

The Individual Writer's Voice: Gao Xingjian's *Aesthetics and Creation*

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Abstract

Gao Xingjian offers a way beyond the currently prevalent ideologies that seem to dominate literature and literary criticism. He does this by creating major works that offer an aesthetic based on a return to the humanist traditions of literary art and the infusion of Buddhist and Taoist Ways to Enlightenment. His achievement is to blend Eastern and Western perspectives or perceptions that enrich each other and so make possible truly original art.

This essay discusses Gao's views on art by arguing that once another, better, way to think and create can be enunciated, we may recognize the passing of what is currently often touted as the only correct or valid way to read and write literature in our universities and in the literary market. If it is possible to be original and cogent in expressing such an alternative, then perhaps we may re-shift our focus back onto the ways we have been writing before the advent of Postmodernist and Poststructuralist ideologies. In so doing, we may also return the writer's voice to the discussion of literature and so re-establish the communication networks we need for great art which dialogues with us as individuals to flourish. Once this is achieved, a new renaissance may be possible that, in Buddhist terms, brings back to life what we thought was dead: literature is not exhausted; the author is not dead; art that sincerely represents the individual's life and mind in verisimilar ways remains the most pressing need in this hyperreal age we have been told by literary ideologies we live in.

The form or style of this essay is offered as an alternative to the current turgid and unreadable ways of writing espoused in poststructuralist academic circles that have only resulted in a new poverty of literary criticism and of language. We may need to re-learn how to discuss literature in our own voices: Gao's voice in his *Aesthetics and Creation* is an exemplary way to do so.

Keywords: Gao Xingjian, Chan Buddhism, postmodernism, tradition,

communication, aesthetics, creativity, voice, pronouns, perception, renaissance, literary criticism

Gao Xing Jian ได้นำเสนอวิธีการที่แตกต่างจากเจตนารมณ์ที่แพร่หลายในปัจจุบันซึ่งมีอิทธิพลต่อวรรณกรรมและงานวิจารณ์เขาได้สร้างสรรค์ผลงานชิ้นสำคัญที่นำเสนอมุมมองความงามที่น่าเสนอมุมมองความงามที่อยู่บนพื้นฐานการย้อนอดีตไปในช่วงประเพณีดั้งเดิมของมนุษยนิยมภายใต้งานวรรณกรรมและการรวมกันของแนวทางการครีเอทีฟในลัทธิเต๋าและพุทธศาสนาความสำเร็จของเขาคือการผสมผสานมุมมองหรือการรับรู้ทางตะวันออกและตกเข้าด้วยกันดังนั้นทั้ง 2 วิธีได้สนับสนุนซึ่งกันและกันและช่วยให้ศิลปะกลับไปสู่ความเป็นศิลปะดั้งเดิมอย่างแท้จริง

บทความนี้ได้กล่าวถึงมุมมองของ Gao Xing Jian เกี่ยวกับงานศิลปะโดยให้เหตุผลว่าเมื่อวิธีการคิดและสร้างสรรค์ที่คิดว่าถูกเผยแพร่ออกไปพวกเราอาจจะรับรู้ได้ถึงการส่งต่อ/สืบทอด/ส่งผ่านของสิ่งที่ถูกปลูกฝังในปัจจุบันว่าเป็นวิธีที่ถูกต้องและมีเหตุผลเพื่อที่จะอ่านและเขียนงานวรรณกรรมในร่วมสมัยและตลาดวรรณกรรมพวกเราจะต้องเปลี่ยนมุมมองกลับไปยังวิธีที่พวกเราเคยใช้ในงานต่างๆ ในช่วงก่อนการยุคของอุดมการณ์, หลังยุคใหม่และหลังยุคโครงสร้างนิยมถ้าเราย้อนกลับไปสู่ความคิดดั้งเดิมและมีเหตุผลในการอธิบายทางเลือกต่างๆ การทำเช่นนั้นพวกเราจะต้องเปลี่ยนมุมมองของเหล่านักเขียนเป็นการประหม่อภิปรายงานวรรณกรรมและปรับโครงสร้างเครือข่ายการสื่อสารที่พวกเราต้องการต่องานสร้างสรรค์ซึ่งจะทำให้บทสนทนาต่างๆ คุลละสลวยมากขึ้นเมื่องานที่ประสบความสำเร็จยุคสมัยใหม่อาจจะเป็นการนำกลับมาของสิ่งที่เราคิดว่าหายไปแล้วในแง่ของพุทธศาสนางานวรรณกรรมยังไม่ได้หายสาบสูญผู้ประพันธ์ก็ยังไม่ได้ออกไปงานเขียน/ศิลปะจึงเป็นสิ่งที่แสดงถึงชีวิตและจิตใจของแต่ละคนอย่างแท้จริงซึ่งยังคงเป็นที่ต้องการของสื่อมากที่สุดในยุคเกินจริงที่พวกเราได้ถูกบอกกล่าวผ่านทางระบบความคิดทางวรรณกรรมในช่วงสมัยที่เราซึ่งอยู่รูปแบบหรือลักษณะของบทความเป็นตัวเลือกแทนวิธีการเขียนที่อ่านไต่แยกและตรงเกินไปในปัจจุบันที่ถูกเผยแพร่ในวงการวิชาการของนักโครงสร้างนิยมซึ่งจะมีผลต่อความเชื่อมโยงในการวิจารณ์วรรณกรรมและภาษาพวกเราต้องการที่จะเรียนรู้อีกครั้งถึงวิธีการอภิปรายบทความ/งานวรรณกรรมในแง่ของมุมมองของ Gao Xing Jian ในงาน “ความสุนทรีย์และความสร้างสรรค์” ก็เป็นตัวอย่างในการทำเช่นนั้น

Keywords: Gao Xingjian, นิกายเซน, แนวคิดหลังยุคทุนนิยม, ประเพณี, การสื่อสาร, สุนทรียศาสตร์, ความคิดสร้างสรรค์, ลักษณะการเขียนเฉพาะตัว

But hell can endure for only a limited period and life will begin again one day. (Camus: 1951: 241)

I

The impetus for this essay comes from a realization that Gao Xingjian has been largely ignored by critics. This is despite his having written *Soul Mountain*

(1990, translated into English in 2000), the most challenging and perhaps most difficult great novel since James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1942). One startling example of such silence is Stucky (2010) whose postmodernist metatextual deconstruction of modern Chinese novels totally ignores Gao whose work is not mentioned once. While Joyce's *Ulysses* remained a mystery for critics until Stuart Gilbert (1930) published the schema Joyce provided to him, Gao has responded to his readers by offering a series of talks and essays about his art in all its manifestations. Many of these have been collected and translated by Mabel Lee in *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012). In this book, we may have some of the keys to Gao's art.

If, as Gao suggests, great art confronts or challenges life, and by implication its audience, we should not expect to find in it trite tropes and worn out ideas that sound like the popular or trendy views that usually predominate in a milieu until a great work comes along and changes everything. Instead, we can only expect to be challenged and surprised by it. One way he challenges us is in his view of art as a record of the creations achieved by individual human souls whose truthful attempts to write about the human condition survive the test of time and communicate with us to this day. This record transcends time, space, cultures and languages to form what he calls a history of the soul (Gao: 2012: 203). For a humanist who is familiar with the traditions of art, this argument should not come as a surprise or a shock. In *Great Souls* (2007), I have argued that the ideas of Socrates, Jesus, the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu are deeply compatible in many ways. In fact, this is how tradition as a force always works: when we are aware of the voices of the past, we hear in the present their continued relevance in the dialogues others are now having which re-voice or reverberate those views. As Byron, the romantic rebel knew well, the past never passes away. Voices inside the stream of art that create lasting works are never inherently incompatible with one another, although the poverty of our thinking may make it seem that they are. Instead, we can hear them in dialogue with each other, much as E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) envisaged the great novelists living and working in the same room. One such voice that seems to be invisibly but audibly present in Gao's work is that of Albert Camus:

In *The Rebel* (1951), Camus, like Gao, rejects Nietzsche's ethics:

Man can allow himself to denounce the total injustice of the world and then demand a total justice which he alone will create. But he cannot affirm the total hideousness of the world. To create beauty, he must

simultaneously reject reality and exalt certain of its aspects. Art disputes reality, but does not hide from it. Nietzsche could deny any form of transcendence, whether moral or divine, in saying that transcendence drove one to slander this world and this life. But perhaps there is a living transcendence, of which beauty carries the promise, which can make this mortal and limited world preferable to and more appealing than any other. Art thus leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but which the artist presents and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history. We shall understand this better in considering the art form whose precise aim is to dive into the stream of the ceaseless change of things in order to give it the style that it lacks; in other words, the novel. (Camus:1951:224)

Here, Camus' emphasis on the need for beauty, the artist's disputing of reality, the limits of Nietzsche's ethics, a transcendent quality in art, the novel as a form whose "aim is to dive into the stream of the ceaseless change of things", are likewise key aspects of Gao's aesthetics. The two artists' attitudes towards art are similar in these ways because they are drawing on perspectives that are an integral part of the vital traditions or life forces of art. Unlike Camus who comes to a view of the stream from a Western understanding of the stream of consciousness, Gao brings a Chan Buddhist perspective to this view that helps him to see other aspects of it. Similarly, while Camus may be labeled an existentialist along with Sartre, there is no way of seeing his *The Outsider* (1942) as disputing reality in the same way that Sartre does in *Nausea* (1938). While both existentialist writers confront or dispute reality, they see different things and represent those things in different ways because they tell the truth about what they actually perceive. So too with Gao whose reality in China and in the mind of specific individuals located there offers different ways of challenging the world of his experience that leads him into the mind and how we exist in it. As Camus hints in his allusion to Voltaire's "Candide" (1750) and the search for the best of all possible worlds, which is linked to Johnson's *Rasselas* (1750) where a similar search is undertaken but with different results, there is a sense of quest in all literature that explores ways of living in a contested and therefore problematical world. Such a quest is inherent in the human psyche while the perceptions we attain are different because each writer sees and experiences things differently. But, the experiences have one important similarity: they are told truthfully, sincerely, with a concern for the quality of life for the individual being portrayed.

In recent years, we seem to have lost contact with Camus', and for that matter with Sartre's, actual voices and ideas. But the traditions they and those that have written before them have kept alive remain in contact in the underground stream of ideas that we need to reestablish communication with if we are to talk with each other as equals in a truly dialogical way about art, language and many other topics. The problem is that these voices have been drowned out in most Western approaches to art and life that seem to deny the existence of living traditions or art. For a student or critic who comes to Gao's work with preconceptions about art as an abstract sign system that only talks about language and that has no past or future because it is simply a language game we play, then Gao's work may seem incomprehensible, or even anathema and so to be rejected. But such a negative response would be intellectually dishonest and irresponsible: we have to confront that which seems alien to us if we are to learn about ourselves as human beings. This means that we have to open our minds to other ideas that seem to challenge the way we think now. If these other ideas offer a better way of seeing things, then we may change how we think. We must do this once we accept that a work offers truthful insights into the only thing that matters — who we are as human beings — which our present ways of thinking cannot offer to us.

This is what Gao sets out to argue in *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012) by using his own art, the only art he has concrete experience with as a creator, to show us that there are other ways of thinking about art. In following him on his quest, this essay seeks to recreate one reader's experience of his work in detail. It does so by giving Gao's voice prominence in the discussions. After having traveled through his book and hopefully seen things through his eyes and in his mind, we may be able to make informed judgments on the value of his quest based on what we have learned along the way. For this reason, I make no apologies for the length of this essay in which much ground will have to be covered in concrete terms if we are to actually understand Gao's art in its complexity and richness. If this seems to confront or challenge the reader, then so be it: unless we are willing to experience such issues in our own reading experience we will never be willing to confront the issues raised by the artist. In this way, we gain a sense of the artist by experiencing his art as he intends it to be experienced: in a verisimilar way.

From a humanist's perspective, one of the great lessons literature, and by extension the criticism of literature, teaches is that all movements, styles, and

ideologies of art will pass: there will always be light at the end of the tunnel for those who disagree with the prevailing popular trends of any time. Gao Xingjian seems to be one of those who are announcing the passing of the current dominant, even totalizing, trend in literature: the end of the postmodernist moment along with the attendant academic ideology of poststructuralism. That this current trend is reaching the Asian context may be illustrated by Zhou Weihui's novel, *Shanghai Baby* (1999) which has won her international acclaim as an Asian writer who has learned the current Western language or discourse tropes and has managed to represent voices of modern youth in China who are finding that the West truly is the best. She begins her novel by announcing herself to the world, a very egocentric thing to do:

My name is Nikki but my friends all call me Coco after Coco Chanel, a French lady who lived to be almost ninety. She's my idol, after Henry Miller. Every morning when I open my eyes I wonder what I can do to make myself famous. It's become my ambition, almost my *raison d'être*, to burst upon the city like fireworks. (Zhou: 1999: 1)

To use poststructuralist terms, her identity is Western, as in her names and heroes. It may be innocent of her to announce her worship of two very incompatible "idols" (even if a postmodernist would see no problem in such a conflation of ideas), but the rest of the novel seeks to bring these two together. Later, disaffected by her casual romances with a string of men, she consults a psychologist, David Wu, who informs her that because of her conflicting identities, she is doomed to live a chaotic life:

He told me that the clash between my natures as a female and as a writer doomed me to chaos. Artists have a decided tendency toward weakness, dependence, contradiction, naïveté, masochism, narcissism, Oedipal complex, and so forth. (Zhou: 1999: 35)

This sounds like a sophomoric catalogue of poststructuralist themes in Culture Theory that she accepts without question. She adds these to her identities of Coco Chanel and Henry Miller. She then admits that she wants to forget her past:

A lot of life can be assigned to oblivion, and as far as I'm concerned, the more unpleasant one's experiences, the faster they're forgotten. (Zhou: 1999: 36)

The pop psychologist then confirms her aim: "That's why you'll be a good writer. A writer buries the past with her words..." (Zhou: 1999: 36). There is nothing satirical about this exchange. It is offered at face value. The question of Coco's identity remains the main thread of the novel until in the last sentences she is confronted by an old woman:

"Who are you?" she asked in a low voice.

My heart fluttered. A feeling of tenderness and bitterness engulfed me, and for a moment I didn't know how to answer this tired and helpless old woman.

Who am I, indeed? Who am I? (Zhou: 1999: 283)

The question, repeated, is the answer: you are Coco and you are Zhou Weihui; the hero and this novel are who you are. You have fulfilled the promise or goal announced in your beginning chapter and burst onto the city with your pyrotechnic postmodern life and art. This novel is about itself and how it was written; it is a metafiction for a postmodernist. Your identity has been confirmed. A postmodernist reader-response to the quality of this novel would not progress to an analysis of the novel as a work of art. Instead, it would probably stop with an assertion that it is culturally significant as a modern voice in Chinese literature. It has succeeded in what it set out to do; it has played the game of literature and said very little. And the little it has said is as a sign of postmodernity in Western tropes that only confirm the identity of the writer as "new".

It is a sad fact that some students in the faculty where I work have wanted to use this novel as the basis of a thesis on language (not on literature *per se*). But when I have suggested to them, and to other Chinese students, that they consider writing on Gao Xingjian's work, they respond either with indifference or horror that he is just a political writer who is stuck in the Cultural Revolution. Not that they have actually read Gao: more often than not, they have only read about him in the press. This reaction, too, is a sad reality: a postmodern-minded reader doesn't have to actually read the text; he or she knows it from the press metacritically and in a hyperreal form.

Zhou's text has been presented here as a way of contextualizing the discussion I want to have about Gao Xingjian's art. Unlike Wei Hui (as her name is deformed in the Western publication of the English translation of her novel), Gao is a serious artist who offers a way out of this postmodern malaise that I

hope is apparent in the brief discussion of *Shanghai Baby* and its reception by Chinese students who are ignorant of Gao's work.

The pitfalls of playing the postmodernist game are apparent to Gao, as they should be to any serious artist or critic who is aware of the traditions of literature and art that have not passed or died:

The postmodern epochal signs announcing the death of the writer most likely have ended, and the literary revolutions that failed to terminate writers have instead come to an end. However, the problem is simply how literature will deal with the modern individual's existential conditions and the dilemmas confronting literature. Will the writer have the courage to present humanity's true predicament, and have writers found a more precise mode of literary expression? (Gao: 2012: 217-218)

This is a bold statement. Gao announces the death of postmodernism (and by extension it's literary critical twin poststructuralism), and sets out to confront the reality of the human condition that has been ignored in recent ideologies that have become an abstract system of signs without human content. The present essay seeks to explicate Gao's answers to the questions he asks here and to evaluate their lucidity, relevance and implications for the novel after the wave of poststructuralism finally passes in academe. Once clear alternatives to the present apparently totalizing ideas that haunt academic discourse and literature are shown to exist, then we may see that what we are currently doing is not the only, or even the best, way we can think and act.

By framing his point in terms of the need to rethink the value of literature and by implication of literary criticism, Gao is re-voicing the point made by the English poet, artist and rebel William Blake. In *Jerusalem* (a poem he worked on for over a decade and published in 1820), Blake encapsulates the task of the artist:

I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another Mans.
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.

Here, like Gao, Blake is in rebellion against the constrictions of formal or accepted spelling, punctuation and orthography as a way of announcing his rebellion, as well as against the dominant ways of seeing that he identified with Newton's science. His point needs to be kept in mind whenever we try to

confront great art: the artist must have his own vision and way of doing things if he is to create anything meaningful that will last and so communicate with others in later times. Blake only sold a few copies of *Jerusalem* in his own lifetime; commercially, he was a failure. But it did not worry or concern him. He had to follow his own voice. This is what great, significant artists have always done. In English literature, such a spirit is perhaps first voiced by Philip Sidney in the opening of his sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella* (1595) when he dialogues with his Muse about what he should write of Stella and the Muse responds: "look in thy heart, and write".

Not that there is much evidence that current literary critical modes would accept the validity of the voices I have been quoting against the postmodern approach to the study of literature. They would probably subscribe to Umberto Eco's attempt to impose the interpretations of the super-reader (model reader) on a text by enumerating what such a reader can make the text signify without any recourse to historical or aesthetic criteria from the past that view literature at least in part from the perspective of its creator: the artist. Eco's mechanistic and depersonalized view of the writer and reader may be glimpsed in the way he frames his theory of communication:

In a communicative process, there are a sender, a message, and an addressee. Frequently, both sender and addressee are grammatically manifested by the message: "*I tell you that...*"

Dealing with messages with a specific indexical purpose, the addressee is supposed to use the grammatical clues as referential indices (/I/ must designate the empirical subject of that precise instance of utterance, and so on). The same can happen even with very long texts, such as a letter or private diary, read to get information about the writer.

But as far as a text is focused *qua* text, and especially in cases of texts conceived for a general audience (such as novels, political speeches, scientific instructions, and so on, the sender and the addressee are present in the text, not as mentioned poles of the utterance, but as 'actantial roles' of the sentence...(see Jakobson, 1957).

In these cases, the author is textually manifested only (i) as a recognizable *style* or textual *idiolect* — this idiolect frequently distinguishing not an individual but a genre, a social group, a historical period (*Theory*, 3:7:6); (ii) as mere actantial roles... (iii) as an illocutionary signal (/I swear that/) or as a perlocutionary operator

(/suddenly something horrible happened.../). Usually this conjuring up of the 'ghost' of the sender is ordered to a symmetrical conjuring up of the 'ghost' of the addressee (Kristeva, 1970)...

In the following paragraphs I shall renounce the use of the term /author/ if not as a mere metaphor for textual strategy and I shall use the term Model Reader in the terms stipulated above.

In other words, the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin, 1962) to be met in order to have a macro-speech act (such as a text is) fully actualized. (Eco: 1979: 10-11)

Eco's evidence is only other people's theories that he seems to stitch together, often inappropriately, as in the case of Austin's Speech Act ideas which do not address the narrative issues Eco applies it to. The simplistic model of communication Eco evokes cannot accommodate the sociolinguistic realities of communication networks I have discussed elsewhere (Conlon: 2012). This long passage has been quoted here to contextualize the dehumanizing Theory that Gao's art is offered as an alternative to in what follows.

In a similar vein, Barthes' (1968) contribution to this game is to announce the death of the author; a dogma taken up uncritically by most students who are only exposed to poststructuralist reader responses, where all responses are valid in so far as anyone can have any theory of a work accepted based only on the ingenuousness of the reading. Barthes idea is basically an unacknowledged re-expression of Wimsatt's (1954) idea of "The Intentional Fallacy" in New Criticism. However, in place of the pronouncements offered in Poststructuralism, we need evidence based on coherent argument and actual words spoken or written by those we study or write about. The proof of an argument cannot be that it simply is supported by another theory when that other theory is based on yet another theory. This is the trap of the infinite regress where we can never find the actual data or source for what we assert.

In place of literary art and language, we are left with a hodge-podge of theories that have no evidence to test them against. Over the past few decades, as these theories have taken hold in academe, we seem to have lost sight of literature as an experience of the world that we confront whenever we read or write creative literature. We seem to have forgotten what we have been doing for millennia in terms of literary art. Instead of reading literature, we now seem to only read *about* literature in hyperreal meta-texts that masquerade as criticism. I have

discussed this trend elsewhere (Conlon: 2009: 266-294) so I will not rehearse this point again here except to say that we need to refocus on the questions we have dismissed.

The question needs to be re-asked: What is literature? That is the big question that Gao Xingjian sets out to answer in *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012). The question has been asked before. The words of the question are the title of Sartre's (1947) essay in which he argues for a literature that *engages* with society and reality: it is a literature of engagement. However, this answer seems to have been overturned by more recent critics who, subscribing to a postmodernist view, *disengage* the writer and the work from reality. They see the writer as dead and the text as a flat surface that is only an agglomeration of signs.

Against this disengagement, Gao suggests we need to *confront* the individual's existential situation by finding and voicing the individual's inner voice that affirms his or her existence as a human being. This is not a return to the past understood as a rejection of the present. Instead, through his Chinese roots, Gao is bringing a new (forgotten) voice into literature; one that includes the perceptions and representations of the world through the eyes and ears of Chan Buddhism, the literature of the Tang and Song Dynasties, and the idea that we must confront what is happening in the real world we live in. In this, he seeks to refocus attention on what has been overlooked or dismissed in contemporary Western aesthetics: the plight of the individual artist who is at odds with the prevailing commercial, political and theoretical views of art.

2

At the end of his latest book, *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012), Gao Xingjian hints at what has been present in his approach throughout the book and his life as an underground stream when He mentions a Chan monk who showed the way to confront the self by setting it free:

... the monk Huineng of Tang China also provided a profound understanding of the self that entailed eradicating the control of the self and resorting to observation. (Gao: 2012: 233)

The last paragraph in the book links these two tasks to our present condition and how literature offers a vital way of practicing self-control and observation.

This passage sums up the basic arguments Gao has been developing throughout the book:

To flee is thus to save oneself, but even more difficult to flee are the dark shadows of the inner mind of the self, and if one lacks sufficient awareness of the self, one will undoubtedly first be buried in the hell of the self; right until death may one not see the light. The hell of the self is delusion that can suffocate and destroy a person. However, literature can serve as a sobering medication that will arouse the conscience, promote deep introspection, and help one observe all the phenomena of the universe, as well as awaken people to investigate the darkness of the inner mind. Literature is helped by people's life experiences, but its insights far surpass all prognostications. (Gao: 2012: 235)

If the reader has some experience with the ways of Chan (Chinese Zen) Buddhism, then the way Gao writes and speaks will sound familiar. Chan is not about telling people what to think. In fact, as Gao observes, "Chan cannot be spoken" (Gao: 2012: 126). The problem for a critic who tries to bring out the roots of Gao's ideas in Chan terms is that such a procedure would be an un-Chan thing to do: the reader or student is meant to attain insights him or herself. This means that while much of what Gao says of art comes from Chan, he chooses deliberately not to spell out the connections. We feel the presence of these ideas below the surface of the texts in a way that helps us follow the stream of his thoughts as they flow from one point to another. To avoid a heavy-handed simplistic reading of Gao, I discuss some basic ideas of Chan in this section to prepare the reader's and my own mind to internalize them and join them in his or her own consciousness while reading this essay. In doing this, I am evoking a passage from *The Sutra of Hui Neng* (Humphreys and Wong: 1998), more commonly known as *The Platform Sutra*. In Chapter 2 of that work, Hui Neng advises that:

...the mind should be framed in such a way that it will be independent of external and internal objects, at liberty to come and go, free from attachment..." (Humphreys and Wong: 1998: Chapter 2)

In this freedom or *Prajna*, "our mind works freely without any hindrance" so that "we are in a position to know our own mind" and so to know without attachments. These attachments are the delusions we are captivated by:

...the wisdom of Enlightenment is inherent in every one of us. It is because of the delusion under which our mind works that we fail to realize it ourselves..." (Chapter 2)

With this freedom, we realize that "The capacity of the mind is as great as that of space". By reading *The Diamond Sutra* we can practice the wisdom we need to attain this purified state of mind so that the six Vijñanas (aspects of consciousness) will not be polluted when they pass through the six senses. What *The Diamond Sutra* explains is that we should not cling to false notions or forms (Laksanas) such as the concepts of an ego, a personality, a being and a life. By clinging to such notions as names, we lose our freedom to move or flow in the river or stream that leads to Nirvana. The *Sutta Pitaka* (Bodi: 2000) enumerates these senses as the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. It also explains that a Vijñana is a specific moment when we are conscious and that these moments flow together as a continual succession of conscious states to create continuity within our life now and between our various past and future lives. This is our karma understood as our tradition.

For Hui Neng, harnessing these thoughts is the key to wisdom:

A foolish passing thought makes one an ordinary man, while an enlightened second thought makes one a Buddha." (Humphreys and Wong 1998: Chapter 2)

To achieve this second thought as a Vijñana, we need to understand that we think in two stages: we have awareness and then perception of our awareness. In Chinese, the terms *wu nian* ("no thought") and *bu ran* ("unstained") explain that we must be detached from our thoughts so that they do not harm or pollute us.

When Gao's use of pronouns in his art and essays to dialogue with himself and his characters is understood in terms of Buddhist approaches to the act of perception, we may realize that there is much more going on in his narrative modes than meets the passing thought's eye: a first reading of his work may leave the reader with a sense of difficulty. However, when his art is read in terms of Chan Buddhism, we see in our second thought that he is deliberate and clear in what he does. In a similar way, his discussions of his works may be read in terms of the need to look at things twice, free from the attachments of the ideologies we may bring with our first reading: In *Aesthetics and Creation*, his emphasis on freeing himself from the ideologies of art, the market and politics

are intended as purifications of the mind in order to help the reader see his art on his own terms in what may be understood as his “second thoughts”. An awareness of the flow of Vijnanas also helps the reader understand the way Gao’s narratives flow and explain how this flow is an important part of his understanding of the traditions of literature and art as never-ending flows of individual consciousness in confrontation with the world.

When we read *Soul Mountain* (2000) with these thoughts in mind, we see that each chapter has no clearly marked contextual beginning or ending, that time and experience flows, and that there are no names of the narrator(s) or characters met along the Way. In place of the “life” of the narrator, we have the stream of his experiences as he moves towards enlightenment without judging those he encounters along the way. We hear in the novel (and elsewhere in Gao’s art) echoes of what he says in his essays and talks. These repetitions are intentional as second thoughts that constitute the ecosystem of Gao’s oeuvre as it continues to flow.

In Chapter 52 of *Soul Mountain*, the writer or narrator addresses himself as “you” to explain himself to himself:

In this lengthy soliloquy you are the object of what I relate, a myself that listens intensely to me – you are simply my shadow.

As I listen to myself and you, I let you create a she, because you are like me and also cannot bear the loneliness and have to find a partner for your conversation... But let others discuss or debate such matters, they are of no consequence for I who am engrossed in my journey or you who are on your spiritual journey.

Like me, you wander wherever you like. As the distance increases there is a converging of the two until unavoidably you and I merge and are inseparable. At this point there is a need to step back and to create space. This space is he. He is the back of you after you have turned around and left me...

I have established for myself this way of sequencing which can be thought of as a sort of logic or karma. Ways of sequencing, logic or karma have been established by people in this vast unordered world in order to affirm oneself, so why shouldn’t I invent my own sequencing, logic or karma?...

Philosophy in the end is an intellectual game...

Fiction is different from philosophy because it is the product of sensory perceptions. (Gao: 2000: 312-315)

All of the issues raised in this passage resurface in Gao's essays. This "sequencing" emphasizes that Gao aesthetics and his explanations of it come out of his art practices. In this way, his essays are an integral part of his art; they are not dangling bits that seem out of place in his oeuvre.

In this section, I want to bring together some other Chan voices, much as in traditional Chinese literature. For example, in *The Mustard Seed Garden* (Barnstone and Chou (1996) a compiler would bring together excerpts from a wide variety of sources to offer different perspectives on a single topic. In terms of Chinese painting, this aesthetic form is hinted at by Zhao Zhishen in *The Record of Talks about Dragons* (Barnstone and Chou: 1996) when he warns:

A magic dragon might coil or stretch out, and it changes without fixed shape. Although you perceive it vaguely – just one scale or one claw – you know its tail and head are there. But if you restrict yourself to what you see and take that as the whole dragon, then the painters and sculptors will have only scornful words to say to you. (Barnstone and Chou: 1996)

Offering excerpts from a variety of texts in no particular order is in itself a Taoist way of stimulating the aesthetic thoughts of readers who are invited to combine them in their own thoughts and so to give shape to their understanding. This is what Lu Ji says in his poem *The Art of Writing*:

Let different cadences be used in turn
like five colors in harmony,
and although they vanish and reappear inconstantly
and though it seems a hard path to climb,
if you know the basic laws of order and change
your thoughts like a river will flow in channels. (Barnstone and Chou: 1996)

To turn to the Chan texts: In "True Record of Baiyun", Baiyun explains to a student:

What can be said but not practiced is better not said. What can be practiced but not spoken is better not done.

When you utter words, you should always consider their end. When you establish a practice, you must always consider what it covers.

In this, ancient sages were careful about their words and chose their acts.

When they spoke they did not just demonstrate the principle of Chan, they used it to open the minds of students who were not yet enlightened.

When they established their practices, they did not just take care of themselves; they used them to educate students who were underdeveloped. (Cleary: 1989: 28-29)

This principle of Chan pedagogy may also be applied to writing and, by extension, to what Gao is seeking to do in his work. His acts are his art and his essays are about that art. We learn to read him through his use of Chan practices in his talks and essays. The sages opened their students' minds by letting them experience Chan in the way they were taught; we learn about Gao's art in the way he talks of it. It is necessary for the Chan sage to not only practice his art but to speak of it.

In a letter to Li Shanglao, Zhantang writes:

For wayfarers of all times, the right strategy for skillfully spreading the Way essentially lies in adapting to communicate. Those who do not know how to adapt stick to the letter and cling to doctrines, get stuck on forms and mired in sentiments – none of them succeed in strategic adaptation...

So we know that advanced people who know how to get through counter the ordinary to merge with the Way. They do not fail to change responsively by sticking to one thing. (Cleary: 1989: 40-41)

Here is adumbrated Gao's wariness of doctrines and formalism as his way of countering "the ordinary". It also explains, from a Chan perspective, his willingness to shift his focus during his communication with his audience; he does not try to set out in dry formal academic language what he is communicating. Instead, he reverberates his ideas by repeating them in different contexts within the same talk or from one talk to another. His avoidance of "sticking to one thing" may also be part of his interest in different arts.

For Zhantang, the task is to communicate with others in a sincere way by avoiding the pitfalls of those who only want to understand words as abstract things and not as embodied emotions:

You may get to the bottom of people's words yet fail to get to the bottom of their reason. You may silence their tongues yet fail to conquer their minds.

The difficulty of knowing people is what ails sages. This is especially true as monks in recent times who are bright do not strive to communicate with the hearts of other beings. (Cleary: 1989: 42)

This communication is understood in terms of sincerity by Yuanwu in a letter to Government Inspector Wu:

The study of the Way is in truthfulness, the establishment of truthfulness is in sincerity. Only after you can maintain inner sincerity can you free people from confusion; by maintaining truthfulness in yourself you can teach people to shed delusions...So we know that if sincerity is not whole, the mind cannot be safeguarded or trusted. (Cleary: 1989: 53)

Yuanwu's emphasis on sincerity relates to Gao's criticism of those who play word games without any purpose except self-aggrandizement. It also relates to his emphasis on sincerity in the artist and the academic; without inner sincerity, what we say cannot be true, as we are not true to ourselves.

Foyan, in "Collection of the Real Hearsman", says:

It is as though you have an eye that sees all forms but does not see itself – this is how your mind is. Its light penetrates everywhere and engulfs everything, so why does it not know itself? (Cleary: 1989: 171)

His advice on how to rectify this blindness is: "Search back into your own vision – think back to the mind that thinks. Who is it?" (Cleary: 1989: 171) What stands in the way of this inner perception is our tendency to rationalize: "As soon as you rationalize, it is hard to understand Zen. You will have to stop rationalizing before you will get it". (Cleary: 1989: 171) For Gao, such rationalizations seem to be common in postmodern art and criticism.

Mindlessness, emptiness, nothingness are not negative emotions; they are

positive states of being in oneself. There is no set beginning or end. This is advice not to cling to abstract concepts and empty names or terms. Awareness is seen as the flow of consciousness without external restraints by Fozhi in "Instructions to a Layman": "When the flow of consciousness does not dare to cling to objects, this is the power of awareness." (Cleary: 1989: 99)

Other Chan masters stress the ecology of the mind. Mazu explains:

The Way does not require cultivation – just don't pollute it.

What is pollution? As long as you have a fluctuating mind fabricating artificialities and contrivances, all of this is pollution.

If you want to understand the Way directly, the normal mind is the Way.

What I mean by the normal mind is the mind without artificiality, without subjective judgments, without grasping or rejection. (Cleary: 1989: 133)

Here, pollution of the mind as an environment is understood as the cluttering of our thoughts with ideas that are alien to a "normal mind" which does not seek complicated theories and "clever" difficult concepts invented as part of an academic game.

While these quotes seem to be a random collection of Buddhist precepts that may be alien to the reader, they are intended here to prepare the reader's mind for what will follow in the discussion of Gao's art. In this way, they are offered as a form of meditation that hopefully will prepare the reader to see Gao's intellectual and spiritual background and so feel empathy for his ways of seeing what he gives voice to. At the heart of his perception is a view of the individual which needs to be seen in terms of what is said in *The Diamond Sutra*:

Because in the minds of enlightened disciples there have ceased to exist such arbitrary concepts of phenomena as an entity, a being, a living being, or a personality. (Gemmell: 1912: 11-12)

These perceptions of reality partly explain Gao's lack of concern with a character's (or, more accurately, a pronoun's) physical descriptions too. The point to bear in mind is that these ideas form a deep spirituality in Gao's approach to literature and communicating about literature. Gao insists on the spiritual aspect of art that has been neglected or negated by more recent

mechanistic and abstract theories when they deny any value to art beyond being, in Wimsatt's term, a verbal icon.

By bringing such views into the discussion of literature, Gao makes a significant contribution to our understanding of literature. If there is to be a passing of the current dogmas of postmodernism and poststructuralism, we may need to look away from their source in the West and shift our perceptions to the East where other ideas have existed for centuries which seem, in Gao's eyes, to be compatible with the traditions of art in both the East and the West. It may take an outsider to see this, given the totalizing dominance of poststructuralism in Western universities and art circles.

3

Gao Xingjian's *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012) comprises a series of public addresses and essays composed between 1995 and 2011 in which he discusses his own aesthetics and how this has shaped the creation of his films, paintings, novels, short stories, poems, plays, theatre productions and music. The polymathic range and quality of his art makes Gao's achievement unique. It also makes the writing of a review or essay seeking to do justice to his achievement demanding.

While great art and the artists who make it are timeless, there is still significance in the timing of the publication of this book, coming as it does in Gao's seventy-third year of life. Not that *Aesthetics and Creation* is an apology or a retrospective. There is nothing defensive, tired or exhausted in the writings included in the work. What we have is the affirmation of an artist's way of exploring new avenues for art at a time of life when many artists may have settled into the routine of being a prisoner of their own reputation and achievements.

One way we may change is through our experience of learning. But what is learnt? That depends on the experience one brings to the reading. Without much knowledge of Chinese Buddhism (Chan or Zen), Taoism, Chinese literature, European literature, Peking Opera, dramaturgy, fine arts, music, the history of the Chinese language or experimental film, the reader of *Aesthetics and Creation* may feel out of his or her depth at first. Such a feeling in turn often leads to the impression that the work is difficult. If we succumb to this feeling and give up, we have only failed ourselves by forgetting that any original

work that seeks to be sincere and honest will challenge us. Whenever reader experiences important ideas, he or she is exhilarated and inspired to come away with a different perspective to the one brought to the reading in the first place. This is another way of saying that when we read something worthwhile, original, important, we change as a result of that experience if we can open our eyes or see through what Blake calls “the doors of perception”.

Difficulty, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder. If we are too lazy to think and too afraid to change our minds, we may only seek that which we already know or are familiar with, as a means of reassuring ourselves that we know the truth already. This search for writers who agree with us can become ostrich-thinking when we stick our heads in the sand and pretend that there is nothing out there to challenge us because we cannot see or hear it. This is tantamount to saying what I don't know can't hurt me. Ignorance may be bliss to a fool, but it can be no excuse for an artist or a student of art. I can only learn something that I don't already know; if I want to say that I am learning by simply repeating what I already know, then what I am really saying is that I have my dogmas and beliefs already and only seek to find them repeated in other people's words.

If John Dewey is right in *How We Think* (1910), that progress implies change and that learning is the way we develop by changing ourselves, then we must be willing to think about challenging ideas. While these ideas may be new to us, we should also remember that such ideas are not necessarily revolutionary new ideas to others. What makes something seem new is that we ourselves haven't learnt about it yet. Only in this way can one learn to think for oneself and so find the freedom to be and create anything.

But all too often in what William Golding refers to in *The Double Voice* (1996) as “this sad, homogenous world”, we are enticed or coerced by party-political ideologies, consumerist market forces or academic orthodoxy to surrender our independence by conforming to what other people tell us to think. This way, we feel comfortable and safe in expecting that others like us who have likewise unthinkingly surrendered their souls to the systems of others will recognize us and accept us and “our” ideas. The very real tragedy in all this is that we talk ourselves or let others talk us into the illusion that we are doing much thinking at all. In fact, we are being turned into drones or clones of other people who want their readers or students to think like them. Such a state of affairs is not only profoundly unethical; it is the basis of totalitarianism. And all

too often it is the basis of education systems that encourage the students only to ask the teacher to tell them what to think and do in order to obtain a pass grade and a piece of paper.

In contrast to this form of slavery, one of the critic's, the writer's, the reviewer's roles should be to raise doubts and to encourage dialogues, debates and arguments. If at the end of this process, agreement is reached, then it has been achieved on a voluntary, free basis. In this process, failure is not only an option; it is to be expected: we learn as much from our mistakes as we do from our successes. To risk such experiences takes courage. It may even seem absurd to those who fear thinking more than they fear death. Why risk criticism, failure and disagreement when, by conforming, I can win the praises of others who see themselves affirmed in "my" opinions. I must be right because "everyone" thinks like me, even though by "everyone" I mean those I read, not those I refuse to read because they think differently.

Gao understands the absurdity of failure which is in fact the most important lesson we learn. At the end of *Soul Mountain* (1990/2000), after the anonymous narrator has traveled across China from west to east by following the Yangtze River, he discovers:

The fact of the matter is I comprehend nothing. I understand nothing.

This is how it is. (Gao: 1990/2000)

This is what he knows. But for an impatient reader who wants more, this ending may fail to satisfy. Such a reader needs to remember what has been experienced and learned along the way. This process seems like a river as it is fed with the waters of other rivers and so accumulates experiences, insights and absorbs them into itself. In this way, we form a river-mind.

What the present essay hopes to record is what I have experienced and learned as I read *Aesthetics and Creation* by following or immersing myself in the flow of Gao's thoughts. As such, it is a record of a journey in the mind of what I call a great soul.

4

In the first chapter, "The Position of the Writer", Gao sees that for the past

hundred years, the writer has been caught between two evils: political ideologies and the market. Neither of these positions is conducive to art:

How the writer today can transcend political advantage, transcend the market, remain unwaveringly independent, and be able to speak out in his or her own voice is precisely the issue I would like to address. (Gao: 2012; 4)

He shows us how to do this by doing it, as Baiyun has advised the Chan student discussed above. (Cleary: 1989: 28-29)

These market and political forces threaten to drown out the writer's voice; they are two sides of the one totalitarian coin. Without a voice, communication, in the physical sense, is impossible. This focus on the voice is central to Gao's aesthetics. What the writer needs to find is his or her own voice which, though frail and isolated, is the only viable option if clichéd language is to be avoided. The search for authentic voices guides his travels in *Soul Mountain*:

Where are people's authentic voices to be found? Literature. It is only literature that can speak about the truth of human existence that politics is incapable of addressing or reluctant to speak about. (Gao: 2012: 7)

In writers such as Balzac and Dostoevsky, Gao finds:

...truthful portrayals of humanity and society, revealing entirely both the dilemmas of human existence and the complexities of human nature... (Gao: 2012: 7)

To create these portrayals, the artist needs to listen to his own voice as it is the "primary impulse for writing and it springs from perceptions that originate from a person's real feelings and experiences" (Gao: 2012: 8). The voice is what affirms the individual's own existence and the writer is a witness to this voice by providing testimonies to its existence (Gao: 2012: 8). For this voice to be sounded, it needs to be sincere, as Zhantang and Yuanwu stress, as discussed above in Section 2 of this essay. (Cleary: 1989:42, 53) We cannot perceive an insincere voice; such a term is an oxymoron.

The voices heard in *Soul Mountain* are reverberated in Gao's voice in *Aesthetics and Creation*. It is at once strident, confident and powerful. This need not be seen as a contradiction between strength and frailty:

The solitary individual who becomes aware of his or her own existence will want to speak out in his or her frail voice despite being situated within the problems of society, and this requires strength. This strength primarily stems from the self-belief of writers, and they must believe in the existence of this kind of literature, otherwise it would be impossible to persevere with this kind of writing. (Gao: 2012; 10)

What gives him the courage to go on is his belief in the necessity for literature as a record of this individual creative spirit. To speak out of the loneliness that comes with such aesthetics, the individual needs “cold eyes in order to dispassionately observe the living phenomena of the boundless universe” (Gao: 2012: 10). To prepare for this observation, Gao in part relies on Taoist and Chan (Zen) Buddhist forms of introspection and detachment. Later in the book, Gao recycles and expands on this idea:

The rationality in art must mature into a calm and detached vision that will light up burgeoning perceptions hidden in the darkness and disentangle emotions aroused by the creative impulse; only then does it start to solidify and only then is beauty manifested in images. (Gao: 2012: 117)

This vision may relate to Gao's interest in the *Diamond Sutra* (Lee: 2012: xix) where Buddhist ideas of how we perceive things is presented. Gao devotes a whole section (Gao: 2012: 124-129) to a meditation entitled “Time, Space, and Chan Buddhism” in which he addresses himself in the second person as “you”. This use of the second person may in part come from *The Diamond Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* where the Buddha in dialogue with his students often leads to the student Subhuti to answer the questions that the Buddha sometimes asks as well as his own questions. Gao explains:

...Chan cannot be spoken of and once spoken of no longer exists: it can be comprehended only by direct perception... Visual art is about making visible what is not visible.

Space and time in art are in the mind of the artist and this psychological space and time have endless changes... Chan is not the absence of everything but a realm in the mind.

In a painting, a small cosmos is established that goes past the frame of the painting, the frame merely provides a window. Even if the painter sees the external world through the window, it is at the same time a projection

of his inner mind. Moreover, from this window one can see a world that is totally of the inner mind. (Gao: 2012: 126-127)

By using the second person, Gao is talking as much to the reader as to himself; he is bringing the reader into his mind and putting his own mind into the mind of the reader. In this, he may be reading himself and encouraging the reader to do the same. He is also detaching himself from the ego and the self in a Buddhist perspective.

Much of what Gao says here of visual art may also be true of literature. The writer in his loneliness reaches out for the voices in his mind just as the narrator or narrators in *Soul Mountain* speak to themselves as they search out others as dialogue partners. In delving into one's inner mind or soul, one realizes or perceives one's own consciousness. This consciousness is what literature is: it represents the writer's or characters' understanding of the human world.

What distinguishes literature from philosophy for Gao is that artists translate or convert their thoughts into their characters' thoughts and experiences in specific situations and times. (Gao:2012:14). By honestly or truthfully achieving this most difficult form of expression, the writer records what real people did and thought. When we read the great works of the past or the present, we see that humanity has not changed; we see the same things in new spaces and times and so reaffirm our belief that there are truths the sincere artist is witness to.

The writer's "testimony passes through a light filter as he writes with an eye for what is aesthetically beautiful" and so "relies on aesthetic judgments alone" (Gao:2012:15). This visualized tradition of literature leads Gao to observe: "Literature is like a long river with an endless source, and writers are solitary travelers"(Gao: 2012: 16). He perceives this by infusing his personal experiences into his work. This is the source of what makes a valuable writer's work individual and unique (Gao: 2012: 17). Because such experiences are real, later readers can communicate with what the writer has to say. They know they have a dialogue partner because they can hear the writer's voice. The reader shares and includes his or her own experiences to produce associations and reflections. In this way, experience as a "sympathetic reaction is aroused" in the reader (Gao: 2012: 19).

This uniqueness of each one of us seems to be the heart of his aesthetics:

Poets and writers of different times bring different experiences and use different means to deepen and enrich one's understanding of humanity... These experiences, derived from the individual, are written in different languages, but transcending national boundaries and time they have become humankind's shared spiritual wealth. This is owing to the interconnectedness of human nature, and as long as people have had some rudimentary education, they will have the propensity for mutual communication, feelings and understanding. The writer transposes his aesthetic experiences into his works, and a sympathetic reaction is aroused when the reader of later times encounters these works. Further supplemented by the reader's own experiences, association and reflection are produced. It is in this way that the works left behind by a solitary individual have been transmitted to successive later eras, transcending national boundaries, transcending national cultures, and transcending languages. This is the enduring achievement of the writer. (Gao: 2012: 18)

By looking into our own hearts and telling the truth about what we find there, we will be communicating what is human in us and so others who read us will share our feelings and ideas when they too read us with honesty and sincerity. Gao's message is that we are our own masters:

When the writer recognizes the predicament of the individual in society as well as his own limitations, makes choices according to his capabilities, and remains resolutely independent, he will not find it hard to win an abundance of freedom in the realm of literary creation that he controls. The writer emerging from the miasma of twentieth-century ideology no longer needs to attach himself to politics because literature is an affirmation of humanity's awareness of his own existence and basically transcends practical benefits. And this has always been so. (Gao: 2012: 19)

However, ideologies seek to imprison us in others' political, commercial or theoretical views. By resisting them, we assert our freedom. It is no accident that Gao reminds us that the creative writer *controls* his "literary creation", not the critic who seeks to impose his abstract meaning on the work of art in conformity with prevailing "empty theory" (Gao: 2012: 158). In contrast to such artificial complexity, Gao's argument, in his own words about his paintings, is an "extremely simple, quite unfashionable, but highly matter-of-fact statement" (Gao: 2012: 158).

From this opening chapter, Gao makes clear that the artist “documents experience” to create “a testimony left on the existential situation of human beings” the understanding of which “may be called consciousness” (Gao: 2012: 13). As a document and as testimony, literature’s “most fundamental criterion” is to understand the “truth of human life” and to strive “to approximate truth” (Gao” 2012: 14). The writer testifies to his times about what he sees and hears through his consciousness. He creates this consciousness in his writing. Such “testimony passes through a light filter as the artist writes with an eye for what is aesthetically beautiful”, as literature “relies on aesthetic judgments alone” stimulated by emotional responses in the artist that are shared by the reader or viewer (Gao: 2012: 16).

In the remaining ten chapters of his book, Gao develops these themes in terms of how he practices his art in its different embodiments. For some readers and critics, the way he proceeds to do this may seem puzzling: Why does he feel the need to explain his aesthetics and how he realizes it in his creations? The simple answer is that most of the chapters were originally commissioned by organizations or conference committees. It would be a particularly arrogant artist who refused to explain his art upon request. It would also go against the grain of Gao’s argument that the artist is a communicator, and against Chan ideas of the teacher.

A more immediate reason for Gao’s responses to requests for talks is hinted at in his frequent dismissals of postmodernism in the book. He is aware that the dominant literary ideology of postmodernism would seek to subsume his work in its own theory of art and language. By explicitly rejecting this ideology, he makes it nearly impossible for a postmodernist to take over the role of explaining his art. Almost. Although he does not mention them by name, he would be aware that postmodernists have already begun to take over the ways Chinese write and think about novels. One example is Jessica Yeung (2008) who writes to encapsulate Gao in this trap:

Derrida’s ultimate separation of *logos* and meaning formulated in the idea of *differance*, has become the central theory of poststructuralist linguistics, and the heart and soul of postmodernist writing. In spite of this problem of language, it remains the main means of communication between human beings, leading inexorably to the isolation of the individual.

There are a number of remarks in *Soul Mountain* directly echoing these philosophies that large parts of human experience are not translatable into language... Sometimes these stories explode into surrealist images, sometimes they take the form of unpunctuated utterances. They often frustrate the attempt for subjective reality to be logically communicated to another person. *Linguistic communication that depends on a fixed grammatical and lexical system is taken as an inadequate means to convey subjective reality, which is not defined by language.* This is why “You” and “She” have tried to communicate through telling each other stories, which is actually a means of expressing feelings and emotions, they still fail to reach each other and finally end up parting on bad terms. In fact, this question of language’s (in)capability to convey reality is an issue so frequently brought up in the narrative that it dominates the meta-narrative, the third level of reality in the novel. It is a level on which the text is aware of itself, a reality beyond both the external and psychological realities of the narrative. (Yeung: 2008: 89. Emphasis added)

Here, instead of focusing on the novel as a work of art that speaks the truth about human existence (Gao: 2012: 7), the critic has taken it upon herself to speak for the writer and his text. She is trying to give things names and fit these things into forms; in this, she would not see the Buddha’s warnings against such a procedure in *The Diamond Sutra* as well as his warning against the use of “concepts”. One feels, as is often the case with this type of criticism, that the theory is a surrogate aesthetics: a theory and its application are deemed to be beautiful (or at least, pleasing) in place of the text that they distort. There are no quotes offered as evidence; evidence is superfluous when one has Derrida’s theory as testimony to the truth of what one asserts. Nor does there seem to be any awareness of what Gao has said outside his novel regarding postmodernism, which is understandable given the postmodern theory that the author is dead and has no right to speak for his art. In place of argument and evidence from a close reading of the novel, there are only assertions of theory. Instead of reading the novel as a communicative act, the theorist has already made her mind up about the structures she will find there. This is anti-intellectual and poor methodology. Ignorance of Gao’s writings both in the novel and elsewhere should be grounds for dismissing Yeung’s reading in any literary critical school except the hyperreal one that accepts Derrida’s ideas uncritically, as the prevailing dogma, especially in the italicized sentences that seems to cling to

Derrida's outmoded insistence on the idea of *langue* as the structure of language, even when used by real people in real life.

Yeung's misreading of *Soul Mountain*, while perhaps predicted in poststructural theories of reader-response, serves to contextualize the importance of Gao's uncompromising rejection of postmodern theory. If an artist is to remain free to write, then that artist cannot place his or her art in such anti-artistic frames that fail to recognize the processes of perception of reality and the representation of those aesthetic perceptions by the individual artist who is concerned with the individual's experience.

To ward off the postmodernists' attempts to subsume his work in their theory, Gao makes a series of bold, even aggressive, statements such as:

Some later-generation *nouveau roman* writers went further and turned fiction into intellectual discussions, and by overturning story, plot, and characters and deconstructing the narrator and narrative language, they turned fictional creation into an intellectual game. Fiction was thus transformed into a text about concepts... That fiction had been reduced to this, of course, was related to the ideology behind so-called modernity. The introduction of social revolution and historical evolutionary theory, with its continuing revolution and its perpetual overturning into the domain of literature and the arts, led not to creation but instead to the withering and annihilation of art and literature. Once fiction turned into an intellectual game that could be written in any manner, it lost its social and human consciousness and could not leave behind anything worth a second reading. Instead, there was only a widespread proliferation of vacuous deconstructionist literary theories everywhere. (Gao: 2012: 23)

Responses such as this are in nearly every chapter of the book. In a wider sense, these statements fit what Gao is saying about the distinction between philosophy and literature: the philosopher constructs his own system while the artist "confronts the vibrant human world and strives to confer upon it an aesthetic expression." (Gao: 2012: 194)

Later in the same chapter, titled "Environment and Literature", Gao repeats the idea of confrontation when he describes what literature does:

Literature confronts human beings, individual concrete living human beings, and even when they are fabricated they are derived from the writer's personal experiences and perceptions. (Gao: 2012: 196)

The artist learns about literature from literature. He reminds us that literature “has objectives and methods that are informed by literature” (Gao: 2012: 197). He then offers an overview of the history of literature and concludes that literature is a spiritual search, which in Buddhist terms is an attempt to find the Way:

Looking back like this at the history of literature, one can see that all these are divorced from practical interest and are humankind's spiritual search, a need of the inner mind. (Gao: 2012: 197)

This need is paramount, given the predicament we are all in:

Individuals are increasingly powerless in their life environment. In addition, in confronting the day-to-day worsening of the ecological environment, the raucous cacophony of politics, the all-pervasiveness of the media and the all-intrusiveness of the market and advertising, this pitiful, powerless, and helpless individual is indeed insignificant. So how can the real voice of this insignificant individual be heard? (Gao: 2012: 198)

Again, the individual, like the artist, is seen in confrontation with things. This confrontation is understood in terms of the absurd chaos of existence: “The total chaos of the self has not only created disasters for others but has often led to the destruction of the self” (Gao: 2012: 199). Literature is where these chaotic forces can be resisted in order to create a voice that confronts its environment by communicating with others:

It is literature, and literature alone, that can give a voice to such an individual and his true perceptions... Literature is neither replaced by political authority nor eroded by time, so it can be read and reread, and humankind's experiences and the understanding gained from these can be transmitted over generations. (Gao: 2012: 198)

This is why we continue to read the works of the past and those contemporary works that confront our situation:

Humanity turns to literature because it is only through aesthetics that one can relieve and transcend this anxiety and by so doing affirm one's existence... The person affirmed in literature is made into another person or persons. With the help of aesthetics, the writer transforms his experiences and perceptions into different characters, and by doing this he sublimates his inner anxieties. (Gao: 2012: 199)

He reminds us that while Sartre saw others as hell, “the self in the eyes of others likewise is hell” (Gao: 2012: 199). This is the chaos we are all in. Out of this chaos comes creativity:

However, the magic of literature lies in the making of another person during the creative process. This helps the writer become detached, allowing him to observe with an eye transcending himself, a third eye, an intelligent eye, that will inform his writing. Therefore, the creative process of writing literature helps the writer purify his inner mind. (Gao: 2012: 200)

Without this ecology of the mind, we cannot create beauty or ourselves in the characters we embody; until we clear our perception, we cannot see things as they really are.

In confronting the issues raised in life, the writer will also come into conflict with the state in which he has his cultural roots. This gives the writer three options: remaining silent, conforming, or fleeing (Gao: 2012: 201).

It is in this context, that Gao’s problems with postmodernism fit:

These literary views and theories that contained only arguments turned literature into conceptual games and resulted in a variety of game rules but apparently not any worthwhile works.

This sort of historicism is also an ideological product and has nothing to do with literature. The creation of the writer is always of this instant, confronting the works of predecessors as references and invariably referring to them. There is no literature without foundations. The writer confronts works of the past, and whether he likes or rejects them, they construct a series of coordinates for establishing his own path. (Gao: 2012: 203)

It is important to understand the traditions of literature because it is only in working within them that a writer can keep contact with what I have elsewhere referred to as the underground streams (Conlon: 2003). Gao puts it this way:

The testimonies left by literature can never be passé. If the writer exhausts heart and mind and does leave behind a penetrating portrayal of life at a particular time and place, the work will be enduring. Literary works are more truthful than the histories written by authorities. Those grand official histories are rewritten time and again along with changes in

political power, and just as in some game, masks are perpetually changed to legitimise power. However, once a literary work is published, it is not altered because this is the great pact between the writer and history. Humankind is thus provided with a history of the soul that is more truthful. (Gao: 2012: 203)

This sounds very close to T.S. Eliot's view of tradition's value:

The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious not of what is dead, but of what is already living. (Eliot: 1932: 22)

Such views on the value of tradition are discarded by the poststructuralists who see traditions as things to be overturned to make way for new, disconnected and hyperreal theories. For Gao, literature that remains true to the perception and representation of the human spirit will survive the test of time and so will communicate with others in future just as the writer of that literature has communicated with real people in his own time and with real writers who focused on the human spirit in the past. From such a view point, it seems understandable that Gao is hostile to the dominant forces of postmodernism and poststructuralism that he senses are anti-humanistic. The constant re-theorising of these schools has only led, in Gao's view, to revolutions in literary theory for their own sakes, not to a serious confrontation in terms of seeing what is what in the individual's life as it really is experienced. Abstract thinking is the path to hyperreality where we can pretend that we have all the answers; but, in fact, we are only perpetuating the hell we are actually in, not confronting it.

This may sound bleak, but it need not be so. Gao sees that there are cycles in history and art. He ends his talk with a vision of a new renaissance which has much in common with a Buddhist view of cyclical or incarnate time:

This is a world shrouded in the dark shadows of the last day. The economic crisis and the decline of the West show no signs of slowing down, and the so-called newly rising nations simply follow the old circular road of capital accumulation already traveled by the West. When the next cycle of renaissance in literature and the arts will come about, no

one can say, but I believe that it is literature, and literature alone that can provide inspiration. (Gao: 2012: 205)

By remaining in contact with the traditions that postmodernism seeks to continuously overthrow, the writer is maintaining the literary environment in a way to preserve the hope of rebirth. We cannot learn from a past that we deny or are blind and deaf to. This is the significance of art as a communication network from the past to the future. It can only work when artists tell the truth about individual human beings in their creations. And this can only happen if artists have the ability to perceive these truths and represent their perceptions in works that are communicative in intent, not divorced from the possibility of contact with the actual perceptions and communications a writer experiences.

However, while we avoid such confrontations with reality, as we are abstracted in postmodern theories that are not really aesthetics, we cannot break free from the hyperreality we have constructed around ourselves. In the words of *The Dhammapada*:

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.

If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart. (Mascaró: 1971: 1)

In Buddhist terms, this spiritual pollution is dross over our eyes blinding us to the power of our minds which are shaped by our past. The suffering we experience anesthetizes our minds into surrendering to the forces of ideology that keep us ignorant of our past by telling us it is all a game and of no consequence when we cannot see the truth because there is no truth except the apparently beautiful logic of our theory. Instead of confronting the actual language of a work, we only have to apply our theory like a meaning-making machine and, presto, outcome the meaningless meanings our theory predicted: we see only what we want to see. This is a form of paranoia.

When criticism denies the voice of the writer as a dialogue partner, it is also denying the voices of others who live in that voice. These voices are not only the traditions he draws on, but also the dialogues he creates in his art. Such criticism is necessarily complicit in the silencing of the one thing that gives us

hope against the forces that threaten to crush us, whether they are of the state, the market or the academy. While the writer's art focuses on the perception and representation of the individual, the critic's role in the communication network that keeps the art alive is to hone his or her skills in perceiving the artist's actual work in its individuality and then representing that work through the prism of his or her own consciousness. But when art and criticism are sick with the postmodern malaise of hyperreality, and when the only voice we recognize is our own as we project our reading onto a writer we have defined as voiceless, then we are in no position to do these things.

5

Is Gao a voice in the wilderness whose warnings fall on deaf ears? Being a prophet in one's own country is always a thankless if not dangerous thing to be. If we in the academies have lost our true voices as communicators with writers (as we have subscribed to the death of the author dogma), we can regain our voices by attending to the ways Gao represents his own perceptions and art in *Aesthetics and Creation*. In this work, Gao reminds us of what we seem to have forgotten: how to think and talk about art in ways that maintain its ecological significance in this absurd world we have made worse by our self-imposed abstract thinking.

I have discussed elsewhere (Conlon: 2007) how Camus sees the absurdity of thinking in absurd ways about our actual absurd condition: that way is truly suicidal. In a passage that seems very close to Gao's position, Camus writes in the first person about the need for freedom in an absurd world:

I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don't know that this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand... If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation... And what

constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. (Camus: 1955: 51-52)

In contrast to abstract theories that leave us in a hyperreal condition, we must think clearly about absurdity. By a close reading of Gao's work, we may relearn what we have been taught to forget in postmodernism and poststructuralism. If we can learn, we have hope. Instead of clumsily trying to read Gao as a follower of Camus, we need to recognize that Gao arrives at similar responses to the world through his understanding of Chan Buddhism; there is more than one path to enlightenment and when we put them in dialogue with each other, we may gain fresh insights into our real condition.

Here, Gao is one of the new teachers who has managed to create outside the confines of conventional contemporary theory. In his work, there are adumbrations of the new cycle of renaissance, coming not from the West but from a Chinese writer living in exile in the West who has found himself a literary exile in his new country, France: the home of poststructuralism.

One way Gao is not a voice in the wilderness is through the quality and variety of his achievements in a wide range of the arts. We hear his voice in his plays, novels, paintings, films, and in his public talks and essays. He has a very real presence in the world of art. These achievements will survive the test of time, long after postmodernism has disappeared as yet another movement and become a footnote in literary history, much as Stalinist socialist realism has become a footnote.

6

If all an artist has in order to resist the totalizing chaos of this world are his aesthetic perceptions and his voice which enables him to represent his world, then expression of these ideas must be communicated to others in ways that protect the artist's environment: his artistic creations.

In *Soul Mountain*, Gao seems to demonstrate the Way (Tao) to read and think about any of his works. He does this through the example of the Way followed by the anonymous narrator who is presented through the use of the first, second and third person voices: sometimes the narrative is told in the first person and

at others it is in the second or third person. The novel moves like a river as the narrator travels across China: from the mountains in Sichuan, it flows east along the Yangtze River to the sea as the narrator searches for the real China and finds spiritual enlightenment. He moves by acting as a kind of ethnographer, recording the ways of real people before they disappear. Going with the flow of the narrative, the reader, in a sense, surrenders to the work of art and thus immerses him or herself in it. There also seems to be a deliberate inversion of the direction of movement in *Journey to the West*, which likewise deals with Buddhist and Taoist searches for enlightenment. By returning to classic Chinese literature, Gao suggests that the Ways of art are there to be seen and experienced, if we can learn to open our minds to them.

As all of Gao's works connect with each other in an artistic ecosystem, we can expect to hear and see things in one work that we have already experienced in other works. While this repetition may seem off-putting to a particularly impatient Western reader, it seems to be a pattern in Buddhist as well as Taoist literature. It can be found in *The Dream of Red Mansions*, a novel cited by Gao as one of his influences. Various versions of the novel's writing are retold from different Buddhist and Taoist perspectives. It is also present in the novels of Mo Yan where stories from one work are retold in other works. In Thai literature, the work of Pira Sudham also unfolds in this shape of recycling where stories and whole novels are absorbed in *Shadowed Country* (2005), the story of the reincarnation of the hero Prem Surin. (See Conlon: 2011 for a discussion of how the repetition of previously published stories and whole novels creates a feedback effect that helps to shape and maintain the ecology of the work of art). Such recycling or rebirth may create an internal tradition within a writer's oeuvre as the karma or logic of the flow of experience.

One fundamental belief about writing that comes out of the idea of rebirth is that words, like people, do not die once they are written. In *Soul Mountain*, the narrator seeks to save the traditional ways of China by recording them in his writings too. In one sense, he is retelling the stories told to him by those he meets along the way. By retelling them in writing, Gao is preserving them. He is also using them as inspiration for his art which seeks to embody the voices of the China he experiences. His achievement in the novel is to represent the ways enlightenment comes out of the chaotically experienced encounters he has had.

The flow of experience that is not explained or contextualized through external narrative interference may be seen in the segue between chapters in *Soul*

Mountain. One example taken at random is the bridge between Chapters 19 and 20:

Tell me a story,

When the great flood broke out, only a small boat was left in the world, a brother and his younger sister were in the boat, they couldn't bear the loneliness and huddled close together, only the flesh of the other was real, could verify one's own existence,

You love me,

The girl was seduced by the snake,

The snake is my big brother.

20

I am taken by an Yi singer to several of the Yi camps in the mountain range behind Caobai. (Gao: 1990/ 2000: 116-117)

The marked absence of conventional punctuation (there are no quotation marks or full stops indicating a clear ending to each utterance in the passage from Chapter 19) creates a sense of the narrative's flow in the mind of the narrator until the various voices seem to blend in his inner speech. The result is a kaleidoscopic sense of perception (see Conlon: 2012 for a discussion of this metaphor) which sees and represents many aspects of reality simultaneously. There is no preparation in Chapter 19 for the upcoming trip to the Yi camps; it just occurs, as in a flow or in flux. These apparently sudden shifts in point of view are reminiscent of the ways Chan Buddhists narrated their teachings; they discourage us from clinging to a sequence of events by agglomerating them into what Camus sees as "this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion" which is a denial of the chaos he suggests we must confront (Camus: 1955: 51). They are intended to stimulate the listener or reader to make the connections for him or herself and so gain some insight by recreating the intended meaning in his or her own mind. In the language of the Tipitaka, dharma is the encapsulation of enlightenment that can only be gained by being directly perceived (*sandithika*) as a personal experience (*ehipassika*) to be understood in each one's own way (*paccattani veditabo vinnuhi*). Suzuki (1961: 61) explains, "This meant that the Dharma was to be intuited and not to be analytically reached by concepts."

From my own personal reading experience of *Aesthetics and Creation* some themes emerge which I will now follow as they recur throughout the text. These themes are not separable, at least in my mind; they are entangled like so many voices that, taken together, create a polyphonic effect that emerges from a close reading as the mind of the reader organizes itself in response to the mind of the writer. In doing this, I am trying to find the voice of narrative language in my own terms, as my own *chippassaka*, based on an intuitional understanding produced through a meditation on the text as I read it following the order in which it is presented. However, I am not claiming that I have experienced *satori* in regards to Gao or anything else for that matter.

7

In Chapter 2, “The Art of Fiction”(Gao:2012), Gao specifies his own approach to rendering the stream of consciousness:

The articulation of dream, hallucination, and the dim impulses of the inner mind, or even of ephemeral feelings and images must all be contained in sequential sentences. (Gao: 2012: 30)

He calls the resulting writing “a flow of language”(Gao: 2012: 30). This flow may be perceived in Buddhist terms of letting go of things, not clinging to them, when one enters the stream and moves towards enlightenment. (See a discussion of this in section 2 above). Such a flow cannot be captured through conventional patterns of language; it requires:

...returning to the source of language – that is, when constructing a sentence, one must listen intently to the language of the inner mind, even if it is not spoken aloud, because the sound of the language is linked to the words and sentences, and is the starting point of language. The basic substance of language is sound. (Gao: 2012: 31)

This is why Chan Buddhist approaches to perceiving and understanding the sound of the inner mind are so vital in his work: if the written language is “severed” from the sound, “the language will perish” (Gao: 2012: 31). He sees that it is “the spoken language of everyday life that is the basis of fiction creation” (Gao: 2012: 31). As Mabel Lee observes in her introduction to Gao’s book, this means that Gao turned away from all the Western influenced grammatical reforms to written Chinese language that have occurred since the

1920s in order to standardize it. (Lee: 2012: xx). The “living language” used for thinking and speaking does not have these restrictions.

By hearing this language, one can make the mood of the thinking audible and the language changes with each change in the flow of the mood. What may sound ungrammatical to a reader not used to the living language in fiction or to the ways of Chan Buddhism, is actually the flow of language in the inner mind. By hearing and feeling this flow, we can perceive through aural means what is “uttered” by the inner mind and so enter “deep consciousness” (Gao: 2012: 32). He refers to this language in terms of its “musical feel” (Gao: 2012: 31). Such music comes from changes in the tones of spoken language as well as from its mood and rhythm that are “linked to specific psychological feelings” (Gao: 2012: 31). The living language is the recording of these changes in mood and rhythm that come with changes in emotions (Gao: 2012: 32). To achieve this, Gao suggests a technique that seems clearly linked to Buddhist meditation and to the perception of reality as in a constant state of flux:

In searching for this sort of language, it is important first to concentrate and then to listen intently. This does not mean only describing the character’s lovely face and smiling countenance but also requires focusing one’s gaze inwards and listening intently to what is uttered by the inner mind. (Gao: 2012: 32)

He links this search to the author’s attitudes towards his narrators and characters: how can we listen when our attitude towards a character is interfering with the communication? This attitude comes from the author’s sentiments manifested in aesthetic responses such as seeing the characters as tragic or comic, beautiful or ugly, and so on. To maintain a clear attitude, the author must “keep the necessary distance from the character” (Gao: 2012: 31) by listening and observing intently. Again, the approach is Buddhist:

In other words, the author must purify himself and extricate himself from the total chaos of the self to allow for lucid thinking. And by using a pair of wise eyes, or what might be called a pair of neutral eyes, he will be able to concentrate and listen as he immerses himself in the character’s inner mind and grasps the right tone of language to manifest the feelings of the character. To listen or to look are mere actions that have no other implications, but in highly concentrated observation and intense listening, the attention of the observer endows the object with meaning. This form of observation brings with it aesthetic judgments. (Gao: 2012: 32)

Meaning is given to this chaos through intense observation, a form of meditation, which in turn allows for aesthetic judgments and the development of a spiritual, poetic sense. Expanding on these points, Gao suggests that to relate “the boundless chaos and subconscious of the dream world”, the writer uses the “process of telling so it is best to resort to speech when dealing with the inner mind, which eludes description” (Gao: 2012:35). This process is the flow of language he has already described; but now he adds that this flow can be produced because our concentration and focus are constantly shifting or in flux. However, he differentiates between telling and narrating:

The fiction writer must separate the telling of events and the narrating of the character's memories: these are different levels. The latter will have retreated to the psychological level and is in fact a recreation of past circumstances that are coloured by sentiment. Especially when memories are derived from the narrator's perspective, the thoughts produced by both memory and wish are often chaotically interwoven. (Gao: 2012: 35)

What shapes the language of art as “purposeful behaviour”(Gao: 2012:35) is the making of these shifts and decisions about our perceptions and how these render the psychology of characters. When we understand narration in these terms, we can see that it actualizes art or embodies it in its deliberate actions.

He returns to ideas he has already discussed in this chapter or talk when he reveals more about how aesthetics and perception are linked in art when the author makes judgments about a character's tragic or comic aspects of experience:

When focusing and listening to the characters, the author will give such aesthetic judgments, and moreover, these will be realised in the narrative language of the fiction. Hence fiction is also a unity of perception and aesthetics. (Gao: 2012: 38)

After re-contextualizing his argument, he expands it by linking it to *Soul Mountain*, Chan Buddhism and the varieties of language we use consciously or subconsciously:

The aesthetics of fiction can also gain entry to the spiritual realm via the perceptual level. The realms attained in poetry can likewise be attained in fiction. The frog appearing in the snow in *Soul Mountain* constructs an image, and this sort of enlightenment is similar to a Chan Buddhist realm. Perception can transform into enlightenment, thought can be sublimated

into the spiritual and conscious observation and contemplation of existence do not lead only to religion but can also lead to aesthetics. By becoming fully immersed in discovering the functions of language from the subconscious and the preconscious to the conscious, from the mental to the spiritual, from nonlanguage information to supralanguage spiritual enlightenment, it seems that the writer will find the language for expression. It is in this respect that the linguistic art of fiction is far from exhausted, and it is in this that its magic lies. (Gao: 2012: 38-39)

In making these observations based on his perceptions, the writer gains and provides to the reader aesthetic pleasure and spiritual release (Gao: 2012:39). The spiritual and the aesthetic together may lead to enlightenment. The image of immersion also evokes the Buddhist idea of entering the stream that leads to enlightenment. Each of these experiences is unique and transcends any superficial commonality or identity through race, ethnicity or culture. In this way, each work of art is unique (Gao:2012:39).

By writing this chapter in a circular way in which ideas are re-circulated and restated in different contexts of his argument, Gao is inviting his reader or audience to immerse themselves in the flow of his thoughts. What may seem chaos at first is resolved by the reader going with the flow of his narrative in a way that accepts the flow of language as more than the stream-of-consciousness. For Gao, the language of the novel forms the overall narrative flow that has a particular Buddhist implication of the Way to enlightenment. Everything is absorbed in an aesthetic experience that cannot be pulled apart or articulated in scientific or overly rationalistic terms. There is no linear beginning or ending to the processes or Way that Gao is interested in following.

To have explained his art in other, more commonly acceptable, linguistic or critical terms would have been to fit his view of art as a unique spiritual and aesthetic experience into words that by their history are suggesting a more ordered, homogenous view of language and art. To have done so would have been to undercut his argument: we cannot explain our rejection of an ideology by using the terms and methods of that ideology to explain our life outside that ideology. In Blake's words, we would remain enslaved in another's system.

In Chapter 3, Gao discusses one of his plays, *Wild Man* (1985). The matter of this play, the wild man and an ecologist's random thoughts as he searches for him, anticipates the narrator's search for the wild man in *Soul Mountain*, as an

ethnographic researcher looking for a free person in the wild who has not been socialized in the China of the researcher's day. Gao sees the stage as "a specifically constructed environment" that does not have "to present portrayals of real life" (Gao: 2012: 45). He is critical of realism in the theatre as audience goers come to see performance, not life as they already know it. He sees performance theatre in Italian impromptu comedy and in "Asia's traditional opera" (Gao: 2012: 45) where actors don't conceal that they are actors performing publicly recognized acts. He calls for "theatre creation" to include "the performance methods of song, dance, masks, face make-up, magic, and acrobatics" (Gao: 2012: 45). This performance approach creates an atmosphere where the ecologist's random thoughts flow throughout the performance. He sees in this open flow a way of making the play into a musical work performed or created on a stage understood as a "hypothetical environment" (Gao: 2012: 46).

It requires only that there be a connecting thread in the play: in *Wild Man* it is the ecologist's random thoughts and musings that thread through the entire play. This flow of consciousness has enormous freedom, and intersected by a complexity of polyphonic constructions, the play is somewhat like a symphony. Finding it impossible to divide the work into the scene sequences of conventional plays, I decided to write it up as three musical movements. (Gao: 2012: 46)

To create this musicality, the actor needs to purify or cleanse his "usual voice" (Gao: 2012: 48), the voice of the real world. This cleansing also results in the voices used in Peking Opera. He then needs to enter "the mind of a neutral actor" through this voice; there is no "I" in his performance, but a "he" or third person mask. This allows him to speak to the character he is performing as "you":

At this time, the consciousness of self has transformed into a third-eye that observes and modulates the performance of the actor, who has become *you* and has thus gained an abundance of freedom on the stage. (Gao: 2012: 49)

In transforming himself, the actor becomes like a storyteller who can enter the character or step back from it at any time. In this sense, the actor is following the same process Gao has described in terms of the narrator and the writer in the previous chapter. There is a process of detachment and purification required of both actor and writer. The Chan Buddhist aspects of this distancing from

oneself in order to detach and purify the mind have been discussed in section 2 of this essay. But another factor is introduced: the deliberate exposure of the role being played by the actor:

When the person acting does not conceal his actor status, he will be publicly acting his role. At that particular time the actor has an attitude towards the role he is acting that determines the strategies he uses for his presentation, and these presentation strategies also constitute performance. To begin with, the actor must have ample psychological space, and the play must provide for this performance space. This allows the actor to adopt a certain attitude towards the character, mocking or sympathising with him... (Gao: 2012: 50)

In such a space, the actor can solicit responses from the audience in terms of feedback. By achieving such a relationship, the actor is communicating in two ways at the same time: he is communicating with the character he is performing and with the audience he is performing for. This can only be achieved if he empties himself by transforming into a “neutral actor” (Gao: 2012: 50). Here, as in *Soul Mountain*, Gao uses the switch in pronouns to create this space in the actor and on the stage:

Now if what is spoken onstage is changed to the third person *he*— both in dialogues and monologues — everything is transformed into a narrative, and the distance between actor and character is immediately established. The actor on stage will also of course be able to talk about his character, whether or not he is acting, and he will be able to enter or exit his role with great ease.

This was how my play *Between Life and Death* was written. From beginning to end it consists of a woman’s monologue, and the third-person *she* is used throughout, so that the person facing the audience is not the character in the play, but a female actor narrating before others, presenting and performing her character. (Gao: 2012: 51)

He defends this use of pronouns to replace “named” characters against any poststructuralist attempt to decode them as mere signs:

To replace characters with pronouns does not mean that the characters in a play are thus simplified by becoming a certain personal pronoun *you*, *I*, *he*. This *you*, *I*, and *he* are not mere signs; instead, they are cut into the experience of the character from different angles to reflect different facets of the character’s inner mind like a prism, each facet comparing itself with

and referring to the others; so by changing the pronoun, a person's complex inner world, which is normally hard to present, is transformed into clear and powerful stage images. (Gao: 2012: 53-54)

These images are transformations of the inner world of the mind, not just empty linguistic signs. In a passage that reverberates from the previous chapter, Gao links his approach to the novel to his approach to the theatre:

The tripartite nature of performance – from self to neutral-actor status to character – coalesces as three pronouns because these pronouns are constructed on three levels of human consciousness. Consciousness is formed through articulation in language, and these three levels reflect deep structures of the consciousness. It is only with these three levels that the human consciousness becomes discerning, and as these three levels serve as coordinates for one another, discernment becomes lucid. Otherwise, the state of the inner mind is merely a totality of chaos, and there is no possibility of discernment or narration, and a person will be oblivious of having a self. (Gao: 2012: 55)

In this way, the playwright can “present the inner mind experiences of a character” (55) - the domain of the artist and Chan Buddhism. To overcome the chaos of the mind, the three perspectives of “you”, “I” and “he” as used to shape a communicative relationship: as “you” the character is narrated; as “I” he is telling his own story; and as “he” he is being narrated. The shifts between these three levels of consciousness create a sense of space and freedom in which lucidity is made possible through the dialogues of the mind. By moving between these three voices, a sense of inner space is created as the expansive “realm” of the mind. As in meditation, there is no sense of claustrophobia: the three voices enable the consciousness to resist the isolation of the character and to embody a sense of hope that as long as there is communication and dialogue, there is hope. In this way, Gao creates a transformation of his character. Such a metamorphosis is an alternative to Kafka's whose work he references several times in the book as representing the individual as an “insect” (Gao: 2012: 5-6). Unlike Gregor in Kafka's “Metamorphosis” (1915), Gao's characters can communicate and freely move. One source of this movement is Gao's understanding of the Chan mind and the logic of karma as a process of movement through the space created in and by the mind.

In the next chapter, Gao once again separates himself from twentieth century linguistic philosophy when he dismisses the view that aesthetic questions should

only be posed as linguistic questions (Gao: 2012: 65). Gao wants to activate “direct perceptions that lead to artistic creation” (Gao: 2012: 65). While this chapter focuses on visual art, it develops themes announced in preceding chapters. Gao is concerned with concrete expressions of beauty, not theoretical explanations of it. In this, he is voicing his objections to theories replacing the concrete work of art, much as Tom Wolfe argues against postmodern abstract expressionism in *The Painted Word*: (1975). In such theoretical art, the theory of the artist or commentator replaces the work of art by explaining it to others; the explanation is the work of art. One way Gao develops to avoid misreadings (postmodernist misprisions) of his work is to include in his creations specific characters’ observations of language’s role in the experience he creates. This is evident in Chapter 58 of *Soul Mountain* which is devoted to how “you” exists in language. In a passage that alludes to Kafka’s Gregor, Gao writes:

Dragging weighty thoughts you crawl about in language, trying all the time to grab a thread to pull yourself up, becoming more and more weary, entangled in floating strands of language, like a silkworm spinning out silk, weaving a net for yourself, wrapping yourself in thicker and thicker darkness, the faint glimmer of light in your heart becoming weaker and weaker until finally the net is a totality of chaos. (Gao: 2000: 351)

To escape this predicament, the character realizes that a new pure language is needed in order for freedom to exist:

How is it possible to find a clear pure language with an indestructible sound which is larger than a melody, transcends limitations of phrases and sentences, does not distinguish between subject and object, transcends pronouns, discards logic, simply sprawls, and is not bound by images, metaphors, associations or symbols? (Gao: 2000: 351)

These are not theories; they are aesthetic thoughts that represent the mind of the character as he looks for his Way through and in words.

Gao’s plea is for painters to abandon such theorizations and return to creating actual, concrete images in works of art:

The so-called crisis in contemporary art is an ideologically created anxiety. If artists can make a clear assessment of society and themselves, they will be able to continue painting. Art inherently transcends concepts and ideology and has its own sovereign domain, that of images. Return to

form creation, and continue to paint. The domain of art must do away with empty talk. (Gao: 2012 :78)

While the language of fiction may be limited in its use of images, the painter has only these images to create without being bound by words or theoretical language. In this sense, Gao the painter and Gao the writer are two people, like two pronouns, who together comprise a complex network of relationships within Gao's overall aesthetics and creation. What he cannot do in fiction, he can do in painting. There is more than one "domain" in his art and he is free to move between them depending on his specific visions. Put together, as they are in *Aesthetics and Creation*, these domains operate kaleidoscopically to offer many different voices that at the same time are related to each other through Gao's tripartite voice.

In the next and longest chapter, "Another Kind of Aesthetics", he writes about himself as "you", addressing the second person as himself and by implication, the reader. He is thus demonstrating how to think in the way he is discussing, as this chapter offers, as its title suggests, "another" aesthetics; that of the visual. He expands on this non-conceptual view of visual art:

If the form the artist resorts to is form that has not been infused with human feelings, it remains form only, and the material also remains material only... so for it to become an artwork, language has to be added to explain its aesthetic implications. Therefore, this sort of linguistic annotation replaces art and turns it into an explanation... when art concepts are used to replace aesthetics, beauty is no longer infused by the artist into the work... (Gao: 2012: 110)

For Gao, there is the possibility of a spiritual life existing in images and words. This is unthinkable to a poststructuralist such as Eco who sees signs as empty form. In Gao's aesthetics there is a transformational process by which the spirit is realized in art and the actual voices of the mind and the individual are realized in language. By removing this barrier of concepts, the work of art may communicate with the viewer as that person appreciates the work:

Whether the work is appreciated depends on whether the work itself is able to enter a dialogue with the person. The two sides of the dialogue require a language of communication, and what communicates best transcends race and nation, language and culture, and history and time; the feelings and consciousness common to everyone make exchange

possible and are the basis for art communication between different people. (Gao: 2012: 110)

For communication to happen, the art must be truthful. It also must be realized in images and voices. Gao sees this is an ethical issue:

The many truths of the artist are simply the visual perceptions of his own eyes and, like beauty, do not exist in universally recognised standards. And truth is the artist's belief that his own art expression is his own indispensable link with reality. In the eyes of the artist, truth is the ethics of the artist rather than something that possesses aesthetic meaning. (Gao: 2012: 113)

He links this ethics to the artist's intellect and sensuousness. These in turn are related to the Chan Buddhist view of perception in a practice of detachment:

The rationality in art must mature into a calm and detached vision that will light up burgeoning perceptions hidden in the darkness and disentangle emotions aroused by the creative impulse; only then does it start to solidify, and only then is beauty manifested in images.

Rationality and sensuousness similarly function to direct art. Art creation does not castigate reality, and both perceptions and the intellect are at work in aesthetics. A person's capacity for perception and comprehension is the foundation of aesthetic activities. (Gao: 2012: 117)

These two aspects of aesthetics are to be converted by the artist "into creative power that, through his or her unique talents, is transformed into artwork" (Gao: 2012: 117). This transformation is couched in terms that link Gao's aesthetics to the ideas of Chan Buddhism discussed in section 2 of this essay: he sees that these two forces are "sublimated and manifested as spirituality" (Gao: 2012: 118) that is also in poetry. In the process, perception dissolves rationality. When aesthetic experience is perceived as a personal spiritual force based on each artist's particular vision of reality, the place of the artist's individuality becomes an issue. And this in turn raises once again the ways we perceive the self:

The appreciation of beauty primarily derives from the individuality of the appreciating subject, thereby decreeing that in creation the artist must depend upon the self. However, the self is essentially a chaotic entity, and if allowed arbitrary expression, it would undoubtedly produce unbridled

and reckless outpourings. Unless this unrestrained narcissism is controlled by the consciousness, it easily declines into arrogance, posturing, and putting on airs. (Gao: 2012:119)

Such pitfalls await the postmodern artist and critic who, as discussed above, in Gao's terms, wants to revolutionize art by always doing something theoretically new that overturns traditions in art. To resist these forces, the self seeks salvation:

From modern art's expression of the self to the extreme elevation of the self by avant-garde artists, there has been wanton expression. The overflowing chaos of the self in contemporary art was uncontrollable, and salvation was sought from concepts.

For the artist to control the self, there is another perspective, that *you* observing *I* to scrutinise the self, and as if it is *I* observing the external world, so this is not direct outpourings of the self. This kind of perspective is inherent in China's traditional expressive painting, and modernist writers and artists from Kafka to Giacometti may be said to employ a modern formulation of this perspective.

Once *you* detaches itself from the self, both the subject and the object are targeted for observation and scrutiny, and this forces the uncontrollable outpourings and expressions of the artist's blind narcissism to yield to concentrated observation, searching, capturing, or pursuing. While *you* and *I* are eying one another, that dark and chaotic self begins to reveal itself through a third pair of eyes belonging to *he*. (Gao: 2012: 121)

This relationship between the three persons leads to a communicative dialogue: "The questions and the dialogues between *you* and *I* this form of introspection invariably takes place under the watchful eye of *he*, who is looking inwards" (Gao: 2012: 121). The artist gains self-consciousness, and thus control of the chaotic self, through "the inner mind talking to itself" (121). In this self-control, he differs from the approach of Camus set out earlier in this essay while not saying anything that would negate that view: he is filtering his perception of the issue through his Buddhist eyes. Only in this way can the artist have a clear starting point for observation of reality, whether inner or outer. The second and third persons determine the position of the first person and make self-perception by that "*I*" possible. When these three perspectives dialogue, aesthetic perception is transformed into creation:

The object the artist depicts is not the object but something that has been refracted through the self of the artist: it is a creation. The space perceived in this way is the space of the inner mind, where the three pronouns dialogue with each other as each of them sees, as in Cubism, reality from a different space in the mind. (Gao: 2012: 122)

Insofar as this inner world is not directly visible to the egocentric first person alone, the artist needs these other two perspectives to make it visible. This is Gao's Chan definition of art: "Visual art is about making visible what is not visible" (Gao: 2012: 126). What is in the mind for Gao is Chan: "Chan is not the absence of everything but a realm in the mind" (Gao: 2012: 127). This is the spirituality of art that Gao calls the "poetic". This quality is missing from postmodernism: "It simply deconstructs, turns art into nonart and calls it art, or designates nonart matter as art, and most contemporary art is precisely this" (Gao: 2012: 138):

It would be best for you to return to the literary – that is, return to the human, return to a human perspective: human observation inevitably embodies human feelings... During the time of observation something happens – in other words, observation is also discovery, a departure from habitual and customary visual perceptions and capturing the beauty that is hidden in things, and these aesthetic experiences are what artists infuse into what they are painting. (Gao: 2012: 138)

The aesthetic effect is the result of the artist's powers of observation: "Concentrated observation produces the poetic, and beauty is thus discerned, but it is not something that the object originally possesses" (Gao: 2012: 139).

None of what Gao is saying here should be seen as revolutionary, or an attempt to come up with a startling "new" theory of art. As he admits to "you": "your method and practice have been to seek to discover new possibilities within the established boundaries of art" (140). This is the key achievement in Gao's work: Instead of accepting John Barth's (1967) argument that modernism has exhausted all its possibilities and what we now have is the "literature of exhaustion", Gao understands that traditions do not die. By showing us that there are still many possibilities for creation within the traditions of literature discarded by the postmodernists, Gao is demonstrating that the position of the postmodern aesthetic is untenable. Returning to the work of Kafka, Joyce and Brecht, Gao sees new ways forward. He is able to understand this through his

knowledge of what is vibrant in Chinese traditions of art and Chan Buddhism. These roots remain powerful insofar as they voice the human condition and so are able to communicate with Western modernism and all that went before it. He specifically uses the word "return" for this movement to suggest that he goes back to the source of creativity as he turns from one art to another.

He then explains how he prepares his mind to paint, in a way similar to the method he advocates for the neutral actor discussed above. He listens to music and makes notes until his mind is tranquil and he avoids performing at all while he paints. Here, he is separating the domains of his art. He also guards against leaving any traces of the artist because these are not art (Gao: 2012: 142). In all this, he seeks to control the chaos of the mind and to use it as the aim of his art: "Turn chaos, too, into a process of change, so that it, too becomes interesting". (Gao: 2012: 145):

If the artist returns to the creative impulse of the inner mind, form and expression will arise from this inner pulsation. He is an artist because he has the capacity to turn chaotic experiences and impulses into visible images, turning experiences that others may also have experienced into images and, moreover, giving expression to these. (Gao: 2012: 154-155)

Later in the book in Chapter 8, "Environment and Literature", he expands on this turning of chaos into art when he "confronts the vibrant human world and strives to confer upon it an aesthetic expression" (194).

To do this, he needs to move beyond competing Eastern and Western art theories, whether they be "state of being"(Gao: 2012:149) or "scatter perspective" (Gao: 2012: 151) ones:

The artist does not need such sweeping explanations but needs to find new turning points within differences between the art methods of different cultures in order to find his own path. (Gao: 2012: 151)

To move past the ideological and theoretical conflicts between modern Western artistic theories and traditional Eastern ones that may make Eastern artists feel anxious in being left behind or less postmodern, Gao responds by simply casting these anxieties aside:

If anxieties are cast aside, they are cast aside. This is a form of Eastern wisdom, and not a game with language. Discard time differences, discard art revolutions and the overturning of art, and also let go of tradition, although this does not mean overthrowing it... In this instant there is no

tradition and no concern for the fashions of the time. It is one person confronting art, confronting the achievements of human art, then observing himself, looking for his own images and methods, painting his own paintings, and seeing what interesting things he can produce. (Gao: 2012: 153)

The act of letting go has been discussed above in terms of Chan thought: it is how we free the mind from attachments by not clinging to things (see Cleary: 1989: 41, 99, 133 and 171). By freeing art from such theoretical forces, Gao sees that “artworks can be allowed to speak for themselves” (Gao: 2012: 157), much as his characters can by using the three perspectives of I, you and he. The recurring movement in Gao’s art is the turn or return to different points of view so as to observe possibilities. A similar move beyond competing Western and Eastern ideologies of literature is envisaged later in the book:

The constraining of thought is anathema for the writer because spiritual independence and literary autonomy are essential prerequisites for creation... As long as it does not shun the real dilemmas of human existence and probes the depths of human nature, it will transcend regional and national boundaries, even transcend different languages; it will be translatable and moreover, transcend national cultures to communicate with the world. That literature possesses inherent universality has always been so from ancient times to the present, in both the West and the East. (Gao: 2012: 200-201)

This freedom to think and write predicates the freedom of literature which Gao sees as the “free articulation of human feelings and thoughts” (208). This freedom exists in each individual writer. It is the individual writer who constitutes literature: and this voice is lost once the writer follows fashions and trends of politics, the market or the exhausted concepts of currently dominant literary theory:

Literature can only be the voice of the individual writer, but once construed as representative of the people or the mouthpiece of the nation, that voice will certainly be false and will certainly be hoarse and exhausted. (Gao: 2012: 211)

How is this to be done?:

If the writer of today can abolish such personal delusions and adopt a normal attitude in observing with intelligent eyes the many manifestations

of life in the universe while coldly scrutinising his own chaotic self, the work under his pen will be worth reading over and over again. (Gao: 2012: 211)

What makes literature worth reading is that it offers inspiration in the wake of the collapse of postmodernism:

Today the tide of postmodern thinking seems to have passed and facing these bewildering times of spiritual impoverishment, I think, people must look to literature for inspiration. (Gao: 2012: 213)

He raises a question that has been silenced by postmodernism's insistence on the literary text as a linguistic construct devoid of any social connections:

Under present conditions, can literature still reflect social reality? Of course it can; it is simply a matter of discarding isms, liberating itself from the framework and dogma of ideology, dispelling the preaching of political correctness, returning to the writer's genuine perceptions, and narrating in the individual's unswervingly independent voice. Even if the voice is extremely feeble and not pleasing for the listener, it is a person's true voice and this is its value as literature. (Gao: 2012: 213)

What makes great literature is its truthfulness about the human condition as seen by each one of us as individuals:

Literature is the awakening of the individual's consciousness in the sense that the writer is armed with his intuitive knowledge when he observes the human world while scrutinising the self. He infuses his lucid understanding into his work. The individual's unique understanding of the world is undeniably the challenge of the individual to his existential environment. (Gao: 2012: 214)

This uniqueness is understood as the individual's voice, or in Eliot's words "the individual talent", not a poststructuralist sign or a signified; it is a physical presence:

For the writer, literature constitutes not signifiers, but vibrant human voices that contain every human emotion and desire. And when the writer is writing, these voices are alive in the heart and mind. The language of literature can be read aloud and also performed; it is dynamic and can come to life on the stage to resonate powerfully amongst readers and audiences. What the writer creates is language reverberating with sound; it

is not the language that linguistic research refers to or even *can* refer to. (Gao: 2012: 217)

To hear and record these voices requires freedom to think which often occurs at the boundaries between things or two or more individuals trying to communicate with each other:

Fresh thoughts are often born at the boundary between two things, and the long accumulated history of human culture is the continual discovery of new understanding on the foundations of predecessors. Literary and art creation are also like this. (Gao: 2012: 233)

This view of literature teaches us that great art is only possible with freedom of thought and is often created when we “break with existing patterns and find new expressions” (Gao: 2012: 233). The place where this occurs is in the individual writer’s confrontation with the self and in the communications that this confrontation engenders.

8

Now that the ways Gao pursues in enunciating his aesthetics and the ways he links this to his creations have been followed, it may be possible to suggest that he does offer a viable alternative to the prevailing dogmas and orthodoxies in academic circles. To have simply summarized his contribution without following him on his way would have been to violate the spirit of his art. He insists not on abstract statements, but in learning by immersing ourselves in the creative process. A more fashionable way of writing about him, such as in poststructuralist terms, would risk being trapped in abstract discourse and dogmatic assertion – the very things he dissociates himself from. Such traps can be seen in the paths followed by Yeung and Zhou Weihui discussed in the opening section of this essay. Instead of trying to categorize himself as yet another postmodernist, Gao insists on the uniqueness of his achievement, thus perhaps inviting himself to be overlooked by those who subscribe to a particular theory of literature as a language game. However, it should be clear that when we all subscribe to a particular theory, we invite a contrarian’s view. Gao’s value in the current debates over art is that he is an instance of Karl Popper’s (1958) one thousand and first swan, the black one who gives the lie to positivism’s notion that the truth is provable based on popularity or generalisability.

Art is an experience for Gao, as it is for any great artist or a sincere reader of that art. The experience transforms us by changing the way we see things and so helping us not to cling to them. If we can see the way the artist sees, we learn something valuable: that there are alternative visions which, by our immersion in them, transform us. This is done through our communication with the work of art as a process at once spiritual and aesthetic. In this way, we experience a living thing, not a set of abstractions.

Gao creates this transformation by returning to the past and seeing it as the living present, to borrow Eliot's words. He reanimates that past through his communication with it. This communication is seen as his confrontation with that art by making out of its traditions new and vibrant works.

In a way, Gao's achievement is attained through a rebellion against the totalizing forces of prevailing failed perceptions of art and of the individual's place in the world. It has already been suggested that there are links or underground streams between Gao's art and the work of Sartre and Camus. What makes this relationship isn't a form of imitation. Instead, Gao is tapping into the same authentic real human sources of experience that these artists are voicing. After all, this is how traditions survive and in so doing recreate "humankind's shared spiritual wealth" (Gao: 2012: 18) as a "history of the soul" (Gao: 2012: 203). In this, Gao seems to understand art as a religious experience that is informed by his understanding of Chan Buddhism and its spiritual search for the inner mind where time and space exist in ways that make life possible. This approach is most clearly hinted at in the title of his novel *One Man's Bible* (2002). In Buddhist terms, his quest is to find ways of transforming perception into enlightenment (Gao: 2012: 38-39) by confronting the chaos of the mind and shaping it in dialogical terms as a communicative act in cold and detached perceptions.

Such communication is only tenable if the voice we hear and use is an individual one, whether it is our own voice as a reader or the voice of the individual character Gao records. The uniqueness of the individual voice constitutes its challenge to the environment we each are in (Gao: 2012: 214). By affirming our unique or individual existence, even if only as "insignificant insects", we find a spiritual release from the anxieties that otherwise would overwhelm us. These anxieties need to be confronted, whether they be about art, the novel, prevailing dogmas or our place in the world.

The best of all possible worlds is the one we create for ourselves in art or in our mind as we respond authentically to our environment, whatever that may be for each one of us. We achieve this when we are conscious of who we are as we communicate with ourselves and others.

Gao's achievement is to describe how creation occurs for him and how we can actually perceive the beauty of that creation in its own terms as well as in our own. By doing this, he offers us release from the traps of current literary and artistic theories that do not seem able to pose such questions let alone offer practical and sincere answers to them. This, at least, should be cause to make us pause and wonder about the efficacy of those theories that seem to dominate critical and artistic discourse at present. If the questions and answers offered by Gao cannot be offered by a particular theory, then is that theory offering very much in terms of understanding issues of aesthetics and creation? Given a choice between a view rich in its traditions and experiences and a view poor in its insights related to actual art, then we are left with a Hobson's choice: the answer should be obvious for anyone sincerely concerned with the creation and appreciation of art.

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