Specters of Realism

Liu Yang & Wang Shouren

Abstract: This paper explores the critical possibilities of "specters of realism" as a conceptual metaphor for realism's place in literary history, its truth-seeking spirit as well as its approach to reality. Contrary to René Wellek's description of realism as a "period-concept," realism has made recurrent returns to the literary landscape, and, in a spectral gesture, disrupted the linear temporality of a literary history that sees realism as preceded by Romanticism and followed by Modernism and Postmodernism. Underlying the acts of mimesis is a realist impulse that compels writers to engage with reality through diverse representational strategies. Drawing on the "spectral turn" in cultural studies in the past three decades, this paper examines the circulation of "The Luo Cha Country and the Sea Market," a mystical story from *Liaozhai*, and discusses Yan Lianke's critical works such as *The Veils of Liaozhai*. It argues that the concept of mythorealism, proposed by Yan Lianke and exemplary of the contemporary realist enterprise, is premised on a hauntological epistemology that places the novel on the liminal position between the present and the absent, the material and the immaterial, and the visible and the invisible. The spectral metaphor, reforming and innovating the traditional realist theory which regards the writer as the observer/subject and reality as the observed/object, provides a new perspective on realism's resilience and enduring vitality.

Keywords: specters; *Liaozhai*; realism; mythorealism; reality

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标题：现实主义的幽灵

内容摘要：本文探讨作为概念性隐喻的"现实主义的幽灵"的批判性潜能，它不仅代表了现实主义在文学史中的存在，也体现了其追求真实的创作精神及其通达现实的方式。有别于韦勒克所描述的"现实主义是一个时期性概念"，现

实主义在文学图景中不断回归，以一种幽灵般的方式，打破了文学史中将现实主义线性地安置在浪漫主义之后、现代主义与后现代主义之前的时间观。摹仿行为背后蕴藏着一种现实主义冲动，它促使作家采用多样的表征策略以触碰现实。借鉴过去三十年来文化研究中的“幽灵转向”理论视角，本文以《罗刹海市》的传播为例，分析阎连科的《聊斋的帷幔》等论著，认为阎连科提出的神实主义是当代现实主义探索的典范。它以幽灵存在论的认识论为基础，将小说置于在场与缺席、物质与非物质、可见与不可见之间的边界位置。幽灵的隐喻对传统现实主义理论中将作家视为观察者 / 主体、将现实视为被观察者 / 客体的观念进行重构与创新，为理解现实主义的韧性与持久生命力提供了新的视角。

关键词：幽灵；《聊斋》；现实主义；神实主义；现实

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In 1848, London, at the height of European literary realism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, beginning with perhaps the world’s most famous statement of the ghost: “A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of communism” (Marx and Engels 1). A similar fortune of realism is visible since the advent of Modernism—it was forced to retreat to the realm of the spectral, and relegated to the status of a “nursery tale” (Marx and Engels 1) which affords little, if any, import to a literary academia no longer gullible to the referential illusions after the linguistic turn. The specter, nonetheless, is at the same time evidence of its undeniable existence, however implicit and incorporeal. In fact, writers and critics have in recent years hailed for a “realist turn” in literary studies, and the past decade has witnessed the publications of *The Antinomies of Realism* (Fredric Jameson, 2013), *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (Brian Willems, 2017), *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* (Mary K. Holland, 2020), *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postmodern Realist Fiction* (T. V. Reed, 2021), *Romanticism, Realism and the Lines of Mimesis* (Polly Dickson, 2024), to name a few. The resurgence of realist theories and criticism has been further buoyed up by important academic journals such as *MLQ* (2012), *Novel* (2016), and *Orbis Litterarum* (2021) which have published special issues on realism. It is based on such a status quo in the literary scholarship that one may suggest some slight alterations to the famous quote from the *Manifesto*: Specters of realism are still

haunting the world as we know it. It may also be argued that realism has never been away from the academic circle despite sustained critiques from both Modernism and Postmodernism, and that it is a revenant, in every sense of the word, constantly returning to our contemporary world. In this paper, we intend to explore the critical possibilities of "specters of realism" as a conceptual metaphor, that is, not only to use it as a figure of speech or rhetorical device that embellishes what we already know, but to test its potential as "a discourse, a system of procuring knowledge" (Blanco and Peeren 1) in realist theorization and criticism.

The Spectrality of Realism

The first point to be established is that realism did not simply die after the rise of Modernism in the 20th century. It exists with us presently rather in the form of a specter. To illustrate this point, an example is helpful here: "The Luo Cha Country and the Sea Market" (《罗刹海市》), a mystical story from the classical Chinese tale collection, or as Chinese-educated readers have known it since childhood, a ghost story collection, *Liaozhai/Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (《聊斋志异》), written by Pu Songling from the 1670s to the early 1700s. The story is about how a trader's son, Ma Ji, a youth of astonishing beauty, is carried away by a typhoon in a voyage across the sea and ends up at a country where the people are hideously ugly. Having recovered from the initial shock of seeing a devil-looking stranger, the villagers are much pleased to see him and recollected tales told by their forefathers about a country named China 26,000 *li* to the west of their own, where the people are the most extraordinary in appearance. Ma Ji later learns that political advancement in this foreign land of Luo Cha depends not on literary talent, as in imperial China, but on beauty—the most beautiful are made ministers of state, the next handsomest are made judges and magistrates, and the third class in looks are employed in the palace of the king. Ma Ji therefore begs the accommodating countrymen to show him the capital. So he departs with the company of the villagers, arriving just about dawn at a city whose walls are made of black stone, as black as ink, and whose city gate-houses are about 100 feet-high. Pu Songling interrupted the unfolding of the plot with a detail here: "Redstones were used for tiles, and picking up a broken piece Ma Ji found that it marked his finger-nail like vermilion" (356). Here, Ma Ji gets the chance to catch the first glimpse of the most powerful men in the country. As it turns out, all systems of judgement, all binary oppositions between the beautiful and the ugly, the high and the low are completely inverted in this country. The surpassingly gorgeous young man in China gets a chilly reception and is met with fear and antipathy. Later, in order to have an

audience with the king, Ma Ji has to smear his face all over with coal dust. The king is charmed, and at once makes him a privy councilor, giving him a private banquet, and bestowing other marks of royal favor.

The story continues with Ma Ji visiting a market in the sea, impressing the Dragon King with his literary talent and marrying his daughter. For the purpose of the present discussion, the above synopsis will suffice as a demonstration of Pu Songling's extraordinary style of relating the stories of the strange. Judith T. Zeitlin has noticed the singularity of his narratives as classical tales: "Unlike vernacular stories, which arguably unfold in a space clearly demarcated as fictional, *Liaozhai* tales deliberately straddle the border between fictional and historical discourse and are indeed predicated in part on the ensuing ambiguity" (5). In the particular case of "The Luo Cha Country and the Sea Market," this "ambiguity" is unabashedly unveiled to the readers even in the title, for "Luo Cha" in other classical texts, especially in the Qing Dynasty, is either the transcription of Russia—a reference to an actual land, or the transliterated name of a cannibalistic demon according to Buddhism—an allusion to the ghostly and the spectral. Apart from the title, the ambiguity of genre penetrates the entire narration. Take for example this initial moment when Ma Ji arrives at the city wall of the strange country: "picking up a broken piece Ma Ji found that it marked his finger-nail like vermilion." Readers perusing the pages of *Liaozhai* for excitement and sensation, stimulated by tales of the strange and the occult, might pause at this description here and wonder: What is the purpose of this detail which seems to have little to do with the core of the story? This might remind us of a similar question by Roland Barthes who once mulled over the inclusion of ostensibly irrelevant details in Gustave Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* and Jules Michelet's *History of the French Revolution*. Yet Flaubert's novel is widely received as masterpieces of realism; to include Pu Songling's *Liaozhai* in the same category would not only be far-fetched, but also anachronistic and, perhaps, Eurocentric. That a similar realist inquiry might arise from the reading of a strange-story collection tells us a lot about the potential of the spectral as the source of inspiration for the real. With narrative seriousness and arresting descriptions of details, Pu Songling achieves the paradoxical confluence of the real and the imaginary, the everyday and the strange, the affective and the sarcastic in this short story.

Also paradoxical are some recent attempts at pursing the real in China which find themselves end up in the strange world of *Liaozhai*. A feeling of dissatisfaction is unequivocally registered in these attempts—dissatisfaction with the available modes of representing the real in fiction. As Frank Kermode once pointed out, "we

have a loving-hating affair with reality, we 'keep coming back to the real'; and this continually impoverishes us because it is at odds with such concords as we have achieved" (166). Concords here refers to the existing paradigms and structures of story-telling. This affect of "loving-hating" prompts the more adventurous realist entrepreneurs to conjure up specters of realism back to a world no longer spellbound by its enchantment. In July 2023, Ma Ji's adventures in the Luo Cha country 300 years ago created a renewed resonance among its contemporary readers, thanks to the eponymous song composed by Dao Lang. Due to the ambiguity of the lyrics and the song's allusion to Pu Songling's equally ambiguous story, volunteered efforts have been made by social media users, who delved into the most infinitesimal details of the song, to discover its referential meanings. Since its release three years ago, the song became immediately an Internet phenomenon, believed by millions to be a cryptic yet unreserved revelation of the hypocrisy and imposture of certain celebrities and fellow singers, as well as an address to our times and to philosophic inquiries, suggested by the reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein and the last line of the lyrics. Regardless of Pu Songling's original intent, "The Luo Cha Country and the Sea Market" has become a symbol of unearthing hidden truths and exposing realities long concealed from public view.

The statement that "specters of realism are still haunting the world as we know it" serves to identify a primary impulse of pursuing truth inherent in realist writers. Ulka Anjaria identifies "the realist impulse" as "a transition in representational mode, style, and/or medium that entails a new textual engagement with the contemporary world, as evident in gestures such as stories set in the present rather than the past and the trimming of modernist, metaphorical and metafictional language for a more stripped-down and less ostensibly self-conscious aesthetic" (278). Meanwhile, the realist impulse may also exist in less unequivocal ways. In 2010, Fredric Jameson wrote of a utopian impulse that "is not symbolic but allegorical," which "does not correspond to a plan or to a utopian praxis," and "expresses utopian desire and invests it in a variety if unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways" ("Utopia as Method" 25-26). He therefore called for "a hermeneutic, for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious utopian investments in realities large or small, which may be far from utopian" ("Utopia as Method" 26). In a similar vein, the realist impulse may be detectable, throughout history, in the most strange and occult stories, deviating from our commonsensical methods of perception fine-tuned by the advancement of modern sciences, as is in the case of "The Luo Cha Country and the Sea Market."

Tracing to its Qing Dynasty context, readers may sense a strong note of political mockery aimed at chastising the realities of the imperial court. And adapted as a song in 2023, it still fascinates its audience with the power of truth-seeking that it possesses and may unleash.

This enduring vitality of the realist impulse is exactly what reminds one of a specter: a being which should have belonged to the past, yet frequently appears in the present, disrupting the forward flow of time. As Hamlet exclaims upon seeing the ghost of his murdered father, "Time is out of joint," implying that the pre-existing temporal sequence has been fractured and dislocated. Literary realism in its most restrictive definition is a "period-concept" (Wellek 2) of the 19th century, according to René Wellek. In his 1961 essay "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship," he declared that "realism was a regulative concept, a system of norms dominating a specific time, whose rise and eventual decline it would be possible to trace and which we can set clearly apart from the norms of the periods that precede and follow it" (2). Within this 19th century framework, realism was seen as established upon some necessary conditions and criteria: "truth of observation and a depiction of commonplace events, characters and settings" which were "universal in Victorian novel criticism" (4). In short, realism was "the objective representation of contemporary social reality" (11). It is indeed a fact that we often find introductions to realism in literary history textbooks between the chapters Romanticism and Modernism, overlapping with the historical period of the Victorian era, and that we are inclined to associate realism with the works of major 19th-century European writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Charles Dickens. After this period, to speak of realism is to engage either in nostalgia or in critique of a bygone era—one that now exists for us only as a kind of deceased ancestor who once stirred the rebellious energies of Modernism and Postmodernism, which claimed a more sophisticated understanding of what it means to be real. Nonetheless, realism returns, just as Hamlet's dead father, a revenant haunting and disturbing his son while asking for remembrance: "Hamlet, remember me." Robert Weninger once explained the meaning of *return* as in the phrase "the returns of realism":

> The noun *return* has several meanings; it designates among other things an act of coming or going back in return for an investment or risk taken. Reflection on the word "return" in the context of realism reminds us that realism was never really gone; it might have been sidelined or ostracized, ridiculed or demoted, but—as we must conclude in hindsight today—that was only because it was perceived as so omnipresent, pervasive and intrusive that realism-averse critics

and writers felt duty-bound to bring it down or put it in its place. (687)

And according to the list put together by Mary K. Holland, over twenty different literary realisms have been proposed so far. Of course, they vary enormously in narrative techniques, styles and purposes—some of them seem very far from being sub-branches of realism, for example, postmodern realism, post-postmodern realism, poststructural realism, meta-realism, metafictive realism, etc.—but they are driven unanimously by the ubiquitous realist impulse.

The Specter as a Path to Truth and Reality

Hamlet is another case of resorting to the spectral for knowledge of truth. It is worth noting now that the murdered King of Denmark, "unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled" (1.5.77), returns not merely to startle, but more importantly to divulge what has been kept a secret: "Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing / To what I shall unfold" (1.5.5-6). What he indeed unfolded next was the truth of the court of Denmark that unsettled Hamlet's conception of time ("Time is out of joint."). Perhaps not quite paradoxically, truth was obtained not by the intellectual activities of approaching and scrutinizing—after all, Horatio tried and failed.

MARCELLUS
Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.
[…]
BERNARDO
It would be spoke to.
MARCELLUS Speak to it, Horatio.
HORATIO
What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak!
MARCELLUS
It is offended.
BERNARDO See, it stalks away!
HORATIO
Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!
Exit Ghost (1.1.41, 44-50)

The ghost in *Hamlet* is analogous to "specters of realism" under discussion in this paper in two important ways. First of all, it returns to the center of focus, once and again, in times of considerable confusion and turbulence, providing a path to truth and reality. Secondly, the ghost is symbolic of the crisis of representation that many reality-oriented writers have felt since the end of the last century and is still experiencing today. The readers, just like Marcellus, would expect the professional (scholar) to have in their possession the know-how of approaching reality. They urge their championed scholar to speak to it, in the hope of some positive response that will bring them one step closer to the truth. However, the fact is that realist writers now often find themselves hesitant about using their representational paraphernalia, due to the disconnection between language and reality ushered in by the linguistic turn. Traditionally, realism assumes the role of the scholarly Horatio who is confident in his intellectual prowess and the efficacy of an investigation. In a famous metaphor made by Stendhal, the realist writer is a mirror walking down the road, reflecting whatever there is along the way. Yet the specter, by stalking away, warns us that there is always a dimension of reality that is evasive to our enquiring minds and observing eyes. The fleeing specter forces us to take a step back and re-evaluate our relationship with the object. Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* encouraged us to have a refreshed awareness of the specter, not only as an object of exorcism, but also as an analogy to the fundamental condition of knowability itself.

> It [specter] is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. (5)

A similar note is reiterated in Jameson's explication of Derrida: "Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us" ("Marx's Purloined Letter" 39). Realism's description is often understood in terms of the ancient Greek technique of ekphrasis: the verbal representation of a pre-existing

visual representation. Yet what is often neglected is that the object of description is fictitious after all in a work of fiction. In the case of Pu Songling's story of the occult, for instance, the vermilion-colored tiles simply do not exist outside the writer's world of imagination, despite the remarkable power of visualization the description possesses.

The second point to be established in this paper is that "specters of realism" speak to the need for a critical framework that addresses the not immediately observable reality which may pose a major threat to the conventional notion of literary representation or *mimesis*. We opt for the word *specter* rather than *ghost* precisely for the reason that it implies a liminal position between the visible and the invisible. Stendhal's catoptric metaphor is our clue that the traditional realist technique of description hinges primarily on visibility: to see, watch, observe with various methods of scientific inquiry, and to transcribe the data into detailed verbal depictions that would, then, form vivid images in the readers' minds. In the words of Peter Brooks, realism is "a visual inspection of the world of phenomena," and "we tend to believe that sight is the most objective and impartial of our senses" (16), or Nancy Armstrong, "in order to be realistic, literary realism referenced a world of objects that either had been or could be photographed" (7). If this is true, then several questions might be asked: What will happen if reality exceeds the observing capacity of our senses? What if there is more to it than meets the eye? What if the hinges fall apart and everything "is out of joint"?

Answers to these questions will instigate the reconfiguration of realism as not only a style of literature, but also a fundamental method of epistemological exploration. In the more traditionalist view of realism, its primary goal and function is to keep as detailed a record of the world as possible—especially a record of the base and the ugly which were not granted license in literary representations in the classical era—in order to assist human cognition. It is supposed to be, first and foremost, about humans, according to Georg Lukács. In an essay titled "Narrate or Describe," he quotes from Karl Marx to highlight the importance of human activity to realist works: "To be radical is to grasp things by the roots. The root of humanity is, however, man himself" (110). It is no surprise then that in this essay, Lukács targets the French naturalism, personified by Flaubert and Émile Zola, as the foil of genuine realism represented by Walter Scott, Balzac or Leo Tolstoy, and objects the naturalist method of meticulously detailed descriptions. The "descriptive method," in conclusion, "lacks humanity," for the readers are insufficiently informed of the genuinely important social phenomena: the struggle among people and classes, the epic and heroic actions of the central figure, and the stages of social change and

progressions, etc.

There seems to be a common frustration among realist critics when they are confronted with the parts of the realist work which are elusive to the mechanism of making sense. Lukács's reaction was a verdict of capital sentence: admittedly, he observed, social problems were present in the works of Zola, but they were present in the form of "*caput mortuum*" (113), dead head, eviscerated with the vitalities of life. Roland Barthes was less radical than Lukács, but equally condemning the inclusion of detailed descriptions which bear no apparent relevance to the entirety of the story. Take for example his theory of "the reality effect" ("l'effet de réel"). Stumbling upon Flaubert's barometer in *A Simple Heart* and Michelet's little door in *History of the Revolution*, Barthes tried to contain them in a meaningful framework of explanation by asking the questions: What functions do they perform and what significance do they have? Apparently not satisfied with the speculation that these were meaningless narrative fillers, he came up with a proposition which was linguistic in essence—these details perform the function of signifying the real. They create, therefore, the reality effect, and they are there to make an announcement of their truth-value to the readers. The operation of creating reality effect can be seen as a manifestation of the realist impulse underneath that gravitates towards truth. Teleologically, they operate in a language system of signification that refers not to the outside, but the inside of the text. Elsewhere, Barthes explained this mechanism in more straightforward terms: "The discourse has no responsibility vis-à-vis real: in the most realistic novel the referent has no 'reality'[…]In short[…], what we call 'real' (in the theory of the realistic text) is never more than a code of representation (of signification)[…]" (*S/Z* 80) Yet, *must* we ask the teleological questions about the function and significance of these details and objects? It would probably make more sense if they are understood as objects of the Levinasian alterity: the ultimate Other which is beyond the reach of conceptualization and precedes the foundation of the subject.[1] One would rather think of these details in terms of the specter: they enter the rooms of Madame Aubain and Charlotte Corday simultaneously with us the readers, yet they remain invisible until the moment they catch our eye and confront us as inscrutable intruders. And as soon as we start asking questions and demanding them to speak, they stalk away and escape, leaving us to wonder if they come from the limbo, the realm on the borders of the real and the unreal—the world of writings and languages.

1 In 2002, Julian Wolfreys went as far as to state that "any medium through which we seek to communicate today that involves a narrativization of our identities in relation to others not immediately present is inescapably spectral" (2).

Mythorealism and the Spectral Reality

To speak of "specters of realism" is to find a way of dealing with the dimension of reality that is beyond the reach of our current empiricist paradigms of understanding, be they scientific, linguistic, sociological, or psychoanalytic. As Blanco and Peeren argue, "what is at stake ultimately is the specter as a figure of absolute alterity, that should not be assimilated or negated, but lived with in an open, welcoming rationality" (33). This new rationality is yet to take on an exact critical or philosophical shape[1], at the same time, a contemporary Chinese realist writer and critic, Yan Lianke, has been working toward a solution. In an epilogue to his own novel, *The Odes of Songs* (《风雅颂》) titled "The Non-Existent Existence," Yan recalled that on a posthumous marriage ceremony in a freezing winter, he saw hundreds of red and yellow butterflies sitting on the coffins of his nephew and the bride. To him, the event of the butterflies appearing out of the blue on a winter day was both "true and strange" (*Odes* 352-353), testifying to the existence of certain realities beyond his understanding. Throughout the years, Yan has created a series of oxymorons to call our attention to the discrepancy between what we perceive to be real and the unattainable truth. "The Non-Existent Existence" is a case in point. Another example would be "the real covered up by the real" in his 2011 monograph *Discovering Fiction*. Here, he proposed a variation of realism—mythorealism, by which he means a style of fiction writing as well as a way of thinking not subjected to the logic of rationality, but rather the souls and spirits of the writer. This new path to reality is through imaginations, allegories, mythologies, legends, dreams, visions, and transformations. Reality is not "reflected" in a mythorealist piece of work, but "created" by the writer.

Mythorealism is different from its magical realist predecessors. The logic of reality in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is "half-causality," according to Yan, as opposed to the "full-causality" of the traditional realism represented by Tolstoy and the "zero-causality" demonstrated by Kafka. The grotesque story of a man transforming into a giant bug in "Metamorphosis" is "zero-causality," because it is a total violation of the law of nature or society. The 19th century realism, on the contrary, endeavors to give explanations to every single one of its protagonists, events, and plots so that everything happens with a good cause, mostly rooted in the social milieu in which the characters are immersed. García Márquez's narrative is something in between, and therefore "half-causal"

1 One example might be the recent trend of speculative realism in philosophy, and especially the object-oriented ontology.

in the sense that the events are not explicable following the everyday logic, but not as incredible as a man suddenly transformed into a bug. In Yan Lianke's diagram, "non-causality" and "full-causality" sit at the two ends of the scale, and "half-causality" is forever flowing in-between, occupying the space of "probability" and "likeliness" (*Discovering Fiction* 117-118). Yan himself is after something else—to him, the "inner-causality" or the "inner-truth" is the new principle of fiction writing evolved from the whole of the literary experience of the 20th century. Writers are encouraged by Yan's manifesto of mythorealism to perform the task of uncovering this inner-truth, and thus revealing "the real covered up by the real."

A recent invention of oxymoron, "the real of the unreal" (27) is seen in his 2023 monograph, *The Veils of Liaozhai* (《聊斋的帷幔》). The fact that Yan declared unequivocally in the Preface this time that "literature is solely committed to the belief in the real" (6) followed by an exclamation mark. He then explained that the real here is not circumscribed by empirically determined facts, realities and possibilities, but also "the real of the unreal," "the real that transcends the real," "the real with no verifiable evidence," or "the real that is counter-real" (31). In this new critical work, Yan extended the view that literature oscillated between the real and the unreal in different historical periods. In the 19th century, the criteria of literary quality were based entirely on its faithfulness to the limitations of experience. From the 20th century onward, the unreal and the impossible reappeared in literature. Specifically, about the Chinese literature, Yan contended that little progress had been made in terms of writing the real since Lu Xun's 1921 novella "The True Story of Ah Q" (《阿Q正传》). In order to push for some progress, Yan proposed not to follow that trail blazed by the 19th century realists, and perhaps not even the modernists and postmodernists, but to return to an age that was pre-modern and pre-Englightenment—the age of mythologies and folklores. Indeed, China has a *zhiguai* (志怪) tradition—writing of the strange and supernatural—from *A Search of the Supernatural* (《搜神记》) in the 4th century to *Old Tales Retold* (《故事新编》) written by Lu Xun in the height of the New Culture Movement. Yan was confident that there was much to learn from the understandings and dealings of the real in these strange story writings.

The trick is to make readers believe—not so much demanding a degree of suspension of disbelief on the readers' part as providing enough serious evidence of reality as the writers' responsibility. *Liaozhai*, the pinnacle of the *zhiguai* tradition according to Yan, is indeed a strange story collection written in Classical Chinese, but it demonstrated the same narrative seriousness as any realist fiction. It is worth now returning to the story of Ma Ji. As was mentioned, when the young man arrives

at the capital, he sees city walls made of black stone, as black as ink, and gate-houses about 100 feet-high. Immediately after this depiction of the wonderous, Pu Songling invited the readers to have an intimate touch with the fantasy world, and commanded Ma Ji to pick up a piece of redstone. Here, Pu Songling has achieved a displacement effect—the most realistic description is displaced from an expected story of realism, but inserted in a most strange and occult story of the Luo Cha Country. These descriptions serve as the "ocular proof," an eye-witness that gives credit to the otherwise incredible beings and happenings. They also serve metaphorically as a bridge—a word used by Yan in an interview explaining the mechanism of mythorealism. It is a bridge that helps us to cross the treacherous river of superficiality and reach the other shore which is the real. Intentionally or unintentionally, "the other shore" is an allusion to the ultimate Buddhist pursuit of truth, a destination that appeals to us the mortals, with its looming and mythic appeal in the distance.

Specifically, Yan spoke of specters in *Liaozhai* as well as in "Pedro Paramo," a novella by Juan Rulfo.[1] Of course there are differences: the boundary between the living and the spectral was unmistakably demarcated in *Liaozhai*, and the line was ambiguously drawn in "Pedro Paramo." Yet the same impulse drives their specters and urges them to visit us, once and again, through 300 years and across two antipodean points on the planet earth: the realist impulse. Like the contemplation of the utopian by Jameson, perhaps what is important about realism is "not what can be positively imagined and proposed, but rather what is not imaginable and not conceivable," the limits of our own perception, and the "lines beyond which" we do not seem able to go in imagining what is real and what is not. This speaks to the necessity and urgency of the contemplation and theorization of the specters of realism today.

In the case of realism, the concept of the specter serves as a metaphor that reconfigures both its existence in literary history and the nature of truth it seeks to reveal. It has yet another dimension which joins together the past and the present. Blanco and Peeren point out that the specter is not only a disruption of the chronological flow of time, but also a non-present presence that achieves the effect of synchronization: "For Derrida, the ghost's story is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibility of the future…because it cannot (yet) be

1 It might be of some interest to know that the latter was alternatively translated into Chinese as literally "Between the Man and the Specter."

articulated in the language available to us" (58). Yan Lianke's theorization of "the real of the unreal" is, viewed in this light, itself a spectral activity. So not so much different from Dao Lang or Marcellus, Horatio and Hamlet, Yan is also approaching a supposedly dead past for the revelation of truth in the here and now. More importantly, Yan's critical effort is based on the activity of reading Pu Songling's *Liaozhai*, which, according to Blanchot, is fundamentally an act of resurrection.[1] There have been constant calls for revisiting realism in literary scholarship in the past decade because realism has been in turn revisiting us all the time, and we have every reason to believe that the specters of realism will not stalk away, but keep coming back, and perpetuate their visitation to us, now and in the future.

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1 In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot compares reading to the resurrection of Lazarus: "To roll back the stone, to obliterate it, is certainly something marvelous, but it is something we achieve at every moment in everyday language. At every moment we converse with Lazarus, dead for three days—or dead, perhaps, since always. In his well-woven winding sheet, sustained by the most elegant conventions, he answers us and speaks to us within ourselves" (195).

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