majority. In the May Fourth ideological discourse, this is nothing extraordinary. Hu Shi, in his espousal of Ibsen, had popularized the image of the individualist as an “enemy of the people.”⁴⁸ Against the common-run of mediocrity and conservatism in contemporary society, such a position—and pose—conveyed a certain self-righteous grandeur. But Lu Xun’s metaphor is quite removed from Hu Shi’s positivism; the iron house is, after all, a literary metaphor which signifies a kind of interiority—the dark, shadowy abode of a disturbed inner psyche. The “light sleepers” seem closer to Lu Xun’s heart because they embody certain strains from his private experience and emotion.

I have attempted to delineate the configurations of these two basic categories of people—“awakened few” vs. the “sound sleepers”—found in some of Lu Xun’s major stories. As illustrated in the framework of his fiction, the few individuals who have been awakened seem initially inclined to wake up the sound sleepers, but their efforts lead only to alienation and defeat. The light sleepers become in fact loners who are unable to rouse the slumbering crowd, succeeding only in aggravating their own pain with their sharpened consciousness of impending death. None of them attains a full victory, and the crowd is the ultimate winner. The destruction of the iron house is nowhere in sight.

However, as the account in the *Nabani* preface continues, since it was Qian Xuantong who urged him to write, Qian also supplied a resolution to his iron house paradox: “If a few wake up, you can’t say there is no hope of destroying the iron house.” This facile answer apparently helped to lessen Lu Xun’s pessimism: “True, although I had my own convictions, I could not blot out hope, for hope belongs to the future. I could never use my evidence that it does not exist to refute his view that it may exist. So I finally consented that I would write.”⁴⁹ It is possible that this promise of the future, based on a faith in evolutionism, offers a possibility that the present debacle can be resolved. As such it could bring some comfort to the suffering of present loners. But at the same time Lu Xun seems reluctant to allow the loners in his fiction such luxury. As Mr. N., the protagonist in “The Story of Hair,” remarks, quoting from Artzybashev: “If too much hope is promised for the future, what is left for the present?” In his stories, it seems that Lu Xun has likewise put this residual faith to the test in a series of doubts, reaffirmations,

and further doubts. Thus after a nightmare of pessimism in "Diary of a Madman" he adds a hopeful plea to save the children. Having put the revolutionary to death in "Medicine," he sees fit to add the flower wreath and to suggest in the next story that the dark night of the present is "eager to change into tomorrow."⁵⁰ After a description of present alienation in "My Old Home," he evokes the famous image of the road:

I thought: hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads on the ground. For originally there is no road on the ground, but when there are many people walking on it, a road is made.⁵¹

The narrator, in making such an analogy, obviously hopes that a way can be found for future generations. But in "Regret for the Past," written four years later, we find a comparable evocation of the road couched in less than certain imagery: "Sometimes the road seems like a big grey serpent writhing and darting at me. I wait and wait and watch it approach, but it always disappears suddenly in darkness."⁵² Interestingly, this was the last road reference in his fiction, written in October 1925, a few days after he had completed "The Misanthrope." From biographical evidence, we have reason to believe that at the time Lu Xun finished his second collection of stories, he had probably reached a nadir of private depression. As far as his fictional vision is concerned, he had not, it seems, fulfilled his friend Qian Xuantong's prediction.

These vacillations between faith and disbelief, between hope and despair, seem to characterize his writings in several genres throughout the 1920s. They not only mirror the fluctuations of his personal mood but also reflect a basic indeterminacy in his thinking—an uncertainty about intellectual options and future action. It was only after a most agonizing process of self-scrutiny, in which he brought himself to an abyss of total despair and nihilism, that he was able to reestablish himself as a committed writer on the leftist literary front in the 1930s. Before we discuss this later phase of his career and writing, we must plunge once again into the area of his inner darkness, which his creative genius has transformed into another genre of art—prose poetry, as collected in *Yecao* (Wild Grass).

Chapter 5

Wild Grass: The Impasse between Hope and Despair

Yecao (Wild Grass) is a unique collection of Lu Xun's creative output. The twenty-three pieces of prose poetry contained therein represent not only some of Lu Xun's most inspired writing but also a rare specimen of modern Chinese literature. Lu Xun himself cherished a special fondness for these pieces, which he called "small and pale flowers" that blossom "on the rim of hell"¹—literary crystallizations of his dark moods and tortured feelings which comprise a surrealistic world of the subconscious. He was never able to repeat this *tour de force* of experimental writing in his later life, nor has any other modern Chinese writer attempted anything remotely like it. In the opinion of the late Tsi-an Hsia, most of the book is "genuine poetry embryo: images imbued with strong emotional intensity, flowing and stopping in darkly glowing and oddly shaped lines, like molten metal failing to find a mold."² This conjunction of his impulses for formalistic experimentation and psychological probing yields a magnificent harvest of symbolic art.

The uniqueness of form and sentiment in this collection may have something to do with Lu Xun's private mood at the time these pieces were written from September 1924 to April 1926. This was a rather trying period of his life, as most Lu Xun biographers have noted. By this time, the high tide of the May Fourth intellectual movement had subsided, and he had lost much of the combative spirit which characterized some of his early writings. After the split of the *New Youth* leaders, he depicted himself in a classical poem as a leftover soldier wandering forlornly on a forsaken battlefield. The poem moreover, was meant to be an inscription for his second collection of stories, which was completed around this time—entitled, revealingly