The Language of Musicality in Lu Xun’s Prose Poetry Collection *Wild Grass*

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Abstract
Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 *Wild Grass* (野草 *Ye Cao*, 1927) is the first important prose poetry collection in modern Chinese literary history. While most scholarship focuses on its emotional atmosphere, complex images, and metaphors, this article explores the issue of musicality as a fundamental poetic quality of *Wild Grass*. Through a close reading of some of the poems from *Wild Grass*, this article examines how Lu Xun employs the modern Chinese vernacular as a new literary language, how various stylistic devices add levels of musicality, and how the language of musicality, in turn, serves as a living, pulsating aesthetic force that enhances the poeticity and communicability of these texts.

Keywords
*Wild Grass*, musicality, vernacular, repetition, polyphony
Wild Grass (野草 Ye Cao, 1927) is a prose poetry collection written between 1924 to 1926 by Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936), the foremost Chinese writer of the twentieth century. As the first important collection of Chinese prose poetry, Wild Grass is a work with very few predecessors or successors in its own time. With this collection, Lu Xun produced an extraordinary literary hybrid that blends poetry and prose together. Composed of twenty-two prose poems, a doggerel, and a foreword, Wild Grass supplied its readers with an outpouring of literary creativity, an abundance of metaphorical imagery, and a unique form of poetic expression.

All of the Wild Grass pieces initially appeared in Yusi 語絲 (Tattler),¹ a literary periodical to which Lu Xun contributed many of his satirical essays. The essay (散文 sanwen) is a time-honored genre in China, one which continues to seem both resonant with tradition and distinctively modern. Lu Xun allowed his writings to find their own form without being unnecessarily concerned about following a specific genre of writing, yet there are definite similarities between his essays and the pieces in Wild Grass. Both are marked by rhetorical eloquence and intellectual sharpness, and Lu Xun’s own way of referring to the contents of Wild Grass sometimes underlined the connection. In the “Preface to the English Translation of Wild Grass” (野草英文譯本序 Ye cao Yingwen yiben xu), he called it a collection of “twenty-some short essays (小品 xiaopin)” (emphasis added). A year later, however, the author called Wild Grass pieces of “short compositions” (短文 duanwen), or “[m]ore pretentiously, . . . prose poetry” (誇大點說，就是散文詩 kuada dian shuo, jiushi sanwen shi) (Lee, Voices 91).

The very ambiguity of the genre—are they to be called “short essays,” “short compositions,” or “prose poetry”?—reflects the ambiguities that have characterized Lu Xun’s experimental style of writing. Now, more than ninety years after its first publication, most critics have come to agree that Wild Grass is not only one of Lu Xun’s greatest works of literary art, but also, more importantly, a unique collection of prose poetry in the context of modern Chinese literature. What are the special attributes or qualities of Wild Grass that so eminently distinguished it from Lu Xun’s other types of writing? Scholars have offered different explanations. Some

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¹ Founded on November 17, 1924, the literary periodical Yusi 語絲 (Tattler) was very influential in terms of the establishment and development of “the new literature” in China. Lu Xun had a lasting relationship with Yushi, in which over one hundred pieces of his writings were first published. The periodical published many essays which were informed by moral exploration and political commitment and written in a simple yet biting style. This came to be known as the “Yusi style” (語絲文體 Yusi wen ti). Sun Fuyuan (孙伏园) has been regarded as the editor, but recent scholars have also recognized Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zuoren (周作人) as the actually the prime movers of Yusi. For details, see Zhang.
have argued that Lu Xun’s essays put more emphasis on engagement with social reality, while his *Wild Grass* offers a self-revealing journey into the writer’s inner feelings and torment, and the self-referentiality of language in *Wild Grass* contributes to its poetic quality (Qian 110). Others have focused on the complex use of imagery and its metaphorical signification, commenting that imagery in *Wild Grass* departs daringly from classical Chinese poetic convention—something which not only defines its modernity, but which also “imbues his prose with its poetic quality” (Lee, *Lu Xun* 13). While acknowledging the importance of emotion and imagery as inherent features of the poetic discourse, this paper attempts to look into a less well-researched, but equally vigorous poetic quality of *Wild Grass*: the issue of musicality.

**Musicality in Prose Poetry**

Between poetry and music, there has been a long history of analogous relationship and indissoluble connection. One of the basic qualities shared by music and poetry is often thought to be rhythm. In patterned poetry, such as sonnets, both syllable count and stress patterns are highly controlled. One conventional way of approaching the musicality of patterned poetry is metrical scansion. By marking the meter of lines and dividing the lines into feet, this method of prosodic analysis may yield a clear representation of the metrical variation and the musical effect of the poem. Prose poetry, however, breaks the stringent metrical contract and defies traditional metrical scansion with its irregular recurrence of rhyme and the absence of fixed strophic structures. In prose poetry, and free verse alike, there is often the free undulation of strong and weak syllables, aiming at an organic sense of wholeness over an artificial measure of completeness. The musicality of these poems, therefore, needs to be perceived as something broader and subtler than mere metricality.

The musicality of poetry, as John Hollander defined it in his classical study on music and poetry, refers to poetry’s non-semantic or hyper-semantic elements, “including not only its rationalized prosody, but its actual sound on being read, and certain characteristics of its syntax and imagery as well” (7). Hollander further argued that the relation between music and poetry is not simply one of imitation,

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2 John Milton, for example, idealized this connection as “harmonious sisters,” and John Dryden developed this analogy in his dedication to Henry Purcell’s *The Vocal and Instrumental Musick of The Prophetess*. See Milton; Dryden.
nor is it based purely on elements in common, such as rhythm. The more fundamental reason for us to explore the musicality of poetry lies in the apparent similarity “between the ways that music affects us and the manner in which formal, non-semantic poetic elements contribute to our experience of poetry” (8).

Modern free verse poets have sought to apply the principles of musical notation in their versification in a more flexible way. In his Literary Essays, Ezra Pound compared the handling of time in music composition to the writing of free verse:

No one is so foolish as to suppose that a musician using “four-four” time is compelled to use always four quarter notes in each bar, or in “seven-eighths” time to use seven eighth notes uniformly in each bar. He may use one 1/2, one 1/4 and one 1/8 rest, or any such combination as he may happen to choose or find fitting.

To apply this musical truism to verse is to employ vers libre. (“The Tradition” 93)

Elsewhere, Pound also made a clear statement that the poet should “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome” (“A Retrospect” 3). While Pound’s purpose was to justify his experiments with free verse, this argument applies to the composition of prose poetry as well. In other words, when music is substituted for meter as the primary indicator of poeticity, then prose poetry must be measured by the musicality of its language.

In his seminal study of Lu Xun, Hsia Tsi-an once commented that many pieces in Wild Grass can be considered as “genuine poetry in embryo: images imbued with strong emotional intensity, flowing and stopping in darkly glowing and oddly shaped lines, like molten metal failing to find a mould” (150). Scholars have also noticed that the powerful “flowing and stopping” (Hsia 150) of poetic emotion in Wild Grass should not be entirely attributed to its use of images, but also to its musical qualities as well (Kaldis 194; Admussen, “A Music for Baihua” 13). The rich lyrical passages, vivid imagery, careful diction, and the acoustic combination of occasional rhythms, alliteration, assonance, consonance, as well as repetition of sentences and structures—these all work together to impart a unique musical quality to Wild Grass which essentially accounts for its poeticity. The “oddly shaped lines” (Hsia 150) of prose poetry might indeed lack a “mould,” but the lifting of a “mould” also brought new possibilities in poetic expression. For this reason, this paper argues that Wild Grass is a collection of accomplished, genuine poetry instead
of something embryonic. It communicates with its readers not only through its obscure sentiments and complex ideas, but more importantly, through its “formal, non-semantic” elements.

Lu Xun was clearly aware of the value of formalistic considerations in the writing of poetry. Being, as he was, an accomplished poet in the traditional style, Lu Xun took delight in its formal techniques such as “the mot juste and neat phrasing,” “excision and compress,” “making subtle allusions,” “contrast and juxtapositions,” and regulating emotions “according to rhyme, rhythm, and form” (Hsia 198). In the following analysis, we will explore the language of Wild Grass mainly from three aspects: Lu Xun’s experiment with the spoken language as the new poetic medium, his use of repetition as a powerful poetic device, and the polyphonic complexities in his composition. These aspects, as our close reading of some of the prose poems demonstrates, contribute to the musicality of Lu Xun’s writing, which not only offers a more direct access to the meaning of these poems, but also in turn, works as an intense motivating force that enhances the poeticity and communicability of these texts.

Exploring the Music of the Vernacular: The Case of the “Foreword”

One of the heated debates during the New Culture Movement (新文化運動 xinwenhua yundong) (1916-27) was between the use of classical Chinese and the vernacular in literary writing. Inspired by the Renaissance in Europe and the Romantic Movement in England, Hu Shih (胡適) (1891-1962), one of the movement’s leaders, attempted his influential literary experiment by writing free verse in the vernacular. Alongside his efforts at creating new style poems as models, Hu Shih also wrote influential essays arguing for vernacular poetry and rejection of traditional prosody, thereby forging a new direction for the development of Chinese poetry. It is possible to think of the emergence of prose poetry as a response to the

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3 In a letter to his friend on November 1, 1934, Lu Xun distinguishes “the type of poetry that can be read aloud” and “the type that can only be read in silence,” and sees the former as superior to the latter. He further explicates that “a poem lacking in both rhyme and rhythm does not lend itself to recitation aloud and is hence less easily committed to memory” and for this reason “new poetry” has never succeeded in displacing the old forms. See Kowallis (6).

4 Written vernacular Chinese is also known as “baihua” during the New Culture Movement. May Fourth scholars often described Chinese literary history in terms of the struggle between classical (文言 wenyan) and vernacular (白話 baihua) literatures.
change of poetic aesthetics of its time.

In the ancient Chinese literary tradition, there were various poetic forms, such as *shi* 詩 (poetry), *fu* 賦 (rhapsody), and *ci* 詞 (song lyric). The poetic quality of classical Chinese writing was often linked with the employment of rhyme and a metric defined by a set number of syllables for each line (Rouzer 118). As the New Poetry movement called for the liberation of old poetic forms, it became necessary to expand and redefine the scope of what constitutes poetry in the modern era. Without the time-revered structural features of classic al poetry and with an increasing emphasis on using the natural cadence of the vernacular, modern Chinese poets found themselves confronted with a crucial question: “how is one to recognize poetry as distinct from prose?” (Yeh 100) The issue becomes even murkier where prose poetry is concerned. Sitting on the stretched boundary between prose and poetry, prose poetry is almost impossible to define satisfactorily. In his study of Chinese prose poetry, Nick Admussen noticed that while many of the May Fourth writers (五四作家 Wusi zuo jia), such as Zheng Zhenduo (鄭振鐸), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Liu Bannong (劉半農) and Shen Congwen (沈從文), made various statements about prose poetry, their definitions were rather arbitrary. More importantly, these poets were more concerned with their rebellion against the ancient tradition of rhymed poetry than the “categorization of a piece as a prose poem” (Admussen, “Trading Metaphors” 98).

The layout of *Wild Grass* resembles prose more than poetry. Unlike free verse that is written in lines and stanzas, the tightly-knit sentences and paragraphs in *Wild Grass* allow it to release the energies of contemporary speech and to use it as a resource for poetic expression. In her discussion of the history of American and French prose poetry, Margueritte Murphy noticed that “the prose poem becomes a vehicle for bringing ordinary speech into the poetic idiom; it is a field where the poet can rehearse ‘ordinary’ prose rhythms, patterns and expressions” (41). She further commented that such an interest in contemporary speech can be observed clearly in Baudelaire or Rimbaud, and accordingly, their prose poems demonstrate a desire to “catch the music of modern urban consciousness” (42). In the preface to *Petits Poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire himself also made it clear that in his “ambitious moments” of writing prose poetry, he was actually trying to represent the “mouvements lyriques de l’âme” (the lyrical movements of the soul). For this purpose, he looked forward to the discovery of a new language, “musical, without rhyme and without rhythm, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the prickings of consciousness” (7).
Lu Xun appreciated the intertwined relationship between language and modernity and shared Baudelaire’s ambition of finding a new language to express the complexities of modern sentiments. As Gao Yuanbao observed, Lu Xun made an unprecedented effort to “synthesize all the new styles of writing” and “created a kind of writing that is capable of promoting the ‘free-speaking’ spirit of modern Chinese so as to rival the traditional style of writing” (332). Lu Xun was himself one of the greatest proponents of the Vernacular Movement (白話文運動 baihuawen yundong), who remained “critical of his contemporaries’ attempts to establish institutional standards for writing in baihua” (Davies 248) and vehemently called writers of his time to eschew the opaquely flowery language of classic Chinese in favor of simple, clear modern vernacular. He claimed that “using arcane words expressing hackneyed ideas in a voice from the past” would lead us nowhere, and “we need to speak in a modern language, a language of our own, namely, lively baihua, to express our feelings in a straightforward way” (Lu Xun, “Wusheng de Zhongguo” 15). Although Wild Grass is considered by many as “the most difficult of all his works and is, consequently, the least understood among Chinese readers” (Lee, “Literary Trends I” 498), there is no denying that the writing style of Wild Grass, in general, is quite simple and forcibly vernacular. The difficulty of understanding Wild Grass lies not so much in its language as in its intricate ideas and emotions. If one resists, however, for a brief moment, the urge to find exact explanations for the symbolic and metaphoric content, and focuses on its language per se, one might notice that the sonic evocations can sometimes provide an easier and more direct access to the meaning of these rather enigmatic poems.

In Wild Grass, Lu Xun made a remarkable effort at preserving the natural rhythm of the spoken language and exploring the musicality of the modern Chinese vernacular. Take, for example, the “Foreword” of Wild Grass. It begins with a quite frank and straightforward first-person point of view narrative to reveal the poet’s recursive reflections on the predicament of silence and speech:

當我沉默著的時候，我覺得充實；我將開口，同時感到空虛。
過去的生命已經死亡。我對於這死亡有大歡喜，因為我借此知道它曾經存活。死亡的生命已經朽腐。我對於這朽腐有大歡喜，因為我借此知道它還非空虛。
When I am silent, I feel replete; as I open my mouth to speak, I am conscious of emptiness.

The past life has died. I exult over its death, because from this I know that it once existed. The dead life has decayed. I exult over its decay,
because from this I know that it has not been empty. (*Wild Grass* 3)\(^5\)

Immediately noticeable is the frequent use of compound words, such as *chen-mo* 沉默 (silence), *chong-shi* 充實 (replete), *kai-kou* 開口 (open my mouth to speak), *kong-xu* 空虛 (emptiness), *sheng-ming* 生命 (life), *si-wang* 死亡 (death), *cun-huo* 存活 (exist), *xiu-fu* 朽腐 (decay), etc. Unlike the compact language of classical Chinese in which each character represents a word, the modern vernacular consists of more compound words. The series of two-syllable words replace one-syllable characters to become the building block of the prose poems in *Wild Grass*. In terms of their pronunciation, these compound words form a unit in which the main accentuation is accompanied by one light accentuation, thus creating the inherent rhythm of the language. The syntax of these lines also demonstrates characteristics of modern-day vernacular Chinese. The use of subordinating conjunctions, such as *dang* 當 (when) and *yin-wei* 因為 (because), connects the lines logically and allows for a natural flow of words and smoothness of expression. The subordinate clauses “因為我借此知道 . . .” (“because from this I know that . . .”) preceded by the main clauses “我對於 . . . 有大歡喜” (“I exult over . . .”) indicates an influence of Western grammatical features on Chinese vernacular.

While capturing the natural cadences of ordinary speech, the writing here also attempts to transcend the use of everyday language. *Da-huan-xi* 大歡喜 (exult) in the second paragraph, for example, is a term borrowed from Buddhism, which brings with it a sense of linguistic estrangement and increases the poetic density of this line. The use of this three-syllable word also breaks the accentuation tendencies of two-syllable words and adds a moment of metrical variation to the line. In particular, the accentuated first character *Da* (大) makes a strong, decisive sound, which reflects the intense emotion of the poet. Moreover, the composition draws on a striking combination of traditional literary devices, such as parallelism, repetition, and contrast, in which the ultimate themes of life and death, meaning and purpose, are concurrently negated and reaffirmed. In his analysis of the sound-meaning relationship in the “Foreword,” Nicholas Kaldis also notices “a marvelous ironic tension between the binary oppositions and their auditory formulation.” On the one hand, there is the use of “the frequent rhyming or pairing of characters, parallelism and repetition of words, phrases, and entire sentences, which serve to invest the

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\(^5\) Except where otherwise stated, I have followed Lu Xin’s *Wild Grass*, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang.
prose with a musicality and rhythmic flow”; on the other, there is “the
disjointedness and contradictory nature” of the writer-speaker’s intellectual paradox.
The disparity between the theme of existential unsettlement and its aural
manifestation “calls attention to the poem’s opening quandary” and allows for an
active interplay between semantic and sonic aspects of the language-stream (Kaldis
157).

The middle section of the “Foreword” explains the title of the poetry
collection:

野草，根本不深，花葉不美，然而吸取露，吸取水，吸取陳死人的
血和肉，各各奪取它的生存。當生存時，還是將遭踐踏，將遭
删刈，直至於死亡而朽腐。
但我坦然，欣然。我將大笑，我將歌唱。
我自愛我的野草，但我憎惡這以野草作裝飾的地面。
地火在地下運行，奔突；熔岩一旦噴出，將燒盡一切野草，以及
喬木，於是並且無可朽腐。
但我坦然，欣然。我將大笑，我將歌唱。

Wild grass strikes no deep roots, has no beautiful flowers and leaves,
yet it imbibes dew, water, and the blood and flesh of the dead,
although all try to rob it of life. As long as it lives it is trampled upon
and mown down, until it dies and decays.
But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing.
I love my wild grass, but I detest the ground, which decks itself with
wild grass.
A subterranean fire is spreading, raging, underground. Once the
molten lava breaks through the earth’s crust, it will consume all the
wild grass and lofty trees, leaving nothing to decay.
But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing. (Wild
Grass 3)

The first section describes the characteristics of wild grass, while the second
introduces the image of burning “subterranean fire” which will eventually spread
and bring everything to destruction. The use of sibilants and fricatives—such as
sheng-cun 生存 (life), xi-qu 吸取 (imbibe), xue 血 (blood), shui 水 (water),
zhuang-shi 裝飾 (deck), chen-si-ren 陳死人 (the long dead), xiu-fu 朽腐
(decay)—delivers the sound effect of the soul’s whisper, and gradually builds up
towards the poet’s admission of guilt and the subsequent release of passion. Both
sections, or strophes, end with the same line, uttered with so much boldness and sincerity that is perhaps best captured only in the original Chinese:

但 我 / 坦 然 · / 欣 然。/ 我 將 / 大 笑，/ 我 將 / 歌 唱。
Dan wo / tan ran, / xin ran. / wo jiang / da xiao, / wo jiang / ge chang.
+  + /  + -，/ - - - /  + - /  + +，/  + - /  - +。
But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing. (Wild Grass 3)

In terms of rhythm, each Chinese character acts as a single beat within the 2/4 rhythmic structure. The line is also written in a rather modified symmetry between level tones (平 ping, as represented by “-”) and oblique tones (仄 ze, as represented by “+”). Unlike traditional Chinese verse with prescribed rules of tone regulation, the alternation of ping-ze in this line forms a vibrating tonal structure suitable for the portrayal of the poet’s psychological turbulence. The ebbing tone of tan-ran 坦然 (not worried) and xin-ran 欣然 (glad) creates a descending melodic motion, which is harmonious with the inner peace depicted by the poet. The lively deflecting notes of da-xiao 大笑 (laugh aloud) and ge-chang 歌唱 (sing), in contrast, reflect the poet’s emotional fluctuations and impulsivity. In addition, the assonance of “an” and “ang” along the line produces a cumulative echoing effect that is both reassuring and somewhat uplifting. As a result, the writing is audibly cadenced as if meant to be chanted, and the words are established in the reader’s mind like the notes of a musical theme.

The writing of the “Foreword” reaches its searing climax in the end, when the poet dedicated it, “between bright and darkness, life and death, past and future,” to “friends and foes, men and beasts, and those I love and those I don’t love” (Wild Grass 4). While the poet made it clear in writing that “he cannot laugh aloud or sing,” he wrote it with such a tempo that the reader can almost hear his reckless heartbeat between the lines. The accelerated pace has such a strong musicality that it may even occasionally shift the reader’s attention from the meaning of the words to the contour and rhythms of its speech. The hastening of beat and increased dynamic level reaches a pinnacle as the poet declares a concluding exclamation: “Go, then, wild grass, together with my foreword!” Using the inverted sentence to foreground the suddenness and urgency of the demand, a direct and powerful exclamation is made in an utterly vernacular, and even colloquial, manner. There is something short, resolute, and even harsh in the demand, making it very similar to the strong and decisive ending of a melody.
The above analyses of the sounds and tonal patterns further attest to the musicality of the “Foreword.” Flowing with ease but also with an underlying tension, Lu Xun’s writing maintained a delicate balance between hope and anguish, detachment and concern, reason and passion. The melody of the modern Chinese vernacular as the new literary-language-in-the-making was both meticulously captured and constructed in the writing of *Wild Grass*.

**Working the Magic of Repetition: The Case of “Autumn Night”**

Repetition has always been ubiquitous in music, and is often believed to be the foundation of musical expression. Carlos Chávez, a noted musical theorist and composer, claimed that “repetition has been the decisive factor in giving shape to music” (38). While some music forms are more stable and strophic, most of them do not set very rigid patterns of repetition. The repetition in music is often a matter of choice with the composer, who may add subtle differences and variations to repeated patterns. Chávez argued that in music, repetition and variation can be understood as constant rebirths, like “a stream that never comes back to its source; a stream in eternal development, like a spiral” (84). Repetition in prose poetry bears an intriguing resemblance to repetition in music, in that neither is confined to predetermined forms. In the prose poem, the refrain and the rhyme of conventional verse poetry is often transferred into varied types of repetitive figures to produce a similar effect. The abundant repetitions in Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass* take on different forms and never lead to monotony or boredom. There are repetitions of words and phrases, lines, and more subtly, images and symbols. A most frequently quoted example of repetition in *Wild Grass* is in the opening paragraph of “Autumn Night”:

在我的後園，可以看見牆外有兩株樹，一株是棗樹，還有一株也是棗樹。

Behind the wall of my backyard you can see two trees: one is a date tree, the other is also a date tree. (*Wild Grass* 6)

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6. In Zhou Gang’s research on the trajectory of the triumph of the vernacular in modern China, she examined Lu Xun’s bi-lingual approach toward the vernacular, which manifests dramatic language change at that specific period of historical transition in Chinese literary history. For details, see “Shaky House” in Zhou Gang’s *Placing the Modern Chinese Vernacular in Transnational Literature*. 
Here the poet presents two “date trees” with an almost mysterious repetition of the same information about each tree. Leo Ou-fan Lee argued that with repetition “the author’s imagination takes flight” and transforms the real setting of the courtyard of his house in Peking into a “fairyland” (Voices 94). The repetition also represents the idiomatic style “typical of Lu Xun’s challenge to vernacular language and conventional thinking” (Laughlin 16). Many scholars see the date trees as a symbol of Lu Xun himself and the repetition as an emphasis of the poet’s sober and irreconcilable personality (Cheung 152; Li Helin 205; Sun, Yecao Yanjiu 81). According to Sun Yushi, they draw the reader into an enclosed atmosphere of solitude and thereby lend themselves to an emotional manifestation of the poet’s resolute and unyielding pertinacity (Xianshi 18). However, it is also worth noting that the reiteration of “a date tree” in the first paragraph is an organic component of this prose poem which is replete with repetition. The subsequent paragraphs, in particular, all begin with lines written with either obvious or subtle forms of repetition:

這上面的夜的天空，奇怪而高，我生平沒有見過這樣奇怪而高的天空。
The night sky above them is strange and high. I have never seen such a strange, high sky.
我不知道那些花草真叫什麼名字，人們叫他們什麼名字。
I have no idea what these plants are called, what names they are commonly known by.
棗樹，他們簡直落盡了葉子。先前，還有一兩個孩子來打他們別人打剩的棗子，現在是一個也不剩了，連葉子也落盡了。
As for the date trees, they have lost absolutely all their leaves. Before, one or two boys still came to beat down the dates other people had missed. But now not one date is left, and the trees have lost all their leaves as well. (Wild Grass 5-6)

All these repetitions—such as “strange and high sky” (奇怪而高的天空), “what names they are called/known by” (叫什麼名字), and “lose all their leaves” (落盡了葉子)—have important implications outside their semantic scope. Moreover, some of these images or expressions recur later in this text. For example, the “strange and high sky” mentioned at the beginning of the second paragraph also recur at the end of the fourth and the fifth paragraphs. The sonic effects concretized in the repetition of these phrases is analogous to that of repetition in melody, in that
both can be understood as an essentially temporal phenomenon. Music theorists have long been aware that the medium of music is not just sound, but also time, and the pattern of repetition and anticipation in music can shape our experience of time (Johnson 65). Alfred Schütz spoke of “virtual coherence,” or a sort of “coherence” of sense of the continuous elements in the musical flow. He considers repetition to be “a special case of the intermittence of a continuance” and further located its origin “in a synthesis of recognition between the reproduced past experience of the theme with its actually experienced recurrence” (263). In a similar way, the series of repetitions in the beginning paragraphs of “Autumn Night” brings about a peculiar temporal progression, a union of smooth and jagged movements, of musicality and dissonance. When read aloud, it produces an unusual acoustic effect, which goes outwards from these lines to the whole paragraph, inducing a hovering sense of *déjà vu*. The melodic flow of the poet’s reverie is then interrupted by a sudden shriek of a fierce bird:

哇的一聲，夜遊的惡鳥飛過了。

With a shriek, a fierce night-bird passes.⁷ (*Wild Grass* 5)

The Chinese line actually starts with an abrupt use of an onomatopoeia *Wah* 唔 (shriek), a rather loud and noisy sound. Its articulation requires a good deal of energy and is therefore fit for breaking the soft ripple of the murmuring wave of reverie and drawing the poet/reader back to the soundscape of reality. In the following paragraphs, the poet endeavors to depict sound more or less realistically:

我忽而聽到夜半的笑聲，吃吃地，似乎不願意驚動睡著的人，然而四圍的空氣都應和著笑。後窗的玻璃上丁丁地響，還有許多小飛蟲亂撞。

All of a sudden, I hear midnight laughter. The sound is muffled, as if not to wake those who sleep; yet all around the air resounds to this laughter. A pit-a-pat sounds from the glass of the back window, where swarms of insects are recklessly dashing themselves against the pane.

(*Wild Grass* 6-7)

The use of the bisyllabic duplicates *ch’ih-ch’ih* 吃吃 (muffled), *ding-ding* 丁丁

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⁷ A more direct rendering of the sentence would be “Wa! A vile bird flies past on patrol,” as was translated by Dave Haysom and Karmia Olutade.
(pit-a-pat) are rather direct, imitative, and conventional onomatopoeias in Chinese. They serve to enrich this part of the poem with a sense of certainty and reality. However, amid the realistic symphony of sounds, there remains a sense of temporal rewind and disorientation instigated by the recurrence of “midnight laughter.” Each of the three “midnight laughter” moments towards the end of the poem indicates a point of contact and confusion between reverie and reality.

At the end of the poem, “I” yawn and smoke, as the mind moves through meditation into silence:

我打一個呵欠，點起一支紙煙，噴出煙來，對著燈默默地敬奠這些蒼翠精緻的英雄們。
I yawn, light a cigarette. And puff out the smoke, paying silent homage before the lamp to these green and exquisite heroes. (Wild Grass 7)

Like the closing ritual in traditional music performance, there is a gradual fading of sound as the smoke evaporates into thin air. The final silence in the poem then ensues, as a result of a realignment of the poet’s inner mindscape and the natural soundscape.

**Polyphony as a Strategy: The Case of “The Beggars”**

As its etymology suggests, “polyphony” means “many voices” or “many sounds.” In music, it refers to the superposition of several vocal or instrumental parts. According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, polyphony is “music written as a combination of several simultaneous voices (parts) of a more or less pronounced individuality” (Apel 687). In literary studies, “polyphony” is a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to the plurality of voices and consciousnesses in a novel. In his analysis of Dostoevsky’s work, Bakhtin wrote: “In actual fact, the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky’s material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth” (16).

Counterposed to the traditional narrative dominated by a single narrator’s voice, the polyphonic writing assumes a dialogical principle which allows the utterance and interaction of different voices—each has its own validity and narrative weight, just like in polyphonic music there are multiple voices that are
cognizant of each other but independent. Although in literature, one cannot, as in music, write two or more melodies to be heard simultaneously, it is still possible to develop parallel intrigues or themes in writing. In reading them consecutively, the readers can also try to imagine them as superimposed. Many pieces in Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass* entail a texture of intertwined themes and motifs, which may bring to a reading experience similar to that of hearing musical polyphony. Considered by Sun Yushi as the “most musical” (*Yecao Yanjiu* 182) of all the *Wild Grass* pieces, “The Beggars” is a good case in point to illustrate polyphony as a strategy in the construction of textual musicality.

“The Beggars” opens with the narrator walking along a high, decaying wall, trudging through the dust. He sees two children begging on the street, one pleading charity, and one mute, wigwagging for alms. The narrator does not feel any sympathy, but rather disdain and contempt. Midway through the piece, the narrator seems to become a beggar himself, wondering how he will beg. At the end of the poem, the narrator retreats to silence and non-action, while other passers-by continue their walk in the dust. On the surface, the poem addresses issues of social inequality in the historical context of 1920s China. At an even more important level, it probes into an individual’s existential dilemma, trapped in a state of indifference and lacking empathy. In his close reading of “The Beggars,” Kaldis noticed its highly experimental form:

“Beggars” has eighteen distinct paragraphs and twenty-seven sentences. Significantly, all but two of the paragraphs contain fewer than thirty-five characters, occupying no more than a single column of printed text. Figuratively, their appearance on the page can be likened to the narrow streets and walls of the poem. Semantically, every paragraph seems to have been designed to convey no more than one or two bytes of information. Words, phrases, and entire sentences which would seem to belong together are distributed into different paragraphs. (173-74)

Kaldis further explains that “the amount of existential anxiety which the speaker feels in his environmental spaces actually determines their transposition into the form of the poem” (176). Accordingly, the visual segregation of narrative elements on the page may signify the speakers desperate attempt to prevent associations with his environment and to repress connections among the things he sees.
Indeed, if we read horizontally and linearly, the deliberately isolated sentences can be seen as a visual representation of the narrow streets and walls of the poem, and thereby intensifying the isolation of the individual psyche. Yet our natural tendency in reading is to see things both horizontally and vertically at the same time. As the eyes moving down and around the page, one can perceive consistencies in diction and repeated words that usually indicate an identifiable hidden pattern of composition. This kind of reading can be likened to analyzing polyphonic music with a superimposition of melodic lines. The sequential threading of notes on the horizontal plane creates melody, while the stacking of notes on the vertical plane creates harmony. To a certain degree, “musical composition lives on and through the tension between vertical-harmonic figural possibilities and horizontal-melodic ones” (Ross 32).

Viewing “The Beggars” from both the horizontal and the vertical plane, it is possible to perceive the sentences as independent but carefully coordinated “melody lines” woven together towards a gradual polyphonic build-up. Charles Alber observed a clear structural parallelism in the composition of “The Beggars.” The poem can be divided into seven scenes, three dramatic and four descriptive. More importantly, “these scenes are so arranged that dramatic and descriptive scenes continually alternate with one another” (Alber 5). The following chart is based on Alber’s analysis of “The Beggars”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>The opening scene, or a prologue, is a descriptive and static scene that creates the appropriate mood and setting.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>Scene II introduces the child beggar and induces a certain amount of tension and hostility between the two characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Scene III is the first interlude, where the poet returns to the imagery of the prologue and reconstruct the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>Scene IV is much like Scene II, with a further development of the drama and emotion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Scene V returns to the descriptive imagery of scene I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>Scene VI depicts a sudden reversal in the drama, as the speaker assumes the identity of a beggar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Scene VII, or the epilogue, releases a sense of finality haunted by images of the prologue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Such structural parallelism vividly reveals the polyphonic nature of “The Beggars.” Rather as in music where the linear melodic dimension is not disturbed but rather enhanced by the vertical harmony, the descriptive and dramatic scenes in “The Beggars” interact with each other to give rise to a more complicated emergent structure. As Victor Zuckerkandl pointed out, “the musical meaning of a tune is affected and may be changed by the other tonal motions that go on at the same time” (150). The emergent polyphonic structure in “The Beggars” has a clarifying effect on the individual scenes that comprise the piece. More specifically, this textual polyphony enables a sharpened understanding of the parallel motifs and tensions throughout the poem. For example, the prologue starts with “I am skirting a high, mouldering wall, trudging through the fine dust,” while “a breeze springs up, and dust is everywhere” (Wild Grass 10). In scene III, “I walk on,” while “a breeze springs up, and dust is everywhere” (10). Again in scene V, “I am skirting a tumble-down, mud wall,” and “a breeze springs up, sending the autumn chill through my lined gown, and dust is everywhere” (11). The recurrence of the background elements, such as the pedestrian-speaker walking, the molding wall, the autumn breeze, and dust, is not a simple repetition but rather a familiar improvisation of the environmental setting, which is both “embedded in” and “entangled with” the dramatic scene in the counterpoint line. The contrapuntal themes of the description and drama interact like lines of melody to create both thematic coherences and strains throughout the poem.

Moreover, the poem also facilitates the co-presence of multiple voices and silences, including that of the child-beggar, the confused mix of “beggar-I” (Chan 61-63), and other passers-by. These voices not only weave and blend with each other along the longitudinal time dimension, but also generate a spectrum of consonance and dissonance on the transversal dimension. Worthy of mentioning here is also the fact that the narrator’s physical and psychological movements in “The Beggars” are vocalized mostly with the closed-mouth sound, such as zou-lu 走路 (skirt), yan-wu 厭惡 (dislike), zeng-wu 憎惡 (detest), and fan-ni 煩膩 (disgust), which goes along with the main motif of qiu-qi 求乞 (begging), the prevalent background, and the curtain line of chen-tu 塵土 (dust). The recurrence of the closed-mouth sound leads to an ebbing stream of resonance, which serves as a sensual stimulant of frustration and negativity, adding an extra layer to the polyphonic musicality of the text.
Conclusion

Ever since its initial publication, *Wild Grass* has received sustained scholarly attention both from within and outside China for more than ninety years. This prose collection represents Lu Xun’s search for a vernacular language to replace the stiff and stifling classical language and his effort to overthrow the ancient poetic tradition of rhymed poetry with fresh and flexible poetic methods. Lu Xun’s primary ambition in prose poetry writing, nevertheless, is more about finding and creating new ways of articulation than attacking the stale literary establishment. Instead of attempting to venture into abstract experiments with the poetic form, Lu Xun allies his writing to a natural, contemporary mode of language in order to give expression to the passionate, emotional essence of his poetic drive. *Wild Grass* reflects a radically different aesthetic sensibility from that of Lu Xun’s early fiction and his later essays. As Admussen aptly pointed out, “*Wild Grass* represents, perhaps even more than his fiction, a set of decisions about the beauty and musicality of the *baihua* for which Lu Xun was such a passionate advocate” (“A Music for Baihua” 12).

This paper explores the “beauty and musicality of the *baihua*” in *Wild Grass* mainly from three angles. First, one of the many potentials Lu Xun proved with his experimental pieces of *Wild Grass* is the extraordinary expressiveness and musicality of the vernacular. Our current reading of the “Forward” to *Wild Grass* demonstrates that Lu Xun successfully captured the inflection of vernacular speech, the extraordinary colloquial sound, cadence, and rhythm, which imbued his writing with genuine feeling in which the reader can share. Secondly, this paper focuses on the use of various types of repetition in “Autumn Night” of *Wild Grass* to further analyze the musicality of its language. While the reader traces and retraces a path through musical space, repetition makes a sequence of sounds seem less like an objective presentation of events and more like a kind of moving beyond time. The multiple dimensions of repetition in “Autumn Night” help to bring together the poet’s fantasies of the garden and reveries of the past, and create both tension and harmony between an inner mindscape and the natural soundscape. Thirdly, this paper examines polyphony as a textual strategy in the case of “The Beggars” and explores how the juxtaposition of descriptive and dramatic scenes, the co-presence of multiple voices, and the deliberate use of background sound effects work together to construct a polyphonic musicality through the text.

Consequently, this author would like to suggest that the reading and understanding of *Wild Grass* is always first of all an act of “listening.” After all,
sometimes it is the indefinite musical effects rather than concrete meanings that bring aesthetic experiences that are most direct and intense, and that essentially make a poem poetic.

Works Cited


**About the Author**

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