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Poetry and subalternity: what are we looking for?

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Lyrical Experiments in Sinophone Verse

Time, Space, Bodies, and Things



Edited by
Justyna Jaguścik
Joanna Krenz
Andrea Riemenschmitter

Amsterdam
University
Press

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14. Poetry and Subalternity: What Are We Looking for?

Maghiel van Crevel

Abstract: Battler poetry (*dagong shige*), often called migrant worker poetry in English, is writing by precarious workers in postsocialist China that addresses their socioeconomic experience. It speaks to a wide-ranging audience that includes the authors' fellow workers but also cultural officials, middle-class media consumers, labor activists, and scholars and translators, in China and elsewhere. Battler poetry raises questions that lie at the nexus of social experience and aesthetics. As such, it invites interdisciplinary work at the interface of social science and the humanities. Scholarship on battler poetry to date is dominated by paraphrastic and interpretive approaches. To complement these approaches, this chapter proposes an ontological approach that recognizes battler poetry as not just documentation or artifact but as partaking of poetic voice, a fundamental expression of humanity whose manifestations are remarkably diverse.

Keywords: Migrant worker literature, Chinese poetry, battler poetry, *dagong* poetry, Mu Cao

Shopping Street

The girl from out of town sweeps the street at dawn
and early passers-by heave a sigh when they see her
Such a young girl What a shame
The girl from out of town sweeps the street at dusk
and late-hour loafers heave a sigh when they see her

The middle-aged woman has lost her job
—She has parents and children to provide for

The middle-aged woman cannot get by
 The middle-aged woman brings a gift to the Street Office
 and the girl from out of town is now gone
 The middle-aged woman starts doing the sweeping
 The middle-aged woman sweeps
 and heaves a sigh for herself

The kid in jail has served his time is released
 and returns to this old street that raised him
 The people in the neighborhood grow uneasy
 —Shouldn't let him hang out all day with nothing to do
 If he can't make a living he might just start robbing us again
 Come on let's all help out and do something about it

From then on day in day out
 That big bad kid sweeps the street
 and the passers-by spit at him full of contempt
 A police car drives right by his side
 and the kid ducks away in spite of himself
 —He steals a sideways glance
 and sees two women criminals inside the car
 One is the girl from out of town for prostitution
 The other is the middle-aged woman for being her pimp

《商城街》

外来妹在清晨打扫大街
 清晨的路人为她叹息
 这么年轻的姑娘太可惜了
 外来妹在黄昏扫大街
 黄昏的闲人也为她叹息

中年妇女失业了
 ——上有老下有小啊
 中年妇女日子不好过
 中年妇女给街道办事处送礼后
 外来妹走了
 中年妇女开始每天扫地
 中年妇女一边扫地
 一边为自己叹息

青年坐监服刑释放
 回到这条生养他的老街
 周围的人不安起来
 ——不能让他闲着没活干啊
 他没饭吃还会再偷盗我们啊
 大伙相互行动起来

后来的一天天
 人高马壮的光棍青年扫大街
 路人向他不屑地吐痰
 一辆警车擦身而过
 青年下意识里躲到一边
 ——他斜了一眼
 看见车内坐着两名女犯
 一个是卖淫的外来妹
 一个是拉皮条的中年妇女
 (Mu Cao 2009, 162–64)

This is a poem by Mu Cao 墓草 (b. 1974), in my translation. In January 2017, Mu Cao contacted me on email. I had been doing literary ethnography in China for some time and become visible on social media. Mu Cao knew about my interest in China's formidable DIY tradition of unofficial (*minjian* 民间) poetry journals, and I knew Mu Cao could only ever publish unofficially. If you wanted to chalk this up to homophobia, you would not be wrong. Mu Cao is China's first openly gay poet, and this has excluded him from official publication inside the country. But there is more to it, and we need an intersectional perspective such as that taken by Bao Hongwei (2018). Bao writes on Mu Cao in the context of queer studies but begins by noting that Mu Cao is also a migrant worker who sells his labor and works for the boss. The Chinese term for this mode of subsistence is *dagong* 打工.

Mu Cao is one of about three hundred million people who have moved from the Chinese countryside to the cities since the 1980s, to escape from poverty, unemployment, and the strictures of village life amid a socio-economic transformation driven by global and local capitalism. Many do low-status, menial labor on the assembly line, in construction, and in every kind of service industry, from waste-picking and waitressing to courier delivery and sex work. The great majority are faced with social discrimination and fundamental economic insecurity: that the girl from out of town is sweeping the street today does not mean she will get to do so tomorrow. These people constitute the bulk of China's "new workers" (*xin gongren*

新工人) a designation that suggests dignity and hope but also brings to mind Laurent Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). Successors to the socialist proletariat, the new workers are the post-socialist precariat. If the former were dignified political subjects—even if they were often spoken *for* by the authorities—the latter are more or less expendable units in the neoliberal order.

And they write literature. By no means all of them, but enough of them, and effectively enough, for something called *dagong* literature (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学), especially *dagong* poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌), to enter the public eye. The Chinese terms connote a tricky combination of denigration and pride. I translate them as "battler literature" and "battler poetry," after an Australian expression that is similarly ambivalent, in the same colloquial register.¹ I define battler literature as writing by precarious workers in post-socialist China that addresses their socioeconomic experience. This writing contains moments of optimism, cruel and otherwise, but it often speaks of hardship and suffering.²

While the voices of its best-known authors are unmistakable, much of this writing is unsophisticated by conventional standards. This is a literature that works toward social identification and the restoration of dignity in the precarious worker as a writing and reading subject, and a literature of testimony and advocacy. As such, it brings its own aesthetics. Several of its authors have said they write to change their destiny, even as they realize this goal is hard to reach. Marginal and contested, battler literature raises questions that lie at the nexus of aesthetics and social experience. It recalls kindred literatures of oppression and emancipation, othered by the specter of the prefix: aboriginal literature, queer literature, prison literature, women's literature, and so on.

Poetry is the most prominent battler genre, and Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (b. 1980) is the face of battler poetry. She started out as a factory worker in Dongguan and is now a successful poet in every respect, based in Guangzhou (see Zhou 2021). Especially outside China, if people can name a second battler poet, this is usually Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014) (see van Crevel 2019). Xu's rise to fame was posthumous, and tragically occasioned by his suicide at age

1 Wikipedia, accessed May 7, 2023. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler_\(underdog\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battler_(underdog)).

2 Not all scholars insist that the author needs to speak from experience. My definition is motivated by a desire to conjoin textual and ethnographic material. This chapter borrows the occasional turn of phrase from recent publications that are part of my ongoing research on battler poetry.

twenty-four. He was an employee of the Foxconn electronics manufacturing plant in Shenzhen, which is notorious for its dehumanizing labor regime.

Notably, battler poetry has regularly crossed over from its unofficial provenance in blogs and unofficial journals into official literary infrastructures, such as publishing houses, libraries, and the China Writers Association. Not so, however, for Mu Cao. And in addition to his sexuality, there may be something else that bars him from publishing through official channels. Not so much his biting satire and the unruliness of his writing, which he shares with many officially published authors; what I mean is a particularly candid portrayal of social injustice.

Mu Cao's own life story contains chilling scenes of social injustice, from a broken home and traumatizing experiences in high school (from which he was expelled) to hair-raising labor conditions in so-called black factories, where there is nothing that remotely resembles labor rights.³ He does not pull his punches in his writing, which also includes fiction and short prose. Also, he is wont to point out the abuse of power that flows from hierarchy-without-accountability, in the hands of not just factory bosses but also the political authorities, embodied by the police car in "Shopping Street." The poem's closing lines illustrate both points. It doesn't really matter if losing the street-sweeping gig has in fact forced the girl and the woman into prostitution and pimping (social injustice) or they have had these labels slapped on them to justify their arrest (abuse of power). Or both.

But here is the crunch: the candor, irreverence, and acerbic tone of Mu Cao's indictment of social injustice render him invisible not just in officially published literature—but also in what counts as the "mainstream," or the "representative" variety, of the marginal, largely unofficial literature that is battler poetry. While Mu Cao is relatively well known "outside the system" (*tizhi wai* 体制外), in the same space where much of battler poetry resides, he does not appear in your typical list of happening battler poets, whether this list is drawn up close to the cultural apparatus of the state or far away from it. Mu Cao noted this himself in our email exchange and in interviews I did with him later. For the record, he published poetry that explicitly addresses the *dagong* experience as early as the year 2000, when he made his literary debut—and came out as gay—in the unofficial journal *Scrutiny* (*Shenshi* 审视).⁴

3 Interviews conducted during my fieldwork in 2017.

4 One of many such journals that are accessible online at Leiden University Libraries, at <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/unpo>.

I don't think Mu Cao's demonstrable qualifications as a battler poet are obstructed from view by his status as China's best-known queer poet. Rather, his invisibility in battler poetry confirms an observation made by poets, academics, and editors I interviewed during fieldwork,⁵ which highlights the role of censorship. For all the roughness and toughness of certain specimens of battler literature, including regular lament on the suffering of precarious workers, what gets published is to some extent a sanitized body of texts. This has been cleansed of writing that descends too deeply into true horror—of the kind, for instance, that happens in black factories—and of writing that attributes the workers' ordeal to systemic problems which are ultimately brought on by policy decisions. Tellingly, the publication of Zheng Xiaoqiong's *Stories of Women Workers* (*Nügongji* 女工记), a landmark book in battler literature, required “the brave—if somewhat risky—decision of a senior editor,” in the words of Sun Wanning (2023, 420), since the local government had advised against publication. And that was 2012. Censorship is much more severe today.

So here we have a poetry that the inherently elite genre of literary criticism variously refers to as “subaltern” or “underclass” or “from below” (*diceng* 底层), which habitually raises the question of whether it can move up in the world to make the cut and count as actual poetry (never mind the gigantic tacit assumptions that are at play here). And, we have a queer migrant worker who questions the legitimacy of this poetry in his turn, but does so ... from below. The episode illustrates the sheer complexity of the force field in which battler poetry operates. In addition to the usual suspects in the literary field, players include various actors in the unofficial poetry circuit, the state as socioeconomic policy maker and as both sponsor and censor of literature, labor activists who promote cultural education, and last but not least news media in China and elsewhere, for battler poetry turns out to be highly mediagenic.

Things like this help explain the rapid growth of scholarly interest in subalternity and cultural production in China, with due attention to discursive positions and power relations, on the one hand, and the entanglement of aesthetics and social experience, on the other.⁶ We can loosely map this distinction onto that of social science and the humanities. Groundbreaking contributions in these two realms have been made by Sun Wanning (2014)

5 In light of the sensitivity of the matter, they remain unnamed here.

6 See this thematic bibliography: <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/bibliographies/lit/theme-1/#MWS>. There is a substantial body of Chinese-language scholarship from the PRC, but this is increasingly restricted by censorship.

and Margaret Hillenbrand (2023) respectively, to name but two of many scholars who have contributed.

If we zoom out, this scholarship aligns with the social turn in poetry (e.g., Nowak 2020) and in cultural production at large. This is marked by social engagement with gender-race-class, the environment, and other flashpoints of inequality, by a critique of established affordances of literature and art in society, and by collaborative practices and advocacy. It may not be an exaggeration to say that poetry has exuded a new, intense kind of energy since the late twentieth century worldwide, even though this has played out differently in different places. Poetry will doubtless continue to face periodic declarations of its demise, often helpfully specified as its death—but usually by people who have no clue, so that is fine.

Have We Struck the Balance?

In my ongoing work, I ask what battler poetry is, what it does, and what it means, according to the various parties to whom it speaks. To this end, I try to conjoin its articulations with its highly divergent representations and the resultant, intense debates. By articulations I mean the poetry itself but also discourse on the experience of battler poethood and subaltern community-building around poetry and poethood. These articulations, representations, and debates take shape in a discursive space where official and unofficial forms meet. After Caroline Levine, I use “form” to refer to organizing principles of not just the aesthetic but also the sociopolitical kind (2015). In this essay, I ask what we are *looking for* in battler poetry. By “we” I mean scholars. This includes translators, who rewrite the source text and produce influential paratexts, but I will not discuss translation here.

So what are we looking for in battler poetry? Specifically, I wonder if we have managed to strike the balance in a way that does this poetry justice. As such, this essay presents the next step in an attempt to tackle an issue I have found myself circling over the last five years or so, in scholarship and in occasional writings for a general audience.

This issue is a desire to approach battler poetry on its own terms. This simple phrase, to which the study of artifacts and communities is irresistibly drawn, is a trap door that will see one plunge to great philosophical and ideological depth and darkness. Let me say that by approaching battler poetry on its own terms, I do not mean a relativist position, much less an exoticist one. Also, I am not primarily referring to something that I do believe is crucial for understanding the emergence of battler poetry as

a cultural practice: that is, the continuing power of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition (van Crevel 2017). This image has been central to my fieldwork experience since the 1990s, and it can be seen to run through the study of Chinese poetry ever since this became a respectable academic endeavor (you will forgive me, or perhaps applaud me, for smuggling in this claim). But this essay is not about the Chineseness of Chinese poetry.

There are of course different ways to present scholarship on battler poetry to date. In an essay on Zheng Xiaoqiong, I list subalternity, gender and the patriarchy, and late capitalist ecological destruction as three thematic clusters (2023a), with the work of Sun Wanning, Justyna Jaguścik, and Zhou Xiaojing as respective examples.⁷ In this essay I propose to take what is essentially a methodological perspective. In a nutshell: we have a wealth of paraphrastic scholarship and a fair amount of interpretive scholarship, but hardly any ontological scholarship. And we need to do something about that.

I should add that in its present form, this essay is a think piece. It sort of locks itself in at the conceptual level, and it is speculative and schematic. At this point, one could float a Chinese adage that an innocent bystander might think was a reference to robbing a jewelry store, but the insiders know better. *Pao zhuan yin yu* 抛砖引玉 means hurling bricks at others in ostensibly unreasonable hopes that they will reciprocate by lobbing beautifully chiseled pieces of jade back at you. The image is preposterous unless we take it as an enthusiastic expression of humility and respect for your interlocutors, but it can also mean you are going out on a limb.

Don't get me wrong: I love paraphrastic scholarship and interpretive scholarship. It is just that I think things could be even better. As for schematicity, I should add that I use "paraphrastic" and "interpretive" as coordinates, not pigeonholes. In practice, the paraphrastic and the interpretive overlap and intersect, within the work of individual authors and between their work. Just like subalternity, gender and the patriarchy, and ecological destruction overlap and intersect within the work of Sun, Jaguścik, and Zhou, and between their work. And just like, for the study of subalternity and cultural production at large, social science and the humanities overlap and intersect.

On paraphrase, before anything else, I dig the position that says a poem is by definition unparaphrasable. But even Cleanth Brooks, who called paraphrasing poetry a heresy, said it was alright, "provided that we know what we are doing" (1968, 160)—never mind how loudly this is begging the question. Paraphrase is perfectly fine, for instance, to make the texts of battler poetry serve as documentary material for the study of migration

7 See note 5.

and/or labor and/or gender and/or state violence, or as testimony to sustain advocacy and activism in relation to these things—all the more so because there is much battler poetry that demonstrably comes under life writing. As in “Yes, this actually happened.” On that note, there is no need to strictly, and artificially, separate scholarship from advocacy and activism. Conversely, there is quite possibly a need to consider how scholarship can contribute to advocacy and activism, in parallel with the social turn in the poetry that it is about.

Paraphrastic scholarship puts battler poetry to instrumental use, in the service of sociopolitical analysis. In varying proportions: there is, for instance, much more poetry in Zhou’s scholarship than in Sun’s, in quantitative terms. Neither the point about instrumental use nor the observation that different scholars cite different amounts of poetry is a value judgment. At the same time, these observations take us to a question that runs through the conversation at every level and that may just be impossible to dispel, judging by similar conversations on other literatures of oppression and emancipation. Is this “actual poetry” that happens to be about migrant labor, or is it migrant labor activism that happens to take the form of poetry?

This is, of course, a serious contender for the False Dichotomy Award. Then again, “false dichotomy” is what an academic might say when you ask them about the weather. But seriously, maybe the question is harmless. And maybe it is legitimate in that it prompts a variety of readers to ask themselves what they want from this poetry, what *they* are looking for, from foreign book reviewers all the way back to source text authors.

Interpretive scholarship comes in (minimally) two kinds, the symptomatic and the philological. Symptomatic interpretation is associated with cultural studies, which I loosely take as the ideologically inflected study of the full breadth of cultural production. Beyond—or, instead of—paraphrasing the poem, the researcher *talks back* to the poem, within a conceptual framework that is consciously informed by a particular worldview and by the desire for scholarship to be anchored in its social context and to influence that context. Symptomatic interpretation sits on the fence between the paraphrastic and the interpretive, but I like to think of interpretive scholarship as its home ground.

For the notion of philological interpretation, I draw on Sheldon Pollock’s definition of philology as “the practice of *making sense of texts*” (2016, 13; emphasis in the original). This is a vision of fundamental and diverse scholarship, and the caricature in which wizened scholars pore over dusty manuscripts inside the ivory tower while the world moves on should be no more than an obnoxious footnote to it. Pollock himself focuses on language

and writing, particularly ancient Sanskrit texts. But if we take the notion of texts broadly, philology is just as important for understanding present-day migrant worker body-building contests, which the Shenzhen municipality organized for the city's new arrivals at one point (Yang 2011, 5). By the philological interpretation of battler poetry, I mean research that is focused on the poem as inviting affective and intellectual engagement at material and immaterial levels of the text, toward a "making sense of the text" that entails the poem's realization as an aesthetic event.

First, this aesthetic event can draw on the sociopolitical. Second, reflection on this aesthetic event can synergize with reflection on the sociopolitical. Third, with reference to the work of Levine, such reflection can go on to explore the interaction of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical as a two-way process. Not coincidentally, these three points are a thumbnail description of Hillenbrand's work on Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry—in a book on precariousness and cultural forms and practices in China that also extends to film and visual art, human-interest journalism, social media livestreaming, and painfully performative "suicide shows," where precarious workers scale high-rises and tower cranes, and threaten to jump unless they are given their back pay (2023). With text in a transmedial sense, symptomatic and philological interpretation can apply not just to poetry but also to suicide shows and everything in between. And of course symptomatic and philological interpretation can be hand-in-glove, and they can synergize.

Ontological Scholarship

Now to ontological scholarship, meaning scholarship that seeks to address the nature of poetry or more literally its being, to be guided by *what poetry is*. First, let me note that what I have in mind is different from the notion of ontological criticism in the New Criticism tradition. Also, I am cheerfully aware that poetry defies definitive definition, but I would venture that calling this undefinability a defining feature of the genre can be more than mere cleverness, if we allow ourselves to reconsider what we want from definitions in the humanities.

What can an ontological perspective add to our understanding of battler poetry? First and foremost, an ontological perspective can recover a question that is always there but not always made explicit or given a lot of time: Why poetry? Why does an author turn to this particular genre to say what they say? Could they say this otherwise? Could it be that how they say precedes and determines what they say? How does this affect their listeners and

readers? What are the implications for scholarship? All this will eventually take us to the phenomenon of poetic voice, but we need a detour to get there.

Let us first consider what is perhaps an obvious way of “placing” battler poetry as we try to grasp its nature. If we went by something like family resemblance, we might tick PRC workers’ poetry from the high-socialist era, working-class poetry traditions in the UK and the US, and Dalit poetry in India. One finds workers’ poetries and subaltern poetries throughout the world, but these three have generated a lot of scholarship—just like battler poetry is in the process of doing as we speak.

Battler poetry and its kindred poetries as identified here share important motivations: (1) identification and community-building, (2) social concern and social aspiration, (3) resistance and anti-elitism, and (4) varying relations—but always *some* relation—to political authority. At the same time there are striking differences between battler poetry and the other three (which is not to say the other three are the same thing). For example: PRC workers’ poetry from the high-socialist era shows the worker as a dignified political subject whose discursive position can hardly be called subaltern. And in practice, their writing was frequently done *with* them or indeed *for* them by intellectuals, a term I use here in the social-organizational way of PRC political discourse. Working-class poetries in the UK and the US have often thrived in the context of strong unionization, which remains out of reach for workers in today’s China. And while both Dalit poetry and battler poetry count as subaltern writing, Dalit poetry contains a stronger element of political protest and Dalit as a formally institutionalized category of social-class-through-caste works differently from the atomized social group of precarious workers in the PRC today, migrant or otherwise.

But hold on. This positioning exercise is shaped by sociopolitical context more than by anything else. And one of the reasons I talk a lot about the sociopolitical in matters poetic is that I want to push back against it at the same time as embracing it. So might there be other ways of placing battler poetry?

Let me first note that the ideas developed in this essay are in some sense about letting go, but they may also seem strangely confrontational. By letting go I mean an encouragement to the reader to disable the knee-jerk reflex of pinning poetry to a sociopolitical notice board and to forsake the conversational convenience this can bring. As for the confrontation I have promised to serve up, this is one of battler poetry with the theorization of high literature, specifically of lyric poetry. For this I will be taking some of my cues from the work of Jonathan Culler, both his own theorizing and

his survey of the scholarly tradition of which this is a part (2011; 2015). That this might be a *strange* confrontation is because the texts studied in this tradition appear to be as different from battler poetry as can be, as regards both provenance and register. Culler himself, for instance, mostly studies Euro-American high poetry, from ancient classics to modernism and postmodernism.

So doesn't this fly in the face of the attempt to approach battler poetry on its own terms? First, there is the thorny issue of using theory from one place for studying another place. Suffice it here to note that this can be legitimate as long as the critic makes themselves accountable. Second, what about using theory developed for high literature to study subaltern literature? To complicate matters, we might register that some battler poets would actually welcome this, because they would like to get rid of the prefix and be seen as not battler poets but just poets, full stop. *And* we might register that it is the researcher's prerogative to keep the prefix in place, not in order to essentialize battler poethood but in order to focus. Third, doesn't this operation entail a negative definition of battler poetry, one that describes it as what it is not? Maybe—but maybe not, as I hope to show. At any rate, invoking high theory on high literature is to recognize actual power relations in literature and in the study of literature.

While in disclaimer territory, let me add that I am not suggesting that confronting battler poetry with high-literary theory somehow holds the key to its secret. We can confront battler poetry with any number of other theoretical traditions and positions, depending on—that's right—what we are looking for. So why the tradition of which Culler is a part? As I hope to show below, this is especially because of what this tradition says about poetic voice.

Maybe trying to approach battler poetry on its own terms *and* letting high-literary theory into the room can yield an interesting dynamic. There is, for instance, a lot of battler poetry that does not warrant, or justify, the philologically interpretive work that is habitually done on high poetry, popularly or unpopularly known as close reading. This is not surprising. What matters is that we could rephrase and say instead that there is a lot of battler poetry that does not require, or even better: does not *tolerate* close reading—at least of the kind associated with abstruse writing (which unfortunately tends to obscure the many other things close reading can mean; see Herrnstein-Smith 2016). And this could move us to reconsider the scope of “actual poetry,” rather than concluding that battler poetry falls outside this scope. After all, otherness is no less useful than kinship for positioning cultural forms and practices.

A Strange Confrontation?

It was counter-intuitive curiosity that led me to reread Culler's work with battler poetry in mind, but the feeling there was something there grew stronger as I went along. I felt immersed in difference, in a stimulating way, even—or, especially—when this involved friction and collision. As it had done in a conversation with poet and scholar Piet Gerbrandy that put me on to the idea.

Let me illustrate this in three steps. First, I asked myself if a high level of abstraction is permissible if it enables some sort of commensurability between high-literary theorizing and battler poetry. When Culler writes that “complications of language ultimately have a communicative purpose” (2011, 28), is it okay, and does it help, to opine that battler poetry does in fact complicate the language that is conventionally expected of poetry? And that it tries to communicate something in the process—say, outrage over social injustice? And does it still help once we remind ourselves that Culler likely intends for the said complications to refer to linguistic experiment, to difficult and perhaps self-referential language, whereas battler poetry does not tend to be difficult in this sense, and tends to refer to the world-out-there rather than the word-in-here? Whichever personal-political position one ends up taking, making battler poetry land on the surface of high-literary theory in this way got me started.

Second, I tried to see from an alternative perspective some of the defining features of the lyric as these are carved out in Culler's work. This is not an attempt to outline Culler's vision of the lyric, or to map battler poetry onto this vision and make it fit, or even to determine whether battler poetry counts as lyric poetry (anyone say totalistic?). Rather, what I do is gingerly lift some key points from Culler's discussion of the lyric and come at them from left field, to read them in a way that will help me think about battler poetry. Not in order to challenge Culler's vision, which I find convincing, but in order to appropriate some of the junctures in this vision as an inspiration for thinking about battler poetry. And, if need be, to disassemble these junctures and rebuild them differently, even if this leaves some nuts and bolts on the table when we are done. To drag these things away from high poetry and repurpose them for subaltern poetry, if you will.

Let me start from Culler's emphasis on what he calls the linguistic patterning of the poem and its memorability. These two things are inseparable and held together by the centrality of rhythm, which triggers the poem as a somatic experience and a source of physical pleasure. Successful linguistic patterning in high poetry requires a subtle arrangement of language at the

material level, with a key role for repetition. This patterning is often seen as producing some sort of organic wholeness or minimally a precision of phrasing, and a structural presence of ambiguity. It takes place through the regulation of meter and rhyme, and equally, if more elusively, in free verse. On memorability, a *locus classicus* is Jacques Derrida's proposal that, simply and incompletely put, a poem is a text that asks you to learn it by heart (1991). Culler cites Derrida on this point and offers this juxtaposition: "With novels, we characteristically recall characters rather than phrases, but to remember a lyric is to remember at least some of its words" (2015, 130 and 139). The more effective the poem's linguistic patterning, the more memorable it becomes.

I would not describe the language in Mu Cao's "Shopping Street" as subtle, and it is easy to identify narrative elements in the poem. If its language is memorable in a somatic way that is triggered by rhythm, this is so because of the mechanical repetitions of "the girl from out of town" and "the middle-aged woman." Together with the speaker's deadpan enumeration of events, these repetitions reduce the protagonists to lifeless puppets in a gruesome social experience—which it is battler poetry's business to portray, among other things. Of course memorability à la Derrida is not just a matter of linguistic patterning, and linguistic patterning can be at its most memorable when poetic form serves to discipline heavy poetic content—and thus, paradoxically, to unleash this content with even greater force. (At the risk of stating the obvious, it is not as if subaltern literature holds the exclusive right to heavy content.)

In trying to establish a connection between battler poetry and high-literary theorizing, I have now taken two of my three steps. I have explored what is perhaps a mischievous level of abstraction and tried to see defining features of the lyric from an alternative perspective. Neither experiment has left me fully satisfied, but at least the exercise allows us to shake things up. More pertinently, I need these two steps before taking a third, which I am confident will be more satisfying. I need them as a courtesy to the richness of the tradition with which I am confronting battler poetry, and to move closer to the central tenet of my plea for more ontology.

For my third step, I draw on Culler's observation that in its enunciation, the lyric poem moves "from the claims of experience to the claims of writing" (2015, 283), and that it strives to "be an event, not a representation of an event" (2015, 137). Central to Culler's discussion is the notion of lyric address (2015, ch. 5), especially the rhetorical figure of apostrophe, which addresses something or someone who is not an actual listener. This can be one's heart, or a god, or a force of nature, but it can also be a "you" who is not the reader.

Also, this “you” can ambivalently refer to both the reader and the addressee of apostrophe within the space of a single poem.

In battler poetry, this recalls Zheng Xiaoqiong’s “Life” (Shenghuo 生活), which opens thus: “You all don’t know but my name is now hidden in a work ID / my hands are now part of the assembly line, my body signed over / to a contract” (2006, 23, my translation). Another example from battler poetry, where the addressee is not the reader, is a poem by Xiao Hai called “Debts” (Zhai 债): “You owe the everyday a happiness / You owe the dusk a dawn / You owe the dream a future / You owe your friend an expectation” (2017, 314–15, my translation). Here “you” might be the speaker themselves, with the reader “overhearing” the poet talking to themselves, in the image coined by John Stuart Mill and elaborated by Northrop Frye, on whose work Culler draws for his discussion of lyric address. As above, I am not trying to establish that apostrophe is as central to battler poetry as it is to the high-lyrical tradition. I am trying to show that it is legitimate and rewarding to shake up the compartmentalization that has befallen subaltern cultural production and bring it into conversation with verse that looks like its ultimate Other.

As an event (rather than the representation of an event) that emerges in lyric address, lyric poetry is an invocation. In Culler’s words, this is “a move by which the speaking voice claims to be not a mere speaker of verse but an embodiment of poetic tradition and the spirit of poetry.” As such its calling is an act of poetic ritual. Culler, again: “Voice calls in order to be calling. It calls in order to dramatize voice: to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetic and prophetic voice” (2011, 78). Crucially, then, on the strength of this summoning alone, poetic voice claims a space from which to speak and to be heard in ways that are fundamentally different from the instrumental use of language. With the poet asking the listener to hear them out, as one might put it. And the listener knowing that something extraordinary is about to happen, in whatever shape or form.

As I continue to draw on otherness for positioning battler poetry, let me build another stark contrast to try and deconstruct, by giving an example of the power of poetic voice that is as different from Mu Cao as can be. Alan Berliner’s documentary film *First Cousin Once Removed* (2012) is a portrayal of American poet Edwin Honig, toward the end of Honig’s life, when he is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Fascinatingly, perhaps because he has written poetry for almost a century, Honig retains the ability to string together words elegantly while producing what is effectively nonsense. This appears as an autonomous process that is triggered by the questions posed by the filmmaker/interviewer—who is also his first cousin once removed.

The point here is that Honig gets away with producing nonsense. By this I mean that these moments in the documentary strike me as not only showcasing the ravages wrought on his mind by dementia but also allowing the viewer to marvel at this voice, metaphorical and literal alike—which, not coincidentally, utters not just words and sentences but also bird-like sounds that are not language. This is not just my subjective viewing experience. The filmmaker himself explicitly accepts, and seems to respect, Honig's babblings, and to do so because Honig is a poet. And the film intimates this throughout.

This may strike you as sleight of hand. Doesn't the filmmaker, who is also family, let Honig get away with producing nonsense before Honig has even done so, because the filmmaker knows, and knows that the viewer knows, that Honig is a poet? Not to mention that he loves him? In other words, is it justified to associate Honig's syntactically and prosodically fluent but semantically debilitated speech with poetic voice?

Again, I am trying to shake things up, in this case by smudging the line between poetic voice and nonsense, or *non*-sense. This is not a new idea in the study of poetry. Here, I use it to turn things on their heads once more, by crossing what I have called the space from which to speak and be heard. At the other end of that space, I propose to smudge the line between poetic voice and *sense*. This is sense of a hardcore kind, denoting both meaning and meaningfulness. Say, the sense of protesting against discrimination and advocating for social justice. By writing about who gets to sweep the street, or about twelve-hour shifts on the assembly line, or about left-behind children who see their migrant worker parents once a year.

Smudging the line between poetic voice and that particular kind of sense, and making this line crossable in both directions, is a plea to the scholarly community for approaching battler poetry not just as documentation (paraphrase) or artistic artifact (interpretation). But also, and equally, as partaking of poetic voice, which is a fundamental expression of humanity whose manifestations are remarkably diverse.

Why poetry? For an ontological approach, we could do worse than reminding ourselves consciously of this question at every turn, and to ask what it might mean for what we choose to read and hear, for how we choose to read and hear it, and for how we talk back. This may sound self-evident, but it is in fact a challenge, if only because of the urgent presence of the sociopolitical in this writing. Social injustice can make you feel like you have a deadline. For hearing the poetic voice, you need to take your time.

It helps to realize that not just scholars but also other readers might see battler poetry as partaking of poetic voice, even if they don't use

scholarly jargon to verbalize this. Be they the precarious workers that this poetry is about, middle-class media consumers, various actors in the literary field, or labor activists, in China or elsewhere. And it helps to note that in China, culturally trained alertness to poetic voice can explain battler poetry's development from scattered informality to an established cultural practice.

This practice includes collaborative initiatives such as the Picun Literature Group at the Migrant Workers Home, an NGO working on labor rights through what they call cultural education, situated in the outskirts of Beijing. Xiao Hai wrote that "You owe the everyday a happiness" and "You owe the dusk a dawn": this NGO is where he found salvation, in his own words. After fourteen precarious years on the assembly line, the Migrant Workers Home gave him steady work selling second-hand clothing. And through the Literature Group, he has become a published poet (van Crevel 2023b).

I bring this up to show how stories like this connect poetic voice with the more widely studied phenomenon of social voice, as something afforded by cultural production in a more instrumental perspective. That is, the voice of a social group that speaks discursively through literature, music, video, and so on, typically in the context of oppression and emancipation. Or actually audio-recordable individual voices that speak physically and do so from a discursive position that is decisively shaped by the group's socioeconomic experience.

Connecting poetic voice to social voice is recognizing poetry's ability to be about something else and yet be about itself and draw attention to itself—to its nature and its being. It also reminds us that battler poetry's overdetermination by the social experience of its authors is not inherent, or self-evident, or a feature that magically drops on to this poetry from on high. Someone does the overdetermining, and perhaps they could choose not to do so, or not to do so all the time. That someone includes us.

In Conclusion

Subaltern cultural production invites interdisciplinary work, because of its entanglement with issues of social justice among other things. Many scholars across a range of orientations in social science and the humanities are contributing, but let me return to the work of Margaret Hillenbrand, whose work on poetry I have cited as an example of the strengths of interpretive scholarship. It takes courage to write about the suicide shows

enacted by precarious workers, to face disturbing questions raised by the delegated performance art that feeds on this tragedy—which is also a cultural practice—and to articulate disturbing conclusions.

To me, Hillenbrand's work suggests that this courage comes from the imagination that enables researchers to consider the aesthetics of what we might call extreme exposure across media and genres of literature and art. This imagination lies at the core of humanities scholarship and its immanent value. It makes the humanities indispensable for addressing fearsome sociopolitical issues that are crowding the headlines, in tandem with other fields.

I say this not to launch yet another instrumentalist argument for protecting the humanities. I say it to undergird the vision that inspires things like a conference on poetry that makes the tightrope its central image, which spawned the present volume. I say it to suggest that humanistic imagination is what enables us to think about poetry with room for its very being, even if—or, precisely because—we cannot define this.

Like someone walking in mid-air. A poet, or a translator, or a scholar, or an activist. In a balancing act, on a tightrope between the word at one end, and the world at the other. Or, between intellectual and creative impulses at one end, and moral impulses at the other. Crossing other tightropes, with other people on them. The walking we do is not just about technical prowess. And it never stops.

How do you do it? To what end? What happens if you fall off?

Says who?

Who gets to say?

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