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Contemporary Chinese Poetry, Translation and World Literature:

Bei Dao and Yang Lian in English and Italian

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1. Introduction

This work took shape through different evolutionary steps in time. What started out as a personal interest in the practice of translation and in its theoretical implications turned into a wonderful opportunity to conjoin my background as a translator with contemporary Chinese poetry and the concept of world literature.

I first became aware of world literature as a problematic notion when I was about to obtain my bachelor's degree at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which was by then hosting a series of seminars held by professor Martin Kern. It was during one of those seminars that we discussed the meaning of "world literature", and what place Chinese literature holds in it. Through some personal research at Leiden University, I came to understand how world literature could indeed be an ideal theoretical background enabling me to elaborate a specific relationship between contemporary Chinese poetry and translation.

The leading question for this work originated from David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "an elliptical refraction of national literatures" (2003, 281). Damrosch argues that a text enters such an elliptical forcefield as soon as it circulates beyond its "place of birth", either in the original or in translation (4). Sure enough, world literature and translation are deeply entangled, and in this sense, one need only to look at the works by Emily Apter (2012 and 2013), Jacob Edmond (2012), or Susan Bassnett (2019). But what is the role of translation in shaping the trajectory, i.e. the reception and circulation, of particular texts as world literature? More specifically for the present project, what is the role of translation in determining the trajectory of particular texts *in contemporary Chinese poetry* as world literature?

The way this question is formulated sheds light on the novelty of the project itself. World literature's history as a matter of academic research and (sometimes fierce) debate is fairly long; translation studies have been blessed with unprecedented development in the last forty to fifty years, and contemporary Chinese poetry is more well-known than ever in that same period. Although world literature and contemporary Chinese poetry have been related before by scholars such as Jacob Edmond and Martin Kern, and the *translation* of this poetry has sparked harsh controversies between academics and reviewers in the past, no work has inspected the life of specimens of contemporary Chinese poetry in translation within the framework provided by world literature so overtly and explicitly so far. Furthermore, the kind of close reading and comparative analysis of translations performed in this project have never been employed to answer a question such as the one this work centres around, nor in any other

piece of research situated within the same theoretical framework – i.e. the *conjunction* of world literature and translation – and focused on Bei Dao and Yang Lian, the two authors whose work I study.

This introduction is followed by a review of the scholarship relevant to my project in chapter 2. The material included in the overview revolves around three focal points: the notion of world literature, relevant insights drawn from the discipline of translation studies, and previous research and other commentary on Bei Dao and Yang Lian. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the discussion of the theoretical framework and methods adopted throughout the project. Chapter 4 contains the actual analysis of the texts under scrutiny. Chapter 5 offers concluding remarks.

2. The state of the field(s)

This chapter is organized into subsections on world literature, on the translators and their task and on Bei Dao and Yang Lian.

2.1 On world literature

In 1835 Johann Peter Eckermann, a disciple of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published a book entitled *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann*, in which he kept track of the famous sentence in which Goethe is said to have coined the term ‘world literature’:

“I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (2011, 350-51).

World literature then, of course, comes a long way. In more recent times, a good number of scholars have tried to shed light on a concept which is still partially obscure to this day. Without doubt, one of the most influential voices is that of David Damrosch. In a cornerstone work published in 2003 and significantly entitled *What Is World Literature?*, Damrosch proposes a “threefold definition focused on the world, the text and the reader”. According to him, world literature is “an elliptical refraction of national literatures”; it is “writing that gains in translation” and “a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (281).

The definition of world literature as a refraction of national literatures is the most relevant for the present discussion. Damrosch further characterizes such definition by stating that “[it] is double in nature: works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition”. He proposes a very effective analogy by saying that such refraction “can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with source and host culture providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone” (283 – fig.1). In the introductory chapter of his book, Damrosch already states that world literature “encompasses all literary works that circulate

beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4), thus establishing a connection between world literature and translation right from the start.

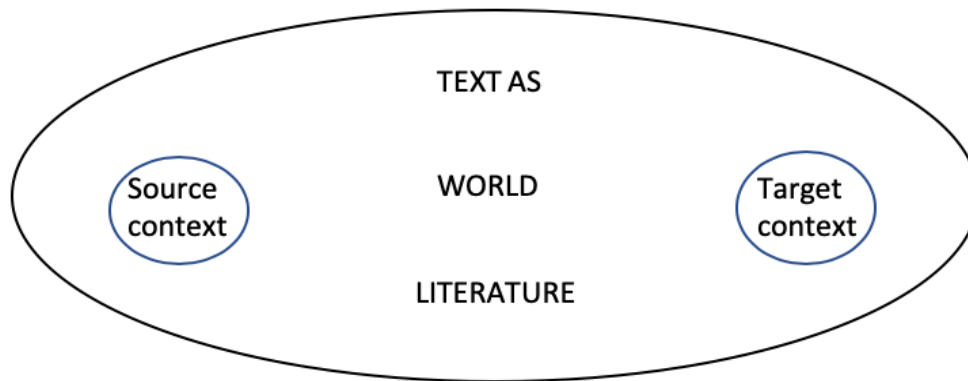


Fig.1

The problematic pair constituted by world literature and translation has stimulated academic debate throughout the years. In the field of Chinese literature, a notable controversy was sparked by Stephen Owen when he declared, in a 1990 review essay on Bei Dao’s *The August Sleepwalker* translated by Bonnie McDougall, that:

“poets who write in a ‘wrong language’ [...] not only must imagine themselves being translated in order to reach an audience of satisfying magnitude, they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it. [...] and this ‘world poetry’ turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism [...] This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony” (1990, 28).

The fiercest reaction to Owen’s critical position came from Rey Chow, who called Owen’s view orientalist, racist and motivated by “an anxiety over his own intellectual position” (1993, 3). As Damrosch points out in his report on the argument, “Owen’s claim that Bei Dao’s poems ‘translate themselves’ says very little about the work of the poems’ actual translator, Bonnie McDougall” (2003, 20). This remark takes us directly to another of Damrosch’s considerations, which is crucial for the present discussion: “works of world literature take on new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural

contexts” (24). In *How To Read World Literature*, another of his best known works, Damrosch goes as far as saying that “read intelligently, an excellent translation can be seen as an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work’s life as it moves from its first home out into the world” (2009, 66). In the same chapter, Damrosch also suggests that “if a comparison of versions can reveal significant patterns of difference among translations, the use of two or three translations can also aid us in getting a better sense of the original work” (71), thus hinting at the high potential of comparing translations of the same work. This is one of the core methods employed in this project.

Other scholars have contributed to the research on world literature, in ways that are both complementary and opposite to Damrosch’s work. Martin Kern, for example, posits world literature and global literature as opposites, as world literature “thrives on alterity, non-commensurability, and non-identity” while global literature “does the opposite: it enforces identity and conformity under a single, market-driven hegemony, erases difference, and appropriates the Other for the Self not in an experience of otherness but in, and for, one of sameness” (2019, 8). Some authors have firmly opposed Damrosch’s theories on world literature. Nicholas Harrison, although admitting that translation is “*the* craft of world literature” (2014, 411), argues that Damrosch’s idea of world literature as writing that gains in translation cannot be sustained in the face of the principle by which “our conception and our valorization of literature is tied fundamentally to a certain relationship to the text, a relationship drawing on and necessitating a certain sense of integrity of the original text [...] from which translation must depart” (2014,419). In other words, loss and gain in translation are never mutually exclusive, and what is “untranslatable” is often what makes the text unique, and what “some people feel the urge to translate” (416). Another voice in favour of “untranslatability” is that of Emily Apter, who extends the scope of such notion even beyond the world of literary production by saying that “a focus on untranslatability counters the reflexive tendency in both translation studies and World Literature to endorse cultural equivalence and substitutability as well as the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources” (2012, 178).

While Damrosch and Kern recognize the potential intrinsic to the practice of world literature and problematize its relationship with translation, authors such as Harrison and Apter stand at the other extreme of the spectrum and seem well aware of (and concerned by) the risk of assimilation and “flattening” embedded in extending the scope of translatability to all literary products from all literatures of the world, while aiming at unifying them under the flag of world literature.

2.2 Translation, translators and the task of translating poetry

“Translation is still regarded by some as a sort of inferior in relation to ‘real’ writing, an ugly sister to a Cinderella, and the reasoning behind this attitude is that translation is in some way second class, because the translator is not starting with a blank page but already has someone else’s original from which to work” (Bassnett 2011, 164).

In these few lines Susan Bassnett sums up the position in which translation still finds itself to this day in the eyes of many, although emancipation and empowerment of both translation and the translator have made great strides since the rise of translation studies. One of the premises of this project is the firm belief in the dignity of translation as literary creation in its own right, and therefore in the necessity of acknowledging the role of translators more regularly and extensively.

According to Lawrence Venuti, the condition of “invisibility” is the scourge of translators in contemporary British and American culture. In what he calls “the regime of fluency”, a translation is judged acceptable provided traces of its foreign origin are removed, when “it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intentions or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’” (Venuti 2018, 1). Such a call for fluency has important repercussions on both the content of the translations themselves, as “a fluent translation is immediately recognizable as intelligible, ‘familiarised’, domesticated, not ‘disconcertingly’ foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed ‘access to great thoughts’, to what is ‘present in the original’” and on the condition of the translator, who “works to make his or her work ‘invisible’, producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion” (4-5).

Venuti argues that, besides the criterion of fluency in judging translations, another factor is crucial in forcing the condition of invisibility upon the translator, and that is the conception of authorship as formulated in British and American culture. He goes even further by questioning the attitude with which translators perform their task, which “undoubtedly reinforces its marginal status” (7). Throughout his widely read book *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History Of Translation*, Venuti marks an opposition between “domestication” and “foreignization”, setting “foreignization as a superior translation method” and arguing that the translator’s invisibility contributes to the concealment of the domestication process which

deprives translation of its potential of challenging readers “by making them aware that they are encountering texts from outside their own parameters” (Bassnett 2014, 46-7).

Although originally identified in the context of British and American culture, the “paradigm of fluency” has been deemed valid in Europe as well. The catalyst for such a takeover is to be found in the establishment of English as a hegemonic language even in Europe, traditionally a fertile soil for continuous exchanges between the languages spoken in the nation-states (Shields 2013, 5). The issue of the increasingly hegemonic position of English has been raised in relation to world literature as well: if English turns out to be the language into which most foreign works are translated, then “the implicit insistence on translation into English as a primary requirement for a literary work to entry the corpus of world literature inevitably carries colonial and neo-colonial overtones” (Trivedi in Bassnett 2019, 16).

Of course, the present thesis considers the product of the efforts of various translators undertaking a very specific task: translating poetry. Susan Bassnett argues that “within the field of literary translation, more time has been devoted to investigating the problems of translating poetry than any other literary mode” (2014, 92). This might just be because “the nature of poetic text makes it challenging to translate” (Jones 2010, 117). A useful generic reflection on poetry translation has been provided by Francis R. Jones in his entry contained in the *Handbook of Translation Studies Vo.2* (2010), edited by Gambier and van Doorslaer. Jones starts by distinguishing the key features of poetry as a literary genre into two categories: textual features and communicative function. The former are particularly important, as “poetry typically communicates meaning not only through surface semantics, but also by using out-of-the-ordinary language, non-literal imagery, resonance and suggestion to give fresh, ‘defamiliarized’ perception and convey more than propositional content; among its specific techniques are linguistic patterning (e.g. rhyme or alliteration), word association, wordplay, ambiguity, and/or reactivating an idiom’s literal meanings” (117). He then proceeds to the identification of three kinds of relationship between source and target text: literal rendering, adaptation and recreative translation, stating that the ongoing debates on poetry translation mainly focus on recreative translation.

Within such debate, one important question seems to be “whether translators should try to replicate source-poem semantics and poetics or should be free to recreate them more loosely”. Jones argues that the former option “probably dominates recent European practice”. The domestication–foreignization opposition also constitutes an important issue, as scholars and translators divide between those who “advocate retaining source-culture-specific poetic features in translation, although this risks deterring potential readers, and those who “advocate

replacing them with ‘counterparts’ or ‘matchings’ which resemble source features in function rather than form” (118). Besides providing an overview of the main questions shaping the debate within the field of poetry translations, Jones also sheds light on how the process of translating a poem generally unfolds, with particular attention to the different skills required by such a task and to what translators normally prioritize when translating (120).

Susan Bassnett makes the important remark that “rarely do studies of poetry and translation try to discuss methodological problems from a non-empirical position”, although such studies would in fact be the most “valuable and needed” (2014, 92). She then contradicts her own wishes in providing empirical evidence in the form of multiple case studies throughout the chapter, analysing and comparing different translations in order to deduce the wide range of methods and strategies that become available when translating a poem. In particular, she points out how “all kinds of different criteria come into play during the translation process and all necessarily involve shifts of expression, as the translator struggles to combine his own pragmatic reading with the dictates of the Target Language cultural system” (114).

After looking at some key issues within translation studies, all essential to the present project, the next subsection presents some of the most important scholarly contributions on Bei Dao and Yang Lian.

2.3 Contemporary Chinese poetry: Bei Dao and Yang Lian

Both Bei Dao and Yang Lian figure among the internationally best-known Chinese intellectuals. In particular, Bei Dao is said to be “the contemporary Chinese poet best known abroad”¹ (Lombardi 2018, 15). It could be argued that both Bei Dao and Yang Lian have similar backgrounds and that the trajectory of their lives is, to some extent, similar: both were among the youths who had to spend time in the countryside to be “re-educated” during the Cultural Revolution, both were among the group of young poets clustering together in Beijing and advocating liberalization and modernization of Chinese poetry at the end of the 70s. Also, both Bei Dao and Yang Lian found themselves outside China and could not go back to their home country after June 4th, 1989, when the army opened fire on a crowd of students asking for democratic reforms in Tiananmen square, Beijing. They have both lived in exile ever since. The fact that studies on contemporary Chinese poetry often mention Bei Dao and Yang Lian together, then, comes with little surprise.

¹ All direct quotations from Italian volumes are reported here in my English translation.

The most complete research on contemporary Chinese poetry has been carried out by Maghiel van Crevel in his *Language Shattered* (1996) and *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (2008). The former covers early history of avant-garde poetry, while the latter offers a rather comprehensive account of the developments in Chinese poetry from the early 1980s until the early 2000s, addressing issues of text, context and metatext, that is to say “poetry, on the page and in recitation”; “poetry’s social, political and cultural surroundings”; and “discourse on poetry”. After discussing the meaning of “avant-garde poetry” and the way it overlaps with the notions of “unofficial” and “underground” as they have emerged in China, van Crevel discusses the thematic and aesthetic developments within the unofficial poetry scene. Poetry originating from “outside of the establishment” is crucial in China since, as van Crevel notes, “it is in the *un*-official scene that everybody that is anybody in contemporary poetry from the PRC first published and developed their voice” (2008, 6). The perspective adopted in the chapter about Bei Dao and Yang Lian (and Wang Jiaxin) is that of exile: van Crevel operates a “*reading for exile*” (143) of selected poems, demonstrating how significant such a perspective could be in making sense of both authors’ production.

Both Li Dian’s book-length monograph on Bei Dao (2006, 27-45) and Jacob Edmond’s chapter on Yang Lian (2012, 15-43) acknowledge the importance of exile as a theme in Bei Dao and Yang Lian’s poetry, and both extend (as van Crevel did) its scope beyond physical displacement to encompass a (more or less place-independent) mental dimension that ultimately proves to be productive in terms of writing poetry. Edmond uses the phrase “flâneur in exile” to refer to the encounter between a paradigmatic figure of European modernity, the flâneur, and Chinese poetry, especially the exilic writing of Yang Lian (15). In Edmond’s view, the flâneur is “a figure for cross-cultural comparison itself – one that emphasizes the multiple figurations of encounters among places, times, peoples, and languages” (18), and he reads Yang Lian’s “walker” as such flâneur. As a figure embodying encounter, superimposition and touch between different landscapes, cultures and contexts in itself, the flâneur is presented as a key reference to rethink comparative literature altogether.

Other issues addressed within studies on Bei Dao and Yang Lian are related to translation and translatability: Li Dian addresses some criticism of Bei Dao as an “un-Chinese” poet (2006, 101-113); Edmond criticizes Owen’s aforementioned remarks on world poetry by suggesting other possible translations of some of Bei Dao’s best known poems, thus proposing a reading of such poems as “simultaneously, as an allegory of [Bei Dao’s] own political situation and as an allegory of world literature”, in that some of the poems ward off any attempt at positing “a single national or world literature, and produce an allegory of that impossibility”

(2012, 101). From Edmond's point of view, then, Bei Dao not only sparked an important debate on world literature and globalization, but even addresses, through the medium of allegory, the idea of world literature in his poems. In order to support his argument, Edmond relies greatly on the ambiguity intrinsic to some of Bei Dao's works. Such ambiguity is precisely what generates a multiplicity of plausible translations, thus discrediting Owen's claim that Bei Dao's poems "translate themselves" (1990, 31).

Translation also plays a key role in Cosima Bruno's study on Yang Lian's poetry: after positing original text and its translation(s) as mutually constitutive (2012, 3) Bruno builds a model of analysis based on comparing translation in order to look for "shifts" between them, since "it is precisely at those points where shifts between translations occur that the reader can engage with the singularity of the original poem, 'where the treasure lies'" (5). I find this perspective illuminating: my own project draws upon Bruno's work of comparative analysis of translations and follows it in considering "reading through translation" a rewarding way of investigating the source text.

In addition to the above contributions, the translators themselves have provided various paratexts for their work. While most of these chapters focus on Bei Dao and Yang Lian's experiences as dissidents and exiles, Claudia Pozzana offers some interesting insights about both. She reads Bei Dao's poems for three "series of distance", through which the poet defines his poetic world. Such series of distance "concern the main entities to which his poetry as "thought" relates. The first is language itself— that is the core matter of poetry. The second concerns relationships with other singular rationalities, namely love and politics. A third distance is established from the sphere of knowledge that is particular to philological-literary fields" (2007, 95). In introducing her own Italian translation of Yang Lian's *Da hai tingzhi zhi chu* (Where the Sea Stands Still), Pozzana argues that "the sole condition of existence of poetry is the existence of forms of thought which originate and relate within a singular poetic world" and that, in this case, "the main form of thought is the possibility for the sea to stand still" (2016, 11). Going even further, she also argues that "the absence of the poetic persona" (14) is the condition for such a form of thought, and therefore for Yang Lian's poetry to exist altogether.

The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework and methods used for my work.

3. Theory and methodology

In the present thesis, I look at contemporary Chinese poetry through the lens of translation. Such a standpoint also aims at granting translation the attention it deserves but does not invariably receive. The theoretical framework acting both as a premise and as the background for the whole project, which ties contemporary Chinese poetry and translation together, is the idea of world literature as defined by David Damrosch.

My starting point will be the concept of world literature as an “elliptical refraction of national literatures” (Damrosch 2003, 281), which allows to picture world literature as “an ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone” (283). It seems safe to argue that the issues I tackle in my project emerge precisely in light of the theoretical framework described above, as the idea of circulation of texts is crucial to the definition of world literature Damrosch provides: texts circulate beyond their culture of origin both in their original form and through translation. One way of inspecting issues concerning the circulation of texts is, therefore, to look at translations, and in particular at different choices made by translators within and across various languages. I take the texts I work on as existing within two elliptical refractions at once: while the source text is of course the same (and thus the two ellipses overlap in correspondence of one of the two foci, as in Fig.2), looking at translations both into English and into Italian generates the possibility of accounting for the role which translation itself plays in shaping the lookalikes of such elliptical refractions, i.e. the way a same text is received, read and circulated as world literature in different contexts.

When looking at Chinese poetry more closely, I adopt the same framework of analysis as van Crevel in distinguishing text, context and metatext. This framework helps bearing in mind that, even when working first and foremost on texts, the way that such texts are 1) profoundly rooted in the context within which they were produced and the other contexts in which they circulate, and 2) intertwined with any kind of discourse developed around them both in their home context and elsewhere, cannot be neglected.

Close reading and comparative analysis of translations of selected texts are the methods that most naturally combine with the theoretical background to form a coherent whole. I should start by saying that I am going to focus on selected texts because my project does not (and indeed, cannot) aim at comprehensive “coverage” of all available material: the choice of the poems to consider in this analysis has been carried out seeking a balance of some kind between

poems identified as particularly significant by previous scholarship and poems which I connect to on a personal level (two categories that occasionally overlap)—bearing in mind, needless to say, the translational perspective. Pairing up close reading of source texts with comparative analysis of translations, then, enables me to shed new light on the pivotal role of translation in informing the trajectory of texts as world literature.

Umberto Eco is an important reference: the accounts of his own struggles both as a translator and as a translated author he provides in his book *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (Experiences in Translation) involves a great deal of comparative reading of translations in different languages, as well as the attempt of explaining discrepancies between them in light of the source texts. Although Eco never worked on Chinese literature specifically, his reflections are nonetheless precious, if only for the way he thoroughly discusses the specificities of different languages, and how the translator has to deal with them. Reading his work has been inspirational to me, as it was the first time I realized how my thoughts on translation, which were at the time scattered to say the least, could indeed be rearranged in a more organic way.

Another relevant model is provided by the way Bruno has worked on Yang Lian's poetry, as mentioned above. I mainly draw on her way of comparing translations by looking for shifts between them, as I share her belief that such shifts signal ambiguity, multiplicity of potential interpretations and crucial spots in the source text. I made Bruno's conviction mine to the point that, in the next chapter, I will cite the English and Italian texts in full, and only refer to the Chinese when the translations call for further reference.

On a side note: working with translations both into English and into Italian can certainly be productive and even provide the existing research on world literature and translation with a new, refreshing perspective (to name but one example: both Owen's infamous review and the reactions it provoked are either based on the Chinese originals or on English translations). Since the interface language of the present thesis is English, however, my work necessarily involves some degree of metalanguage, in that I use English to discuss the Italian texts and the responses they give rise to in the mind of this reader.

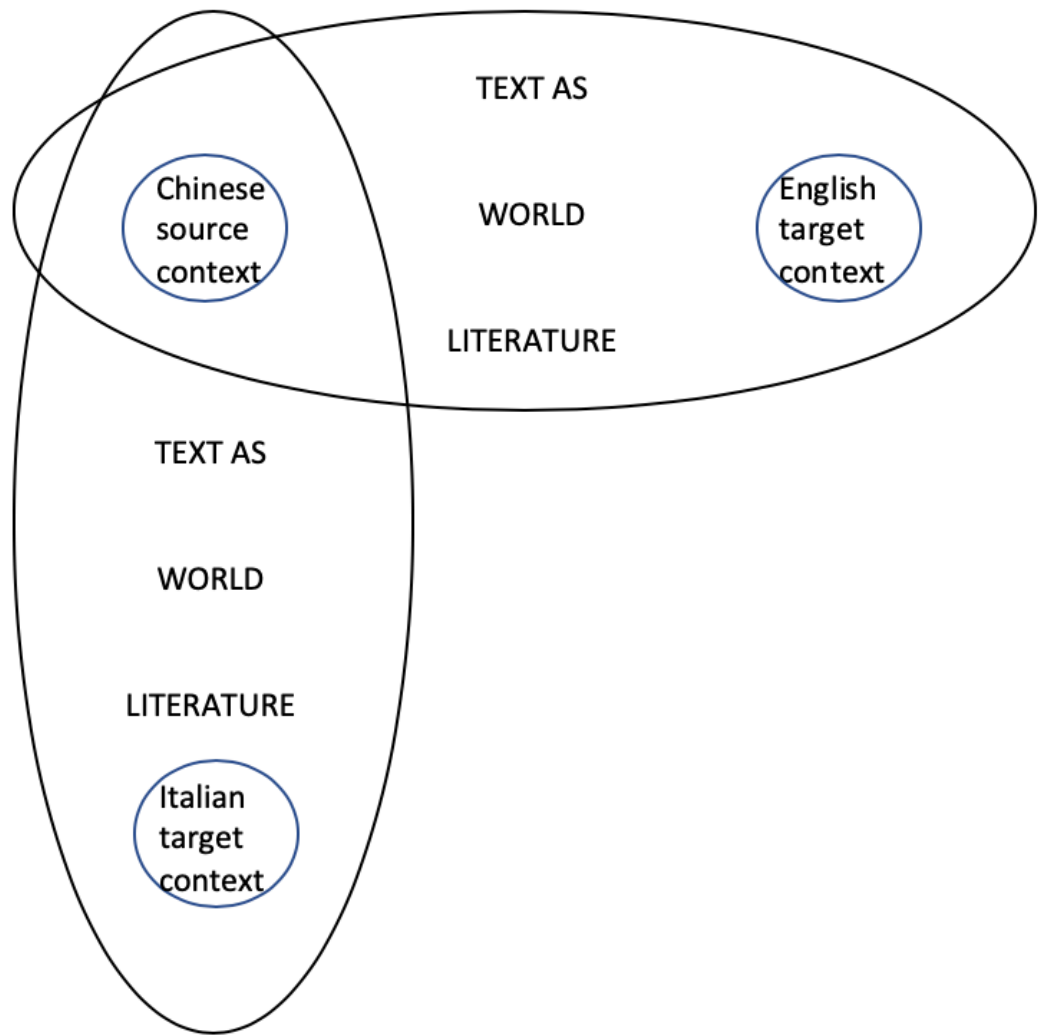


Fig.2

4. Bei Dao and Yang Lian as world literature

In this chapter, after providing some historical context, I present the results of my close reading and comparative analysis of translations.

4.1. After the Cultural Revolution: unofficial and avant-garde poetry from China

Both Bei Dao and Yang Lian began writing poetry during the last years of the Cultural Revolution, and gained readership soon after its end in 1976. Starting in 1978, China gradually opened up to the outside world, important economic reforms were implemented, and the Party loosened control over literature and art, which had been in place since Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (van Crevel 2008, 4).

Bei Dao and Yang Lian figured among the youths sent to the countryside to be re-educated during the Cultural Revolution, and they both contributed greatly to the creation of China's unofficial poetry scene. This scene had its origins in the literary underground of the Cultural Revolution (6), in a time when going underground was the only viable option for anybody who wanted to experiment with poetry. Van Crevel notes that "strikingly, literary historiography and literary events show that it is in the *un-official* scene (非官方) – as opposed to the official (官方) scene, also called *orthodox* and *establishment* in English – that everybody that is anybody in contemporary poetry from the PRC first published and developed their voice", and that "most if not all contemporary poets subscribe to a designation of their work as avant-garde (先锋)" (6). The meaning of "avant-garde" in the context of Chinese literature is peculiar: its scope overlaps with that of "unofficial", and both of them "can be used in aesthetic as well as institutional scenes, which are not always easy to separate" (6).

From an institutional point of view, poetry is "unofficial" when it "operates of its own initiative, outside the publishing business as formally administered by the state" (7).

From an aesthetic point of view, avant-garde poetry was initially negatively defined "by dissociation from and exclusion of the thematics, imagery, poetic form and linguistic register that appear in the products of orthodoxy" (9). Since the mid 1980s, however, avant-garde poetry was so much more popular than establishment poetry that it didn't even make sense to hold the latter as reference anymore, thus enabling "the study of various trends in contemporary poetry not as Others of orthodoxy but in their own right" (10).

While the underground years of the Cultural Revolution were of tremendous importance for the development of avant-garde poetry, as young authors came into contact with officially banned works by foreign authors which helped create what Bei Dao calls the “translation style” (van Crevel 2008, 6; Li 2006, 101), the first overground cluster of avant-garde poets was formed in Beijing in December 1978 with the publication of the journal *Today* (今天). The journal, overtly challenging the state’s monopoly on literary production, featured Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian and Duoduo. When the State’s control over literature and art loosened even further in the 1980s, the unofficial poetry scene emerged in more urban centres throughout the country (van Crevel 2008, 7). *Today* was the home of early Obscure Poetry (朦胧诗): the wide usage of metaphors made such poetry difficult to understand to orthodox critics from the PRC, thus earning it the label of “obscure”—initially with pejorative connotations but soon worn by the poets and their supporters as a badge of pride. The emergence of Obscure Poetry sparked a controversy which showed how “neither poetry nor literary criticism and scholarship were mere mouthpieces of government cultural policy any longer”, and thus ended up among the targets of the campaign to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution in 1983-84, which was an orthodox reaction against increasingly popular instances of Western modernism (van Crevel 2008, 16; Pedone and Zuccheri 2015, 108).

Both Bei Dao and Yang Lian’s life and poetry took a dramatic turn in 1989 with the violent oppression of the Protest Movement remembered as June Fourth (六四), which forced exile upon them, and at the same time drew unprecedented attention on an exile poetry scene that had come into being in the late 1980s. The most widely read Chinese poets worldwide can all be traced back to the same avant-garde roots, although their trajectories differ considerably.

4.2. Selection of texts

Two main factors have informed my selection of primary texts. The first flows from my decision to compare translations into English and into Italian: in order to do so, I had to choose texts available in both languages. Bei Dao and Yang Lian have been translated into Italian only by Rosa Lombardi (2018) and Claudia Pozzana (1996; 2016), thus limiting my range of choice to a quite small number of works among the authors’ production.

The second factor is somewhat personal, in the sense that I first came into contact with contemporary Chinese poetry precisely through the Italian translations by Lombardi and Pozzana: even if the poems contained in said Italian editions were not the only available Italian

translations of Bei Dao and Yang Lian’s work, I would still have chosen to work on them rather than on other texts, as they are the poems that first sparked my interest in contemporary poetry, and I very much wish to work on them. I trust that my analysis will show that they constitute eminently suitable material for addressing my questions.

4.3 Bei Dao

This subsection discusses eight poems by Bei Dao. All the Italian translations are contained in *La rosa del tempo. Poesie scelte (1972-2008)* (The Rose of Time: Selected Poems [1972-2008]), translated by Rosa Lombardi (2018). The English translations are contained in *The August Sleepwalker* translated by Bonnie McDougall (1988) and in the collection *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* edited by Eliot Weinberger (2010). This volume is a collage of poems selected from previous collections by Bei Dao, by various translators.

I chose to group the eight poems according to affinities among them in terms of subject matter and origin, rather than sticking with the chronological order provided by the Italian translation. I identified four groups. The first group is made up of a single poem, whose prominent feature is that of being associated (not necessarily with Bei Dao’s blessing) with the protests leading to June Fourth; the second group of poems centres around the ideas of art and poetry; the third group dwells on distance and separation, be it physical or psychological; poems from the last group appear similar in their rather personal and meditative nature and in the way poetry starts flowing from scenes of everyday life. Both features are typical of Bei Dao’s later work.

4.3.1 Protest

| <i>title</i> | The Answer | Risposta |
|--------------|--|---|
| | | |
| 1 | Debasement is the password of the base, | L’ignominia è il salvacondotto dell’ignobile, |
| 2 | Nobility is the epitaph of the noble. | la nobiltà è l’epitaffio del nobile. |
| 3 | See how the gilded sky is covered | Guarda, in quel cielo dorato, |
| 4 | With the drifting shadows of the dead. | vagano i riflessi deformi dei morti. |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | The Ice Age is over now, | L’era glaciale è passata, |
| 6 | Why is there ice everywhere? | perché ovunque è ghiaccio? |
| 7 | The Cape of Good Hope has been discovered, | Il Capo di Buona Speranza è stato scoperto, |

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| 8 | Why do a thousand sails contest the Dead Sea? | perché mille vele si affrontano nel Mar Morto? |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 9 | I came into this world | Sono venuto in questo mondo, |
| 10 | Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow, | portando solo carta, corda e ombra, |
| 11 | To proclaim before the judgement | per proclamare prima del giudizio, |
| 12 | The voice that has been judged: | la voce giudicata: |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 13 | Let me tell you, world, | lascia che ti dica, mondo, |
| 14 | I – do – not – believe! | io – non – credo! |
| 15 | If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet, | se mille sono gli sfidanti sotto i tuoi piedi, |
| 16 | Count me as number one thousand and one. | considerami allora il millesimo e uno. |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 17 | I don't believe the sky is blue; | Io non credo che il cielo sia blu, |
| 18 | I don't believe in thunder's echoes; | io non credo all'eco dei tuoni, |
| 19 | I don't believe that dreams are false; | io non credo che i sogni siano falsi, |
| 20 | I don't believe that death has no revenge. | io non credo che la morte resti impunita. |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 21 | If the sea is destined to breach the dikes | Se il mare deve rompere le dighe, |
| 22 | Let all the brackish water pour into my heart; | che tutte le acque amare inondino il mio cuore, |
| 23 | If the land is destined to rise | se la terra deve sollevarsi, |
| 24 | Let humanity choose a peak for existence again. | che l'umanità scelga di nuovo una vetta per la vita. |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 25 | A new conjunction and glimmering stars | Un cambiamento e stelle splendenti |
| 26 | Adorn the unobstructed sky now: | ora adornano il cielo sgombro, |
| 27 | They are the pictographs from five thousand years. | è la scrittura di cinquemila anni, |
| 28 | They are the watchful eyes of future generations. | sono gli occhi fissi di quelli che verranno. |

The Chinese title of the first poem is “回答”, written in 1973 but subsequently dated to 1976.

The English translation considered here is included in *The August Sleepwalker* translated by Bonnie McDougall. It is certainly one of the best-known poems by Bei Dao, and it has contributed to shaping his reputation as a “dissident poet” ever since it became a sort of anthem for the protests of 1989 (Lombardi 2018, 29). The poem unfolds in “solemn tone and

clear rhythm, defined right from the beginning, which presents semantic parallelisms and a reiteration of a simple syntactic model in the first two verses". For verses 1 and 2 both translations try to reproduce the length of Bei Dao's free verse, although neither McDougall nor Lombardi have the chance of reproducing the rhyme scheme of the original, in which the second and fourth verse of every stanza rhyme

According to Lombardi, the nature of the poem as a song of protest is most evident from the insistent repetition of the pronoun "I", which conveys the image of a lone voice bravely standing up to a view of the world imposed in a top-down way (29).

In line 1 and 2, both the English and Italian translators maintain the symmetry present in the Chinese original, although the first verse already presents a difference in terms of lexical choices: where McDougall opts for "debasement", Lombardi chooses "ignominia", which translates into English as "ignominy" or "disrepute". While "debasement" designs the state of degradation and corruption which is perceived as the result of the subject's choices and deeds, "ignominia" identifies a perpetual state of dishonour in which the subjects finds itself regardless of the premises: this word highlights the subject's hopelessness, as its current situation is not necessarily the result of its actions, but could also depend on its intrinsic qualities and moral virtues. Such an interpretation is upheld by Lombardi's subsequent choice of the term "ignobile" which literally refers to a lack of nobility (intended as the sum of moral qualities rather than a social privilege). In this case, the English "base" has a somewhat similar meaning (dishonourable, morally low), but while there is a concordance between "ignominia" and "ignobile", both phonetically and semantically, the English verse also speaks of a subject "with a history", in the sense that McDougall's lexical choices indirectly refer to a process of degradation that brought the "base" into play.

The Chinese "飘满" in line 4 shows how difficult it can be to translate syntax. In this case, "飘" is the main verb, meaning "wave to and fro, float in the air; flutter", "满" means "to fill". A fairly literal rendition of "那镀金天空飘满了死者弯曲的倒" would be something like "that gilded sky is covered with the twisted shadows of the dead floating everywhere in the air". While McDougall comes closer to the original with her translation, Lombardi has to choose between rendering either that the shadows are "aimlessly floating to and fro" (飘) or that they are so many that they "cover they sky". In the final Italian version of line 4, "vagare"="wander" translates the verb 飘 and portrays the aimless movement of the shadows rather than their number and ubiquitousness.

Line 20, closing the fifth and most famous stanza of the poem, contains the word “报应”, which as a noun means “judgement” or “retribution” in a Buddhist context, and as a verb could be translated as “get due punishment, get what one deserves”. McDougall translates it as “revenge”: such a choice conveys a much stronger image than the Italian translation does: Lombardi’s translation is literally translatable into English as “I don’t believe death goes unpunished”. Punishment is of course very different from revenge. Both solutions unavoidably lose the Buddhist colouring of the original, but translating 报应 as “revenge” takes the target text even further away of “due punishment” than the Italian version does.

4.3.2 Art and poetry

| <i>title</i> | The Artist’s Life | Vita d’artista |
|--------------|---|--|
| | | |
| 1 | Go and buy a radish | Vai a comprare un ravanella |
| 2 | - mother said | - dice mia madre |
| 3 | hey, mind the safety line | ehi, attento alla line agialla |
| 4 | - the cop said | - dice il poliziotto |
| 5 | ocean, where are you | ah! oceano, dove sei? |
| 6 | - the drunk said | - dice l’ubriaco |
| 7 | why have all the street lights exploded | perché tutti I lampioni sono esplosi? |
| 8 | - I said | - io dico |
| 9 | a blind man passing by | un cieco che passava |
| 10 | nimbly raised his cane | alzò veloce il suo bastone |
| 11 | like pulling out an antenna | come se estraesse un’antenna |
| 12 | an ambulance arriving with a screech | giunse un’ambulanza urlante |
| 13 | took me to the hospital | mi portò all’ospedale |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 14 | and so I became a model patient | così sono diventato un paziente modello |
| 15 | sneezing loud and clear | starnutivo chiaro e forte |
| 16 | closing my eyes to figure out the mealtimes | calcolavo le ore per i pasti ad occhi chiusi |
| 17 | donating blood to bedbugs | donavo sangue alle cimici nel letto |
| 18 | with no time to sigh | senza aver tempo per sospirare |
| 19 | in the end I was taken on as a doctor too | alla fine divenni anch’io dottore |
| 20 | holding a thick hypodermic | con una grande siringa nella mano |
| 21 | I pace up and down the corridor | cammino su e giù nei corridoi |

| | | |
|----|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 22 | to while the evenings away | per ammazzare il tempo nella notte |
|----|----------------------------|------------------------------------|

The first poem of the those dealing with the poet's existence as an artist is “艺术家的生活”, written sometime between 1972 and 1983.

While there are no significant variations in terms of rhythm, the first striking difference is one of tense. Since Chinese has no explicit tense markers, the translators are relatively free to choose where to locate the events of the poem on the timeline. Lombardi chooses the present tense for the first eleven verses, while McDougall situates the poem in the past right from the start.

Lexically, line 3 presents a difference which is strictly culture-based, so to speak. The Chinese word in question is “安全线”, which literally is a “safety line”, as McDougall translates. In Italian that would sound like “linea di sicurezza”, but Lombardi chooses “linea gialla” = “yellow line”. The reason for this choice is that safety lines in train and underground stations in Italy are all yellow, and speakers continuously warn the passengers to “stand behind the yellow line” (“allontanarsi dalla linea gialla”) while the train is approaching. The image of the yellow line speaks to Italian readers in a much more direct way than the equivalent of “safety line”, as it immediately constructs a scene from everyday life in the mind of anyone who might read the text.

In line 22, McDougall translates “消磨” as “while away”, which indeed is the most immediate translation. The English equivalent of Lombardi's version is “kill time”. While the meaning is basically the same, the semantics of the Italian version seems to better fit the mood of the poem as a whole: the events of the second part all take place in a hospital in a rather unsettling and gloomy atmosphere, and introducing a reference to death seems appropriate in such context.

| <i>title</i> | The Art of Poetry | L'arte della poesia |
|--------------|--|---|
| 1 | in the great house to which I belong | Nella grande casa cui appartengo |
| 2 | only a table remains, surrounded | resta solo un tavolo, intorno |
| 3 | by boundless marshland | e una palude sconfinata |
| 4 | the moon shines on me from different corners | da ogni parte la luna splende su di me |
| 5 | the skeleton's fragile dream still stands | il fragile sogno di uno scheletro ancora in piedi |

| | | |
|----|--|--|
| 6 | in the distance, like an undismantled scaffold | in lontananza, come un'impalcatura non smantellata |
| 7 | and there are muddy footprints on the blank paper | e impronte di fango sulla carta bianca |
| 8 | the fox which has been fed for many years | la volpe nutrita per tanti anni |
| 9 | with a flick of his fiery brush flatters and wounds me | con un colpo della coda fiammeggiante |
| | <i>break</i> | mi lusinga, mi ferisce |
| 10 | and there is you, of course, sitting facing me | <i>break</i> |
| 11 | the fair-weather lightning which gleams in your palm | naturalmente, ci sei anche tu, seduta qui davanti |
| 12 | turns into firewood turns into ash | i lampi a ciel sereno che brillano nelle tue mani |
| 13 | | diventano legna da ardere, mutano in cenere |

Bei Dao offers his own insight on the process of writing poetry in “诗艺”, written between 1983 and 1986.

Of course, centuries have passed since Horace composed his *Epistula ad Pisones*, which then became famous as *Ars Poetica*, or *The Art of Poetry*, and it should come with no surprise that Bei Dao’s poem focuses much more on the purely individual experience of composing poetry rather than on poetry’s essence as a literature genre, as Horace did. Bei Dao’s writing develops in absolute solitude, in a “great house” in which “only a table remains”. Solitude is both source of pain and of new opportunities for the poet, as he must not share moonlight with anybody else: around him is nothing but a “boundless marshland”. Lines 8 and 9 of the English translation show through that writing poetry is a process, and as such it develops through time and through multiple and possibly painful steps.

The most evident difference between English and Italian translations can be found at the end of the first stanza. Where Bei Dao writes “挥舞着火红的尾巴” and “赞美我，伤害我” as two separate verses, Lombardi maintains this structure in Italian (lines 9-10) while McDougall deprives the last verse in the original Chinese of its original emphasis on the simultaneous yet opposing effects of the single movement of the fox (line 9).

If Bruno has a point in saying that “it is precisely at those points where shifts between translations occur that the reader can engage with the singularity of the original poem, ‘where the treasure lies’” (2012, 5), then the major shift between the two translations of “诗艺” occurs precisely where we may expect it, i.e. in line 5, where Bei Dao introduces the image of the still

standing fragile dream of a skeleton. The Chinese original “骨骼松脆的梦依旧立在远方” is smoothly translated into English by McDougall, while Lombardi’s translation is ambiguous in Italian, as it could be rendered in English either as McDougall did, or as “the fragile dream of a skeleton still standing in the distance”. In other words, the Italian translation, while still being the only option keeping the original rhythm from being spoiled, is ambiguous for the reader with no knowledge of Chinese. Such ambiguity still catalyses the reader’s attention on the passage that was already the most striking in the source text, albeit by different means than pure imagery.

4.3.3 Distance and separation

Claudia Pozzana argues that Bei Dao’s poetry centres around different “series of distance” (2007, 95). Distance therefore plays a huge role not just in the life of the poet (i.e. his exile), but also in his work. That’s why I chose to group the next three poems together.

| <i>title</i> | Language | Linguaggi |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| | | |
| 1 | many languages | Molti linguaggi |
| 2 | fly around the world | volano su questo mondo |
| 3 | producing sparks when they collide | si scontrano, generano scintille |
| 4 | sometimes of hate | a volte è odio |
| 5 | sometimes of love | a volte è amore |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 6 | reason’s mansion | il palazzo della ragione |
| 7 | collapses without a sound | precipita nel silenzio |
| 8 | baskets woven of thoughts | pensieri leggeri come strisce di bambù |
| 9 | as flimsy as bamboo splints | intrecciano cesti |
| 10 | are filled with blind toadstools | colmi di ciechi funghi velenosi |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 11 | the beasts on the cliff | animali in movimento dipinti sulla roccia |
| 12 | run past, trampling the flowers | corrono calpestando fiori |
| 13 | a dandelion grows secretly | un dente di leone cresce |
| 14 | in a certain corner | nel segreto di un angolo |
| 15 | the wind has carried away its seeds | il vento ha portato via i suoi semi |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 16 | many languages | molti linguaggi |

| | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 17 | fly around the world | volano nel mondo |
| 18 | the production of languages | ma la nascita di una lingua |
| 19 | can neither increase nor decrease | non può accrescere né diminuire |
| 2' | mankind's silent suffering | il muto dolore dell'umanità |

“语言”, written between 1983 and 1986, effectively expresses the poet's distance from language itself, as such distance emerges in the form of distrust towards language seen as incapable of affecting the world and improving the human condition. Not only the interaction between different languages, their encounter and exchange are futile, but even new languages coming on stage leave mankind dealing with its suffering silently and in loneliness, as if nothing ever happened.

Chinese hardly uses plurality markers, and McDougall goes for “Language”, while Lombardi has “Linguaggi” = “Languages” to translate the title— perhaps in order to foreshadow the plurality of languages mentioned later on in the poem.

Comparing the two versions, one easily spots how the structure of lines 4 and 5, perfectly symmetrical in Chinese, is transposed both into English and Italian, albeit in different ways: Lombardi adheres to the Chinese original more strictly, as her translation stays for the English “sometimes it is hate, sometimes it is love”, thus maintaining the repetition of the verb “to be”, which is also a salient feature of the Chinese verses. I would argue that the use of “to be” is crucial, as it lets the reader believe that colliding languages do indeed produce something else than simple sparks: the English translation conveys the idea that nothing originates beyond said sparks, whatever their nature might be. The Italian translation, on the other hand, by keeping the original Chinese verb hints at how the sparks find do indeed “grow into a fire”, so to speak, which could be one of hate or of love.

The two translations differ significantly in the last stanza. Italian personifies the “languages” more decisively than the English counterpart, and this becomes particularly clear looking at two specific lexical choices. In line 18, “语言的产生”, Lombardi translates “产生” with “nascita”=“birth”. Such a choice, along with the translation of “沉默” in the last verse as “muto” (=“mute”, as a person who is not just silent at the present moment, but also generally unable to talk) where McDougall goes for “silent” contributes to the creation of the image of languages as human beings, or at least living organisms. The same degree of humanization is not present in the English version.

| <i>title</i> | A Local Accent | Accento locale |
|--------------|--|--|
| 1 | I speak Chinese to the mirror | Parlo cinese allo specchio |
| 2 | a park has its own winter | un parco ha il suo inverno |
| 3 | I put on music | metto su della musica |
| 4 | winter is free of flies | niente mosche d'inverno |
| 5 | I make coffee unhurriedly | con calma preparo del caffè |
| 6 | flies don't understand what's meant by a native land | le mosche non sanno cosa sia la patria |
| 7 | I add a little sugar | aggiungo un po' di zucchero |
| 8 | native land is a kind of local accent | la patria è un accento locale |
| 9 | I hear my fright | all'altro capo del telefono |
| 10 | on the other end of a phone line | ascolto il mio terrore |

“乡音”, composed sometime between 1984 and 1990, is one of Bei Dao's best-known poems, and it is considered “a stellar example of exile poetry” (van Crevel 2008, 173) as it ties together the reflection on language with the expression of the sense of loss caused by the physical distance between the poet and his home country. Bei Dao defines his position as a “stranger” by evoking the image of his native language spoken in a place perpetually out of reach, with which the poet can only communicate on the phone. As van Crevel notes, the poem's two sequences in lines 1-3-5-7 and 2-4-6-8 fail to connect, while still acquiring meaning only by the alternation and contrast between them (174). The two sequences are ultimately merged together in lines 9 and 10, with an image that can't help but remind the Italian reader of Giuseppe Ungaretti's famous poem “Veglia”, in which the poet sends home love letters from the frightening context of the trenches during World War I.

While translation strategies seem to be more or less the same for McDougall (this time cooperating with Chen Maiping) and Lombardi, two points are worth making : first, I would argue that Italian offers a better solution for translating the Chinese term “祖国” than English does. McDougall renders it as “native land”, while van Crevel opts for “homeland” in his translations. Both solutions are of course correct and reasonable, although Lombardi has at her disposal the Italian word “patria”, which fully reproduces the original meaning. “Patria” comes from the Latin word “pater”=“father”, and this correspondence is hardly surprising, as devotion for ancestors was a cornerstone of Latin culture as well - thus being a wonderful counterpart for the Chinese “祖”, which literally means “ancestor”. “祖国” does not simply design one's

home country, or one's native land, but also the land where one's ancestors lived. The bond between individuals and their “祖国”, their “patria”, is passed on from generation to generation and runs within the blood of all family members.

The second point concerns the way translators handle the repetition of the first person pronoun “我” at the beginning of lines 1-3-5-7-9. Van Crevel reads such repetition as “purposefully awkward” (2008, 174), and notes how English cannot help but insert yet another “I” in line 10. McDougall actually does find a solution to faithfully maintain the original structure by switching the order of the last two verses, while Italian is once again peculiar in this sense, as its verbal system allows the translator not to explicitly reiterate the subject pronoun. The overall effect of the Italian translation is significantly different both from the original Chinese and from the English translation, in that the first person pronoun does not even appear once in the whole poem, thus dramatically reducing not only the awkwardness noticed by van Crevel, but also the emphasis on the loneliness of the exiled poetic voice.

| <i>title</i> | Mission | Missione |
|--------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| | | |
| 1 | The priest gets lost in prayer | Il prete si perde nella preghiera |
| 2 | an air shaft | una finestra |
| 3 | leads to another era: | si apre verso un'altra epoca: |
| 4 | escapees climb over the wall | i fuggiaschi scavalcano il muro |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | panting words evoke | l'affanno delle parole fa ammalare |
| 6 | the author's heart trouble | il cuore di chi scrive |
| 7 | breathe deep, deeper | respire a fondo, più a fondo |
| 8 | grab the locust tree roots | afferra le radici della sofora |
| 9 | that debate the north wind | che discute col vento del nord |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 10 | summer has arrived | è arrivata l'estate |
| 11 | the treetop is an informer | la chioma dell'albero è una spia |
| 12 | murmurs are a reddish sleep | il mormorio è un sonno rosso |
| 13 | stung by a swarm of bees | trafitto da uno sciame d'api |
| 14 | no, a storm | no, una tempesta |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 15 | readers one by one clamber onto the shore | uno ad uno i lettori salgono a riva |

The poem “使命”, written between 1997 and 2000, is also a reference to exile, albeit more subtle and indirect than the previous one. Uncertainty and struggle dominate the poem, as images of people on the run, illness and violence culminate in the picture of the readers frantically climbing onto the shore one by one. Line 4 finds its parallel in line 15, with the fugitives of the first stanza becoming the readers reaching the shore after undergoing sickness and tribulations.

When looking at translations, we can see that Weinberger renders “通风窗” in line 2 quite literally as “air shaft”, while Lombardi chooses “finestra”= “window”, which pairs up very well with her rendering of the next verse resulting in “una finestra si apre verso un'altra epoca”= “a window opens towards another era”. On the other hand, Weinberger’s translation contributes to the feeling of pressure and breathlessness of the whole poem.

The first stanza ends with line 4, opening with the word “逃亡” which, interestingly, as a verb also means “go into exile”, in a reading which would hint at the poet’s background more overtly.

The image of “panting words” that “evoke the author’s heart trouble” opens the second stanza. The Italian version sounds much more crude and direct than the English counterpart, as line 5 and 6 would translate into English as “the panting of the words makes the author’s heart sick”: where the English translation suggests that words evoke a prior condition within the author, in the Italian version the “words” are so powerful that they instantly produce this condition in the author.

Plant names are notoriously a headache for translators, and again in this case the choices differ: Weinberger translates “槐树” as “locust tree”, which is much more common than “sophora”, which appears in the Italian text. Perhaps more importantly, then, *sophora japonica* is native to China and Japan. Lombardi might have chosen “sophora” considering the way it conveys exoticism while also being tied to the Orient in general and to China and Japan specifically.

4.3.4 Intimacy and everyday life

| <i>title</i> | Delivering Newspapers | Consegna dei giornali |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | | |
| 1 | Who believes in the mask’s weeping? | Chi crede nel pianto delle maschere? |
| 2 | who believes in the weeping nation? | chi crede nel pianto del Paese? |

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| 3 | the nation has lost its memory | il Paese ha perso la memoria |
| 4 | memory goes as far as this morning | la memoria prende forma al mattino |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | the newspaper boy sets out in the morning | il ragazzo dei giornali parte la mattina |
| 6 | all over town the sound of a desolate trumpet | sulla città il suono di una tromba triste |
| 7 | is it your bad omen or mine? | annuncia la mia o la tua cattiva sorte? |
| 8 | vegetables with fragile nerves | verdure nevrasteniche |
| 9 | peasants plant their hands in the ground | contadini con le mani piantate nella terra |
| 10 | longing for the golf of a good harvest | bramano l'oro di un buon raccolto |
| 11 | politicians sprinkle pepper | politici cospargono di pepe |
| 12 | on their own tongues | le loro lingue |
| 13 | and a stand of birches in the midst of a debate: | e una macchia di betulle discute |
| 14 | whether to sacrifice themselves for art or doors | se sacrificarsi per l'arte o per gli infissi |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 15 | this public morning | in questa mattina pubblica |
| 16 | created by a paperboy | creata dal ragazzo dei giornali |
| 17 | revolution sweeps past the corner | la rivoluzione sfreccia sulla strada |
| 18 | he's fast asleep | lui si è addormentato |

“送报”, composed between 2001 and 2008 and examined here in Eliot Weinberger's translation, is a case in point demonstrating how sometimes poetry flows out of a trivial scene, like that of a boy delivering newspapers. Although a simple object in itself, the newspaper becomes the means through which the essence of a whole nation, tragic in its loss of memory, is delivered to everyone right at the door. The concept pervading the whole poem is that of collective memory, which is fallacious and immediately vanishes, thus jeopardising the nation's attempt to connect with its past and betraying people's trust in the nation itself.

The original Chinese opens with the chiasmic verses: “谁相信面具的哭泣 / 谁相信哭泣的国家”. Weinberger maintains the chiasm in English, while Lombardi subverts the structure of the second verse, and her translation is indeed more symmetric, while slightly changing the original meaning of the question, from “who could believe in a nation that weeps” to “who could believe in the weep of the nation”: the first question asks how reliable a weeping nation could be, while the second doubts the sincerity of the nation's sorrow.

The first turning point of the poem occurs in line 4: the original Chinese literally means “memory becomes a morning”, and the meaning is very well captured by Weinberger. Lombardi, on the other hand, once again manipulates the original meaning and deprives the

poem of a crucial passage with her translation, which would become “memory takes shape in the morning” in English). By translating the line this way, Lombardi avoids any reference to how short-reaching memory is, which happens to be crucial in the original poem.

This poem is also a case in point for upholding Bruno’s remarks on how ambiguity in translation and shifts between different translations occur in correspondence of the most dense and valuable passages of the poem: here, the last stanza is where the trivial (in the form of the boy delivering newspapers) comes into contact with the public sphere (the revolution sweeping past the corner). While translations do not clearly differ, they are both ambiguous, as neither translation is as accurate as Chinese in specifying what it is that the boy creates, whether the “public morning” or the “revolution”. Such ambiguity allows for two different interpretations by the reader with no knowledge of Chinese, thus, in a way, further enriching the original with an extra nuance.

| <i>title</i> | To My Father | A mio padre |
|--------------|--|---|
| | | |
| 1 | on a cold February morning | In un freddo mattino di febbraio |
| 2 | oaks in the end are the size of sadness | le querce sono grandi infine quanto la tristezza |
| 3 | father, in front of your photo | padre, di fronte alla tua foto |
| 4 | the eight-fold wind keeps the round table calm | i venti tengono fermo il tavolo rotondo |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | from the direction of childhood | dalla direzione dell’infanzia |
| 6 | I always saw your back | quell che vedevo era sempre la tua schiena |
| 7 | as you herded black clouds and sheep | lungo la strada che portava all’imperatore |
| 8 | along the road to emperors | pascolavi nuvole nere e greggi di pecore |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 9 | an eloquent wind brings floods | un vento eloquente porta inondazioni |
| 10 | the logic of the alleyways runs deep in the hearts of the people | la logica dei vicoli penetra nel cuore degli uomini |
| 11 | you sending for me become the son | tu mi chiami a diventare figlio |
| 12 | I following you become the father | io ti seguo e divento padre |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 13 | fate coursing on the palm of a hand | il destino corre veloce sul palmo della mano |
| 14 | moves the sun the moon the stars to revolve | fa ruotare sole luna stelle |
| 15 | beneath a single male lamp | sotto una solitaria lampada maschile |
| 16 | everything has double shadows | ogni cosa getta un’ombra doppia |
| <i>break</i> | | |

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| 17 | the clockhand brothers contend to form | la lotta dei fratelli lancette forma |
| 18 | an acute angle, then become one | un angolo acuto, i due si uniscono a diventarne una |
| 19 | sick thunder rolls into the hospital of night | tuoni malati rotolano nell'ospedale della notte |
| 20 | pounding on your door | battono alla tua porta |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 21 | dawn comes up like a clown | l'alba entra in scena come un clown |
| 22 | flames change the bedsheets for you | fiamme cambiano per te le lenzuola |
| 23 | where the clock stops | dove si ferma 'orologio |
| 24 | time's dart whistles by | il dardo del tempo passa sibilando |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 25 | let's catch up to that death-carriage | presto, raggiungiamo quell carro funebre |
| 26 | spring path, a thief | un piccolo sentiero ladro di primavera |
| 27 | explores for treasure in the mountains | indaga sulle ricchezze dei monti |
| 28 | a river circles the song's grief | il fiume circonda la pena del canto |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 29 | slogans hide on walls | <i>slogan</i> si nascondono sui muri |
| 30 | this world doesn't change much: | questo mondo non è poi cambiato tanto: |
| 31 | a woman turns around blending into night | una donna si volta e confonde con la notte |
| 32 | in the morning a man walks out | un uomo esce dal mattino |

One of Bei Dao's longest poems is “给父亲”, also composed between 2001 and 2008, in which the poet explores the evolution through time of his relationship with his father, from childhood to the moment when the poet becomes a father himself, thus completing the process of “identification in difference” through which new people fill up old roles as generations follow one another.

Bei Dao's childhood relationship with his father is wonderfully described in lines 5 and 6 (“我从童年的方向 / 看到的永远是你的背影”), which have different translations in English and Italian. English flattens the redundancy of Chinese while still conveying the minimal meaning of the lines, while Italian fully maintains the original syntax. The Italian version (=“from the direction of childhood / what I saw was always your back”) doesn't just stress out how the poet could never really walk side by side with his father, but also how bulky (metaphorically rather than physically) his father had to be for him in the early years.

Metaphorical bulkiness can be associated to important role models in life, and that's precisely how Bei Dao portrays his father in lines 15 and 16. The pivotal word in Chinese is “孤灯”: by translating it as “single”, Weinberger sticks to the numerical side of the matter, to

how there is only one “male lamp”. Lombardi translates it as “solitaria”, much closer to the English “lone”, or “solitary”, which also brings issues of perception into play alongside those of quantity.

The last point I want to make concerns line 32, as “从早晨走出男人”, an expression designating place in Chinese, is turned into one of time by Weinberger. Lombardi’s version, on the other hand, maintains the original grammatical function of “从早晨”. If I may propose a personal reading of the last stanza as a whole, however, none of the two translation seems on point: if the poet states that “this world doesn’t change much”, then it would make sense to interpret the concluding image as a metaphor of such little change, and then to translate it as “a man walks into the night / and is a woman when walking out of it”. This kind of translation would emphasize how nothing at all changes in the “big picture” of the world, except for the nature of the human element within it.

4.4 Yang Lian

All texts by Yang Lian presented here were included in 《大海停止之处》, translated into English as *Where the Sea Stands Still* by Brian Holton (1999) and into Italian as *Dove si ferma il mare* by Claudia Pozzana (2016).

Both translators include chapters in which they introduce Yang Lian’s poetry and the structure of the poem itself (Holton 1999, 173-91; Pozzana 2016, 5-23). Both point out, using the poet’s own words, that *Where the Sea Stands Still* is to be considered a complete poem cycle in itself, with a constant climax leading to the last movement (Holton 1999, 182; Pozzana 2016, 9-10), but Holton also provides interesting notes on his translation method in general (177-78) and on how translating Yang Lian was a collaborative effort between him and the poet himself (173-74).

Because of how important it is for the author himself to consider *Where the Sea Stands Still* as a whole, for the present analysis I decided to stick to the order in which individual poems appear in the volume instead of grouping them differently, which I did with Bei Dao’s work.

| <i>title</i> | House like shadow | Casa come ombra |
|--------------|--|--|
| | | |
| 1 | that's your house a house like shadow | quella è la tua casa casa come ombra |
| 2 | a building on a lawn enlarges twilight | edificio che sul prato allarga il crepuscolo |
| 3 | birdsong shot down by the sky delicate tongues of leaves | i canti degli uccelli vengono abbattuti dal cielo le lingue delicate delle foglie |
| 4 | discuss the exhausted storm again | discutono di nuovo della stanca tempesta |
| 5 | shadows exhausted too blind men line up | anche l'ombra è stanca ciechi messi in fila |
| 6 | fall blankly over the precipice | cadono ignari nel precipizio |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 7 | that's your house house with no you | quella è la tua casa casa senza te |
| 8 | you're owed like a debt of nightmares | tu sei dovuto come il debito di un incubo |
| 9 | a mouse jumps to the floor, sickens and slides | un topo balza sul pavimento si ammala e scivola |
| 10 | mouse like a shadow | topo come ombra |
| 11 | face always blacker and blacker | il volto sempre più scuro |
| 12 | mouth the colour of roses bites open the gates of elegy | bocca color di rosa apre a morsi la porta dell'elegia |
| 13 | as day dies you move into a rotting candle | quando il giorno muore tu vai ad abitare in una candela marcia |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 14 | as four walls are struck dumb imitating life | afona come quattro parietiche simulano la vita |
| 15 | light sneaks underground astride the frailest one | la luce cavalca la più fragile delle pietre infiltrata sotto terra |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 16 | sneaks into you an owner like shadow | si infiltra dentro te l'ombra come un padrone |
| 17 | passionately opens night's balcony views the scene | entusiasta apre il balcone della notte ammira quel paesaggio |
| 18 | another wild cat cashes its own fear | un altro gatto selvatico va a caccia della sua stessa paura |
| 19 | another skull meets its end nailed to the stars | un'altra testa viene conclusa da chiodi conficcati nelle stelle |
| 20 | a weed-like silver-white | un bianco argenteo come erbacce |
| 21 | paralysed darkness towers up straight as a die | le tenebre paralizzate torreggiano |
| 22 | blots out the one-year-old you who will some day grow old | cancellano il tu di un anno che un giorno invecchierà |
| 23 | like terrible moonlight blots out this vacant ground | come la spaventosa luce lunare cancella questa terra vuota |

The first poem appears as the third in the second section (summer 1992), to which it gives the name: “类似阴影的房子”. Images of precariousness, uncertainty and violence follow one another throughout the whole poem, while the poet directly addresses his own elusive poetic persona through the pronoun “你”, (“you”, “tu/te”).

It is precisely the usage of the second person pronoun which also strikes the eye when comparing English and Italian translations. Line 7 in Chinese reads “那是你的房子 没有你的房子”, and Holton’s choice is more effective in delineating the image of a space in which “you” as the poetic persona directly addressed by the poet is absent than the Italian counterpart (=: “this is your house a house without you”). The problem with the Italian translation is that it treats the pronoun “你” as if it referred to an individual human being other than the poet, rather than to the absence of every human being, including the poet himself. The following line “你被欠下像恶梦的债” upholds this reading, although neither Holton nor Pozzana emphasize how the pronoun refers to the poetic persona and, by metonymy, to every other human being. Perhaps such an effect could be achieved, both in English and Italian alike, by modifying the verb “to be” to obtain “you is owed like a debt of nightmares”.

The fragility and precariousness of “you” show through in line 22. The Chinese text reads “涂掉一天衰老的你”, and I would argue that both English and Italian translation downplay the original emphasis on how ephemeral the existence of the poetic persona is. In my view, the meaning of the Chinese line could be best rendered as “blots out the you that ages one year in just one day” in English and as “cancellano il tu che nello spazio d’un giorno invecchia d’un anno” in Italian.

| <i>title</i> | Neighbours II | Vicinato (2) |
|--------------|---|---|
| | | |
| 1 | in another time | in un altro tempo |
| 2 | sky’s heavy blue rams birds into the clay | il pesante azzurro del cielo conficca gli uccelli nella creta |
| 3 | twilight a diligent saw on the branches | la luce del crepuscolo è una sega assidua sul ramo |
| 4 | tree stump’s tragic smile a powerless revenge | l’albero sorride infelice una vendetta impotente |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | in a time that separates us | in un tempo che ci separa |

| | | |
|--------------|--|---|
| 6 | a skeleton-shaped table squeezes up to another | un tavolo a forma di scheletro si stringe ad un altro tavolo |
| 7 | the dead who never left | i morti che non possono andarsene |
| 8 | like lamps silently explode in the pinecones | come lampade esplodono silenziosi nelle pigne |
| 9 | shake bats' downy jetblack ears | scuotendo i timpani dei pipistrelle dalla peluria nera |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 10 | another moment | in un altro momento |
| 11 | we are still this silent unfinished work | siamo ancora questa silenziosa opera incompiuta |
| 12 | rammed into the clay by each voice left | conficcata nella creta dalla voce di ciascuno rimasta |
| 13 | to be a one-word today | per essere l'oggi di una parola |
| 14 | to be a famous tongue that once crawled on antique china | per essere la lingua famosa che è andata carponi fra antiche porcellane |

“邻居” is also part of the second section from 1992, and is itself divided into five “movements”. The second of such movements unfolds into three stanzas, each marked by a different expression of time (“另一个时间里”; “隔离我们的时间”; “另一刻”) which nonetheless leave the reader without any accurate setting in time. Once again, images of violence and death permeate the first two stanzas, while the duality between the poet himself and his language resolves in the sense of incompleteness conveyed by the image of the “unfinished work” (line 11) and of the “one-word today” (line 13).

While both translators maintain the same structure and layout of the original, there are two lexical shifts worth mentioning. The first occurs in line 3, where the Chinese “勤奋” is translated into English as “diligent”, and into Italian as “assiduo”=“assiduous”. At a superficial glance the two may seem equivalent, and it is indeed common to find one among the synonyms of the other in dictionaries. Actually, there is a slight discrepancy between the two: “diligent” comes from the Latin word “diligens”, and as an adjective it describes the careful and precise attitude of the subject towards a certain task; “assiduo”, on the other hand, points at the perseverance and regularity with which the subject performs its task, with almost no detail about whether the task itself is performed carefully or not. Holton’s translation speaks of “twilight” sawing the branch carefully and with the utmost precision, as if the saw truly enjoys its task, while the Italian counterpart only specifies how regular and continual the sawing is.

The second shift occurs in correspondence of the last word of the poem: “瓷器”. Pozzana translates it into Italian as “porcellane”: that this language crawling between antique porcelain is Chinese seems straightforward, although not even remotely as straightforward as it becomes in Holton’s version, as he chooses to render it as “china”. This has no implications whatsoever on the meaning, but it is likely that Holton chose “china” instead of “porcelain” to add an extra phonetic layer to the metaphor already present in the Chinese text.

| <i>title</i> | Violence in the forest | Violenza nella foresta |
|--------------|--|--|
| | | |
| 1 | tangled on broken necks sky turns its collar up | sul collo attorcigliato e spezzato il cielo alza il bavero |
| 2 | slogans still smoking sky has begun eating meat | gli slogan ancora infiammano il cielo ha cominciato a mangiar carne |
| 3 | woods bend their heads and sky laughs far away | il bosco abbassa la testa e il cielo lontanissimo ride |
| 4 | tree stumps piling up sky has forgotten | pali di legno si accatastano il cielo ha dimenticato |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | this is the violence you see every day | questa è la violenza che vedi ogni giorno |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 6 | gregarious green feet | piedi verdi gregari |
| 7 | running to death in a more and more deathly silence | camminano verso la morte in un succedersi di silenzi mortali |
| 8 | hear sky contentedly sill in earth behind them | ascoltano il cielo soddisfatti colmano la terra alle loro spalle |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 9 | thunderstorm turns you to a soaking wet chopping board | il temporale ti trasforma in un tagliere impregnato |
| 10 | how sweet to hear a knife hacking at the back | com'è melodioso il suono di un coltello che trancia sulla schiena |
| 11 | sunlight's stylus scratches the growth-rings they'll never grate again | la puntina del grammofoono solare gratta gli anelli di crescita non striderà più |
| 12 | tree trunks have come with an effort to the truth of their disposal | tronchi d'albero si sforzano di avvicinarsi alla realtà del rifiuto |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 13 | this is everyday violence | questa è la violenza di ogni giorno |
| <i>break</i> | | |

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| 14 | sky fells the forest because it's turning human | il cielo abbatte la foresta perché sta diventando umana |
| 15 | because people don't bleed every day | perché gli uomini non sanguinano ogni giorno |
| 16 | just as you enjoy in peace and quiet your endless twitching | come te che godi in tranquillità del tuo tic incessante |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 17 | this is every day | questo è ogni giorno |

The poem “森林中的暴力” (summer 1992) describes a cosmos full of violence on every level. The sky itself, traditionally referred to either as the blue, peaceful and reassuring, or stormy but nonetheless neutral and distant sight above us, turns into the sadistic butcher of mankind in a daily escalation of violence. The regular and methodical way in which violence unfolds is made all the more important by the layout Yang Lian confers to his text, with line 5, 13 and 17 insisting upon how violence perpetuates “every day”. The choice of “这是每天” (line 17) casts away any hope for the situation to take a turn for the better.

In line 2, Yang Lian writes that “口号还在冒烟”: while this could be a reference to the time of the Cultural Revolution, of course full of slogans and violence, the way Holton and Pozzana translate “冒烟” is itself significant. The English translation sticks to the most immediate meaning of the Chinese original, conveying the image of something that has been burning until a short while before, and thus of an act of violence which has been carried out to its full just before the poet started looking at the scene. On the other hand, Pozzana’s choice of the verb “infiammare” is crucial for two main reasons: first, the slogans are still burning, which means that the same act of violence which has just ended in the original is still taking place in the Italian version; and second, “infiammare”=“to burn” in English in that it can be either transitive or intransitive, meaning respectively “set something on fire” and “be on fire”. In the Italian translation, “infiammano” is undoubtedly transitive, although its object is not mentioned, perhaps in order to point the reader towards picturing a scenario in which slogans are not themselves on fire, but “inflammate” people’s hearts with their content.

Line 10 registers another discrepancy between the two translations. Holton translates the Chinese “腰上”, where “腰” literally means “lower back”, “waist”, as “at the back”. Pozzana, on the other hand, quite literally translates it as “sulla schiena” (“schiena”=“back”). This may look like an irrelevant shift, while this line, if read together with the previous one, actually sees its intensity drastically diminished by the English translation. The image of the

human being turned into an unwilling and passive object accomplice to the perpetration of violence in line 9 is reinforced by the idea of the knife hacking “sulla schiena”=“on the back”, while being softened by Holton’s translation of “腰上” as “at the back”.

| <i>title</i> | Prison island | Isola prigionie |
|--------------|--|---|
| 1 | light builds its temple with erect pillars one by one | la luce con colonne erette una ad una costruisce il suo tempio |
| 2 | light carves words on the dull brown stone reads by the sea | la luce incide parole sulla pietra bruna legge accanto al mare |
| 3 | May is a hotel bed | maggio è un letto d'albergo |
| 4 | morning rides a bright blue body glued with dreams | cavalca di mattina un corpo blu e luminoso incollato ai sogni |
| 5 | that was woken in the dark | fatto risvegliare nel buio |
| 6 | a sea's broad leaf balances on a wineglass | un'enorme foglia di mare che sta in cima ad un bicchiere di vino |
| 7 | a day ushers you into a grain of living crystal | un giorno ti chiude in un granello di cristallo vivo |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 8 | the islands you never reached | l'isola che non hai mai raggiunto |
| 9 | you never left either | e che mai hai lasciato |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 10 | the pitch black storm is a sailing ship | la nera tempesta è un veliero |
| 11 | prisoners still tearfully complain in the surf homesick | i prigionieri continuano a piangere tra rumori d'onde nostalgia di casa |
| 12 | imagine a plough pulled from their bodies | immaginano un aratro tirato da loro |
| 13 | imagine bodies as birds have no bodies | immaginano corpi come un uccello senza corpo |
| 14 | when you are drunk dry you are at flood tide | che quando ti beve fino all'ultima goccia ti offre l'alta marea |
| 15 | keeping watch all your life on the exhaustion of your ocean | osservando tutta la vita l'esaurirsi del tuo mare |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 16 | pitilessly banished to your body | si infiltra crudele nel tuo corpo |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 17 | the white horse of May is banished to drunkenness | un cavallo bianco di maggio si infiltra nell'ebrezza |
| 18 | galloping all around you opening the green rise and fall of the skin | ti corre intorno aprendo il verde ondulare della pelle |

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| 19 | eyes that look out over prison islands are prison themselves | gli occhi che guardano dall'alto la lontana isola prigionie sono essi stessi prigionie |
| 20 | light torments a tunnel on the seabed | la luce in fondo al mare tormenta un tunnel |
| 21 | tiny hollow islands bloat you from inside | l'isoletta cava ti gonfia dall'interno |
| 22 | pain is an unextinguished lamp | il dolore è una lampada inestinguibile |
| 23 | more pain the sea shoots out from behind the morning | ancora dolore il mare si getta fuori da dietro il mattino |
| 24 | another day shoots deep in a fatal direction | un'altra giornata si getta in profondità imponendoti una direzione fatale |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 25 | ending is long and wearisome | la fine è interminabile |
| 26 | ending itself has no end | la fine in sé non ha fine |

That of the island is a crucial image in Yang Lian's poetry, as it often stands for the idea of exile, which is the condition in which both him and Bei Dao had to cope with. The "island metaphor" is for example central in the poem "监狱岛" (1992). Images of a dreamlike world culminate in a sense of precariousness (line 6), confinement (line 7 and the second stanza as a whole) and hopelessness (line 22). In the end, prison islands are no more of a prison than "eyes that look over prison islands" themselves: human beings are no more prisoners of the outside world than they are of themselves.

I would argue that the first shift I am going to discuss exemplifies a tendency towards (over)emphasizing a supposed feature of Chinese poetry, i.e. that of being first and foremost "image poetry" in which individual images follow one another as if they were not only unrelated, but also timeless and placeless (Kern 2019, 23). Said shift is to be found in line 11, which ends with the two words "想家" (literally: "miss home"). Pozzana assumes the blank space between "哭诉" and "想家" indicates a fracture within the verse rather than placing emphasis on the last two words, and thus translates "nostalgia di casa", which is Italian for "homesickness". Holton, on the other hand, while still emphasizing the line's last words, refers them to the actual subject of the whole line.

The two versions also differ in how translators chose to render the fourth stanza, which consists of the only line "狠狠打入你体内". Holton fills the vacant spots, so to say, in the Chinese original in a way that this single verse as a whole refers to the poetic persona of the text. The English equivalent for Pozzana's translation would be "it pitilessly sneaks into your body": the newly introduced indefinite subject somehow finds a way into the poetic persona's

body. While, theoretically speaking, “打入” could mean both “infiltrate” and “banish into”, Holton’s rendering seems preferable not only because it doesn’t force new elements into the poem, but also because it reiterates the idea of the subject being imprisoned, which is the core matter of the whole text.

| <i>title</i> | Body of the world | Il corpo del mondo |
|--------------|--|---|
| 1 | no tooth that can die yours or the crocodile’s | non c’è dente che possa morire tuo o del coccodrillo |
| 2 | if this wood carving will only sit up straight | purché questa scultura di legno sieda composta |
| 3 | at the door squander the ancient power of dreaming | sulla porta dilapidando l’antica capacità di sognare |
| 4 | dream morning is a dark corridor | il mattino visto in sogno è un corridoio scuro |
| 5 | opens mouths poking from chests to eat meat | molte bocche protese verso il petto, insieme mangiano carne |
| 6 | winds blow huge ear-rings of straw | molti venti soffiano muovendo enormi orecchini di paglia |
| 7 | sharks with sinister intent climb trees behind your back | squali che nutrono intenzioni malvage si arrampicano di schiena sugli alberi |
| 8 | climb on the bench of the ocean | si arrampicano su una panca del mare |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 9 | no the excess beyond delirium | non c’è il superfluo fuori dall’illusione |
| 10 | if only white cataract shells with gouged-out genitals | purché i molluschi cataratte di genital strappati |
| 11 | still sink into an eye-socket that cannot twitch | affondino ancora in orbite incapaci di contrarsi |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 12 | ship’s sirens that sound on the seabed are like doorbells | le sirene della nave affondata risuonano sul fondo del mare come campanelli sulle porte |
| 13 | the stranger in his travels has been scraped clean by coral | l’ospite in cammino è stato scorticato dal corallo |
| 14 | on pink bones letters are of course sexy | sulle ossa rosa le lettere sono certamente erotiche |
| 15 | the girl in the birthday mirror forced into a corner | nello specchio del compleanno la bambina viene costretta nell’angolo |
| 16 | begging over and over | di nuovo a mendicare |
| 17 | your bodiless flesh pressing on a tiny soul familiar from deep sleep | il tuo corpo dissanguato preme sul minuscolo fantasma immerse nel sonno |

| | | |
|--------------|--|---|
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 18 | non-stop waving | avanti e indietro senza posa |
| 19 | eternity an undreaming brain more like a dream | sfortunatamente una testa senza sogni sembra ancor più un sogno |
| 20 | a face's dark imagination wrings the brain out underfoot | l'immaginazione oscura del volto stringe il volto sotto i piedi |
| 21 | falsity has only existed | il falso è appena esistito |
| 22 | only unchanging under lamplight | immutabile solo alla luce della lampada |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 23 | between sour belches your stomach is thousands of years away | nel tuo stomaco due fetidi rigurgiti distanti migliaia di anni |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 24 | sitting ocean and trees green now | seduti mare e alberi verdeggiano |
| 25 | chisel the sky in the story's white breakfast | cesellano il cielo nel racconto bianca colazione che |
| 26 | makes you unable to escape a daily hunger | non ti fa sfuggire alla fame quotidiana |
| 27 | and unable to reach this terrible address | né raggiungere questo spaventoso indirizzo |
| 28 | like a flesh-eating fish you touch yourself | uno che si accarezza è un uomo-pesce carnivoro |
| 29 | having come through the corridor sense-organs split in a wooden rose | attraversato il corridoio i cinque sensi in una rosa legnosa screpolano |
| 30 | living being dreamed | la vita vista in sogno |

The fifth poem of the third section, “天空移”, written between 1992 and 1993, is “世界的躯体”. It could be argued that, interestingly, the images evoked throughout the poem are at the same time dreamlike and all-too corporeal, in that they are at once totally unrealistic and extremely detailed. Both facets of this double-nature imagery are essential within the logic of the poem, in that the crude realism of line 10 or line 13 is in the end incorporated by the dreamlike scenario of the last verse: “living being dreamed”.

Line 9 is already a crucial one, as “没有 妄想之外多余的部分” already establishes that there is nothing beyond illusion, and that everything the subject sees, as real as it might appear, is ultimately illusory. The English version differs from the Italian counterpart precisely in how it translates “妄想”: Holton renders it as “delirium”, which does indeed have a similar meaning to that of the Italian “illusione”, while at the same time being a medical term. We could therefore argue that “illusione” = “illusion” only goes as far as identifying an error of the mind which distorts reality and that, on the other hand, “delirium” identifies a medical

condition for which the process of distorting reality reaches a pathological level. Translating “妄想” as “delirium” implicitly connotes the addressee of the poem as mentally ill, which brings the feeling of helplessness and absurdity permeating the whole poem.

Line 14 gives way to another interesting shift between the two translations. In the Chinese verse “书信当然是色情的”, “色情” becomes “sexy” in English and “erotico” in Italian. While the basic meaning of “sexy” and “erotico” is similar, the choice of one over another might lead to different effects in readers who don’t know Chinese. Specifically, a reader with no knowledge of Chinese, who then doesn’t know that “书信” means “letter” in the sense of “written correspondence”, could read “letters are of course sexy” as a way for the poet to condensate his special and ambiguous relationship with his native language in a single line, with “letters” as a metonymy for Chinese idiom as a whole. Since “sexy” means “sensual” rather than “erotic” or “pornographic”, the foreign reader might hold that the line in question describes how language seduces and attracts the poet, even though the road towards its mastery is gruelling. The Italian reader, who has equally non-existent knowledge of Chinese, immediately discards this possible reading because the Italian adjective “erotico”, just like the English “erotic”, identifies something “having love as the core matter”, thus clarifying that “lettere” = “letters” refers to written messages exchanged among people, and doesn’t represent the whole Chinese idiom in a metonymical way.

| <i>title</i> | Perpendicular to the paper | Perpendicolare alla carta |
|--------------|---|--|
| | | |
| 1 | perpendicular to the paper you grasp | perpendicolare alla carta afferi |
| 2 | a waft of morning mist a quiet tree in the graveyard | un filo di fumo del mattino nel cimitero un albero calmo |
| 3 | sky is waking in the bedroom | il cielo si risveglia nella stanza da letto |
| 4 | girls opposing the rampant stalk of light | le ragazze si oppongono allo stelo furibondo del raggio di luce |
| 5 | one little walnut of day has incinerated the brain’s evidence | una noce diurnale chiude e distrugge le prove della copla del cervello |
| 6 | four seasons alcohol sustains the headache | lungo le stagioni l’alcool prolunga il mal di testa |
| 7 | holds tight to the fork of the ocean’s dazzling dining table | stringendo la forchetta sulla tavola scintillante del mare |
| 8 | the world feeds its eyes into its mouth | il mondo si riempie la bocca dei suoi stessi occhi |
| <i>break</i> | | |

| | | |
|----|--|---|
| 9 | it's a never-finished poem | è una poesia mai terminata |
| 10 | perpendicular to the page just being written by a headstone | perpendicolare alla carta appena scritta da una lapide |
| 11 | floated by the floor's current | trascinata via dalla corrente sul pavimento |
| 12 | blood hammered into a ladder of frozen feet | il sangue inchiodato in una scala dai piedi congelati |
| 13 | moved into the crowded contingent who buy up corruption | trasloca in orde che si precipitano a comprare marciumi |
| 14 | yet another morning maintains the clock's callousness | un altro mattino mantenendo la freddezza dell'orologio |
| 15 | a perpendicularly crashing street says | si sfracella perpendicolare alla strada dice |
| 16 | this isn't the last time yet you still haven't fallen to the page | questa non è l'ultima volta tu non sei ancora caduto sulla carta |

The poem “与纸垂直的方向” is the third poem included in the fourth section, written between 1992 and 1993 and entitled “否认的石榴”. The title itself hints at a sense of apprehension and anxiety, as if the poetic persona were about to collide with the paper it now stands perpendicular to. The situation depicted in the poem, however, is not going to reach its climax, as the poetic persona, once again directly addressed through the use of the second person pronoun 你, hasn't yet “fallen to the page” (line 16), and is condemned by the atemporality (further underscored by the image of another morning which “maintains the clock's callousness”) of Yang Lian's poetry to the endless perpetuation of the same condition.

Differences in translation shape the poem differently in the mind of English and Italian readers: in line 5, “大脑的罪证” has significantly different renderings in the two languages: the non-Chinese speaking reader is unlikely to realize that “罪” means “crime, guilt”, and that “罪证” therefore means “proof of guilt” itself. Without such key knowledge, Holton's translation may turn out to be ambiguous, as “brain's evidence” also means “the evidence possessed by the brain”, which gets destroyed, leaving it disoriented in uncertainty. This image, however evocative, is different from those conveyed by the Chinese original and the Italian translation, which does clarify (“colpa del cervello”=“brain's guilt”) that the evidence destroyed once proved the brain's guilt, and how the brain is not itself possessing the evidence of something else's deeds.

Line 13 (Chinese: “被搬进抢购腐朽的拥挤队伍”) is also significant. First of all, neither Holton nor Pozzana manage to make the particle “被” explicit in their rendering. This is particularly important because “被” is, in this case, a particle indicating how the subject passively and unwillingly endures the effect of the action predicated by the main verb. Still, Holton’s take seems to be closer to the original meaning than Pozzana’s, since the Italian “traslocare” literally means “to move house”, and it only translates “搬” without even indirectly hinting at the passive enduring of the action, which the English translation does. The different way “腐朽” (literally “rot, decay”, or “decadent, degenerate”) is translated is also worth mentioning: Holton renders it as “corruption”, mainly based on the first character, which is also part of the word “贪腐”, often used within Chinese political discourse to indicate corruption. This kind of choice may suggest an association to today’s China in the mind of the attentive reader, and it can’t be excluded that the poet himself had this association in mind when writing this line. The Italian translation, however, insists on the overall meaning of the word and reads “marciumi”, literally “rottenness”. In the Italian translation, therefore, people do not crowd to buy up corruption: they queue up to buy rotten goods, reinforcing the idea of a weird temporality in which what is just bought is already out of date.

| <i>title</i> | Space | Spazio |
|--------------|---|--|
| | | |
| 1 | birds feverishly push the air aside | gli uccelli freneticamente spingono via l’aria |
| 2 | the sea’s shining surface clear sinuous glass | superficie del mare scricchiolante vetro ricurvo trasparente |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 3 | protected by the apple tree | il melo protegge |
| 4 | a much-praised apple a green bawd | la mela declamante verde ruffiana |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 5 | supporting the smoking flowers | sostiene il fumo esalato dai fiori |
| 6 | taking the shape of a horse’s snow-white dappling | diventa le macchie nivee di un cavallo |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 7 | suddenly the whole city collapses backwards | l’intera città collassa velocemente all’indietro |
| 8 | summer’s brilliant garden a dead butterfly | splendido giardino estivo una farfalla morta |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 9 | so mouths buried in sweat and pubic hair | la bocca sepolta nel sudore e nei peli del pube |

| | | |
|--------------|---|--|
| 10 | take exquisite revenge on the clock | così si vendica delicatamente dell'orologio |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 11 | two trains drive the bodies out | due treni che escono dai corpi |
| 12 | punctually collide head-on in a word | puntuali collidono frontalmente in una parola |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 13 | noon a blue field abandoned by memory | a mezzogiorno un campo azzurro abbandonato dalla memoria |
| 14 | stops its continuous bombardment of a bald head | fermo sulla testa calva di un uomo continua il bombardamento |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 15 | as death's sweater shrinks | quando la maglia della morte d'improvviso si restringe |
| 16 | hell is so tiny we can't both lie down | l'inferno è così piccolo che in due non possiamo stenderci |

The poem “空间” is also part of the fourth section, dating back to 1992-1993. The layout of the text seems to be crucial, as the poem develops through eight stanzas, each constituted by a single couplet: the overall effect is that of having a largely blank page, in which the space left between stanzas is just as important as the text itself. Italian poetry readers are likely to be accustomed to dealing with this kind of texts, as the blank space was considered crucial by Ungaretti (already mentioned when discussing Bei Dao's “乡音”), whose most famous text, named “Mattina” (“Morning”) is made up of only two lines:

“M'illumino
d'immenso”

Allen Mandelbaum's translation (1975) is "I illumine me / with immensity ", though the text sounds much more artificial in English. Here, as in Yang Lian's “Space”, the amount of space left blank on the page is itself part of the poetic text.

The two translations most notably differ in the rendering of the second stanza, which in Chinese reads:

“苹果树看护着
朗诵的苹果 一个绿色的鸫母”

First of all, Pozzana chooses to stick to the original Chinese active voice, as the English counterpart for her version would be “the applet ree protects / the declaiming apple a green sycophant”. Holton, on the other hand, prefers to turn the whole couplet into a passive sentence, and in doing so shifts the focus of the stanza, which is now on the apple rather than on the tree.

In addition to the aforementioned shift of focus, Holton and Pozzana read “朗诵” (“read aloud, recite”) differently. While it is treated as an adjective in the English version, and then translated as “much-praised”, which might let the reader think that poetry about the apple has been written before, the Italian present participle “declamante” is again an active voice, constructing the image of the apple itself declaiming something. The object of its chanting, however, remains unknown.

As the quotes from both translations already show “鸨母”, a term identifying a female brothel keeper, while becoming “bawd” (which is a quite literal translation) in English, is rendered as “ruffiana”=“sycophant” in Italian. This is noteworthy because the term has two distinct meanings in Italian: in the first one, perhaps similar to the English “bawd”, it describes someone who, for money or other compensation, facilitates other people’s love affairs; in its second meaning, it generically qualifies someone who constantly tries to gain other people’s approval through adulation. The latter meaning is much more widely used nowadays, and for this reason it is unlikely that an Italian reader might be aware of the meaning of the original Chinese term at any rate.

| <i>title</i> | 3 | 3 |
|--------------|---|---|
| 1 | at some address kids slice open a pomegranate | a un certo indirizzo i bambini aprono una melagrana |
| 2 | some address imagines kids as | un certo indirizzo immagina i bambini come |
| 3 | eyes white nuts in flesh | occhi noccioli bianchi nella carne |
| 4 | blood chirping bird congealed into glass | sangue uccello cinguettante coagulato nel vetro |
| 5 | half a body twisting invisibly in the hands | metà del corpo si torce invisibile nella mano |
| 6 | and chewed-up pink jelly smeared on the teeth | e una gelatina di frutta rosa masticata bagna i denti |
| 7 | death kids have seen | morte i bambini hanno visto |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 8 | what forgets us and what is pitilessly restored by forgetting | ciò che ci dimentica è ciò che dall’oblio viene spietatamente guarito |
| 9 | lamplight abstracted from a city at dusk | luci astratte in una città al calar della notte |

| | | |
|--------------|---|--|
| 10 | is again but never for the last time | un'altra volta ma mai l'ultima volta |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 11 | what strips us of direction and what is stripped by too many directions | ciò che ci priva della nostra direzione e ciò che è privato da troppe direzioni |
| 12 | blue always unfurled in the heights of the head | il blu che sempre si estende all'altezza della testa |
| 13 | blackening in a stare | annerisce nello sguardo fisso |
| 14 | must always have somewhere for vain hope to sortie out | ci deve essere un luogo dove le illusioni possono rompere l'accerchiamento |
| 15 | to let the words that make addresses get used to the pustulence of the crowd | affinché le parole che formano l'indirizzo possano abituarsi al suppurare della folla |
| <i>break</i> | | |
| 16 | blank in the eye-socket | il vuoto nelle orbite |
| 17 | only in symmetry with | è solo in simmetria con |
| 18 | the sea shapeless beneath blind men's hands | il mare senza forma al tatto dei ciechi |
| 19 | some address is assigned to plant silvery perfumed bones | un certo indirizzo è designato per piantare argentee ossa profumate |
| 20 | to strip away our depths | per scorticare le nostre profondità |
| 21 | kids almond roasted by the seasons | bambini mandorle arrostate dalle stagioni |
| 22 | become every | diventano ogni |
| 23 | imagination denied by being seen | immaginazione negata dall'esser vista |
| 24 | inspired by destruction | esaltata dalla distruzione |
| 25 | the pomegranate is wrapped in blue calcified pips | la melagrana avvolge stretti i semi blu calcificati |
| 26 | the sea never yet slapped beyond solitude | il mare non ha mai battuto le onde fuori dalla solitudine |
| 27 | never yet had another shatter below the cliff | non c'è mai stato qualcun altro sotto la scogliera ad essere frantumato |
| 28 | we hear ourselves fall elsewhere and shatter | ascoltiamo noi stessi cadere in frantumi altrove |
| 29 | no sea that doesn't slip into the void of the poem | non c'è mare che non scivoli nel vuoto della poesia |
| 30 | kids sliced by long-dead light stand still this shore | bambini tagliati con una luce da tempo morta fermi |
| 31 | is where we see ourselves set sail | questa è la riva da dove mi guardo prendere il largo |

The third and last movement of the section named “大海停止之处” (composed in 1993) is also the last text of the whole volume, and as such it has to be considered, one way or another,

crucial, because “it elegantly concludes -and everybody knows how difficult it is to adequately conclude a poem -alluding to the poet distancing from his own text” (Pozzana 2016, 14). Its place as the last poem of the collection invests this text with the role of realising the climax Yang Lian has patiently built throughout the whole sequence of poems starting from the title, which already alludes to the quest for a topic moment in which the mounting poetic tension resolves in total stillness. In this sense, the last verse is of the utmost significance, as it sees the poet looking at the sea with the eyes of a survivor who has now reached land: an attitude much similar to Dante’s when he compares himself to the man who:

“uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
si volge all’acqua perigliosa e guata”

“with sorely troubled breath upon the shore
Turns round, and gazes at the dangerous water”

(Dante, *Inferno I*, 23-24 – English translation by Courtney Langdon)

In addition to feeling gratitude for being still alive, the poet also witnesses himself setting sail in a process of detachment of the Yang Lian from his poetic persona, which is an essential condition for the existence of poetry (Pozzana 2016, 14).

Line 31 is also the most significant one in terms of discrepancies between the English and the Italian translations. The original Chinese line features the pronoun 自己, which means “oneself”, rendered as “ourselves” by Holton and as “me stesso”=“myself” by Pozzana. The English translation sounds more inclusive, perhaps incorporating the reader in the same batch as the poet himself, while the Italian version insists upon the individual experience of the poet looking at his own personal poetic persona fading into the stillness of the sea. This insistence on the individuality of the poet’s experience changes the way the line is perceived by the readers: while Holton’s translation only speaks of a ‘new beginning’ towards which the poet walks along with his readers, Pozzana’s rendering sees the lone poet looking at his poetry moving away again, only this time without his own presence. In doing so, Yang Lian’s poetry can truly gain autonomous existence.

5. Conclusion

The present thesis studies samples of Bei Dao and Yang Lian's work as specimens of world literature, and it attempts to answer a very specific question: what is the role of translation in determining the trajectory of particular texts in contemporary Chinese poetry as world literature? Considering Damrosch's definition of world literature (see fig.1), it could be argued that, on a general level, translation has a pivotal role in allowing the source text to circulate beyond its context of origin, thus creating a link between source and target context and making them the two foci of the elliptical space of world literature. Besides being a means through which texts come into existence as world literature, translation determines the position they take within it: translations that aim at assimilating the source text, i.e. at making it as easy as possible to read and understand for people from the target context (Kern 2019, 17), result in the text gravitating more towards the target culture within the elliptical space of world literature. Translations which try to highlight the specificities of the source text as much as possible, on the other hand, result in the text being positioned closer to the source culture within the ellipsis used here to visualize world literature.

The considerations expressed above should theoretically be true for any text. The focus of my project, however, is on particular samples of contemporary Chinese poetry. The analysis carried out in the present thesis illustrates how translations of specific poems into English and Italian present relevant differences between each other, and are in turn different from the source text, even though it remains the same. Discrepancies between translations are, more often than not, consequences of conscious choices made by the translators, who *de facto* contribute to the creation of a new poem and to the creation of its new life within the target culture. Different choices can sometimes be traced back to the specificities of the languages involved (in this case Chinese, English and Italian): while these discordances are to some extent unavoidable, they are still involved in constructing the imagery with which the reader is ultimately presented.

Early on, I argued that the texts considered here exist within two elliptical refractions at once (fig. 2): for Bei Dao and Yang Lian's poems, translations is both the means through which the Chinese source context comes into contact with the Italian and English contexts, and the factor determining the position of single texts within the elliptical spaces they belong to. The most fascinating finding is that such positions are always different, even though the source text is the same: a given poem, for example, can gravitate towards the source context in its English translation and more towards the target culture in its Italian rendition. The fact that such positional difference depends solely on translation proves how crucial it is in determining

how texts exist as specimens of world literature: translation makes the poems discussed here accessible to people outside of the source context, it contributes to determining who reads them and to determining how much of the source context readers from the target context actually experience through the lines of the text. All in all, translation is the primary element shaping the existence of these poems as world literature and the way they relate to both source and target context.

On a side note which moves away from the “world literature framework”, I would say that the practice of approaching foreign literature without acknowledging that we are working on texts that are actually translations, and not originals, is still dominant. In the future, more emphasis on translation would prevent scholars from approaching texts as if they were originally written in the target language, which more often than not happens to be English (today’s global and academic language *par excellence*), and thus from immediately assimilating and integrating them in their own discourse.

If we play our cards right, literary scholarship through translation could potentially become a valuable form of resistance against the advancement of cultural sameness.

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