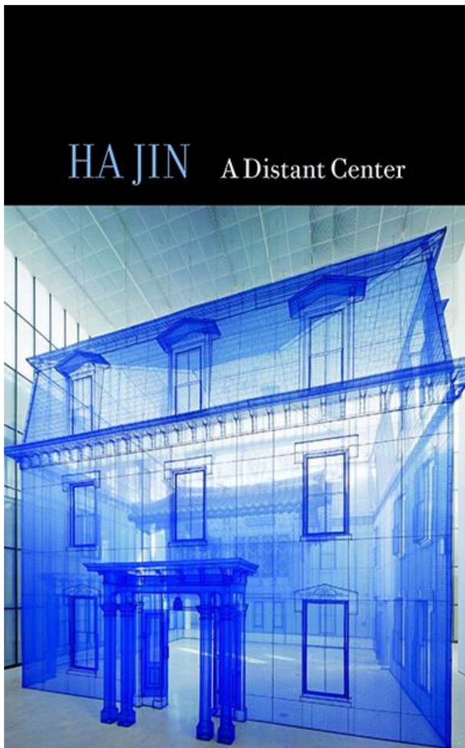

Jack Foley

Ha Jin's Poetry: The Language of Betrayal
a review of *A Distant Center* (Copper Canyon Press, 2018)

As long as he can, a writer will stay within his mother tongue, his safe domain…I have been asked why I write in English. I often reply, "For survival." People tend to equate "survival" with "livelihood" and praise my modest, also shabby, motivation. In fact, physical survival is just one side of the picture, and there is the other side, namely, to exist—to live a meaningful life. To exist also means to make the best use of one's life, to pursue one's vision. Joseph Brodsky once observed, "When a writer resorts to a language other than his mother tongue, he does so either out of necessity, like Conrad, or because of burning ambition, like Nabokov, or for the sake of greater estrangement, like Beckett"…But in reality, a writer's motivations are mixed. In a writer who migrates to another language, necessity, ambition, and estrangement usually come to bear at the same time…At some point, linguistic betrayal can be unavoidable….

—Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant*

Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey
A kiddley divey too, wouldn't you?

—Milton Drake, Al Hoffman, Jerry Livingston

Jack Foley: If, as you say, the person who lives his life is separate from the person who writes, then every writer is in exile.
Ha Jin: That's true.
—Jack Foley, Interview with Ha Jin, 1/23/19

One of the lessons we learn from poetry concerns the deep instability of language—its ability to shift before our eyes (and ears). The above quotation, "Mairzy doats…," is not an obscure passage from *Finnegans Wake*: it's from an American song that was highly popular (and highly commercial) in the early 1940s. It resolves into "Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy. / A kid'll eat ivy, too. Wouldn't you?" When as a child I visited Yankee Stadium, I heard someone selling something though I had no idea what it was. What I heard was, "Hey, get Jacobia!" I wondered what Jacobia was. What the vendor was saying was, "Hey, get your cold beer." Language, even when it is our native language, is a slippery slope.

When in 1989, in exile, Ha Jin made the decision to write exclusively in English he knew that it would raise the possibility of betrayal—not to mention estrangement. He writes of Vladimir Nabokov in "The Language of Betrayal" that Nabokov's "tragedy is not that he might have written better in his mother tongue but that he had to give the prime years of his creative life to English, a language in which he never felt at home." And in "The Spokesman and the Tribe": "The acceptance of rootlessness as one's existential condition…exemplifies the situation most migrant writers face…For most migrant writers today, displacement makes them more vulnerable and their existence more haphazard, since they cannot fall back on any significant past and must struggle to survive in new places."

Poetry at its highest is perhaps the most linguistically self-conscious of literary arts. One can ask how the possibilities of betrayal, estrangement, exile, vulnerability, rootlessness affect Ha Jin's carefully contrived—and often quite beautiful—English (American). He has in fact been publishing English (American) poetry for nearly thirty years. *Wikipedia*: "Jin grew up in the chaos of early communist China. He was on a scholarship at Brandeis University when the 1989 Tiananmen incident occurred. The Chinese government's forcible put-down hastened his decision to emigrate to the United States, and was the cause of his choice to write in English." Previous books of poetry include *Between Silences* (1990), *Facing Shadows* (1996) and *Wreckage* (2001).

This is the opening poem of his latest volume, *A Distant Center* (2018). It appears in a section titled "A Solitary Traveler":

YOU MUST NOT RUN IN PLACE

Don't say since life is short and precarious,
you want to live effortlessly.
Don't brag you will try to outsmart time—
every day you'll watch movies and eat dim sum
while chatting idly with friends.

Better keep busy like the others
who work for a sack of rice or a set of clothes.
See how steady those footsteps are on the wharf,
look at the ships leaving the port—
heavy, they are still going far.

If language is unstable, so is life: “short and precarious.” The poem’s explicit advice (always allowing for irony) is to keep on the move: “you must not run in place.” In the very next poem, “The Long-Distance Traveler” (not “Runner”), the poet adds,

May you have
fresh excitement every day, but don’t
linger at any charming site for long.

A Distant Center is published by Copper Canyon Press, an American publisher. Yet the opening poem (in English) seems to be addressed to a Chinese person, and not necessarily an American Chinese person: “eat dim sum,” “work for a sack of rice”—though the very next phrase, to work for “a set of clothes,” does not suggest anything specifically Chinese. To put it another way, the word “you” in this poem is problematical. The poet may in fact be addressing *himself*—advising himself to do what he actually did after the news of Tiananmen Square reached him: commit himself to “migrating,” to being, like his great predecessor, Li Po, a wanderer. Is the poem merely a mode of self-justification, an attempt to convince himself, long after the fact, that he did the right thing? What exactly does the word “heavy” mean here? The entire line, “heavy, they are still going far” is not quite colloquial American: we would be much more likely to say something like “The boats carry heavy loads but they are still going far.” So there is something odd, something slightly “foreign” about the way the line is structured. But, beyond this, does “heavy” carry overtones of “heavy-hearted”? Does it conjure up his sadness—even his guilt—at doing what the poem tells him he must do? Does it suggest that, at some level, he would rather “run in place” than “run away”? Is the price for “going far”—having a career, making a success in the USA—the pang of homesickness: continual nostalgia, continually having to answer the voice within him that says *he did the wrong thing*? A few pages later, he writes,

…at night I often hear a voice
whisper, tickling my ear:
“There’s no meaning in an effortless life—
you came into this world
just to strive into another self.”

Again, note the effective but odd, uncolloquial—even ungrammatical *—use of the word “strive” and the suggestion that one must go, with effort, from self to self.

Is Ha Jin's insistence on self-realization a betrayal of *both* Chinese culture and himself? Is the "heavy load" he carries simply his ego, placing himself—in a very Western way—above his genetic and cultural inheritance?

"You Must Not Run in Place" is only ten lines: two stanzas balanced against one another, each containing five lines. It appears to be an orderly construct offering perfectly reasonable advice to anyone reading it. Yet, upon inspection, it becomes something else: a field in which various worlds collide. It's like Baudelaire's famous line, "*N'importe où hors du monde!*" ("Anywhere out of this world!") except that the demands of "monde" (world) keep coloring the language. Where would "you" be eating dim sum—the United States or China? Where would "you" be seeing movies? The language of the poem continually—subtly—betrays (subverts) the explicit advice the poem offers, yet the advice remains the poem's overriding "message." The poem's restlessness—its language—suggests a consciousness which must continually negotiate its own contradictions, its own varying demands, and which can find no rest, no "home." One poem—a very moving one—suggests that the situation had been even worse when the poet was younger and that the only final "solution" to his dilemma is death:

> In no time you have become an old man.
> Children on streets call you "granduncle."
> You are old, really old.
> You used to burn with so many desires,
> consumed by bitterness and despair,
> all because you wanted what did not belong to you.
> You used to squander your life
> hoping your soul's fire could light up
> some eyes and dispel
> one patch of darkness after another.
>
> Now you are old,
> but may your heart get purer,
> burning only for one person or one thing
> until it turns to ashes.
>
> ("Old")

As it is, wherever we are, whatever we do or say, someone or something is unacknowledged, betrayed.

In his introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Mallarmé or the Poet of Nothingness*, Ernest Sturm writes, "In a theater full of empty seats, poets became their own favorite audience…From 1850 to the early 20th century, from the post-Romantic generation to the last Symbolists, writing meant exile."

Exile or—to use Ha Jin's term—"rootlessness" is the "existential condition" of this marvelous poet whose highly problematical language tells us that poetry simultaneously

connects us to the world and isolates us, whose very successes are necessarily in some sense a whirl-a-gig of failures. For the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the poet "becomes the strangest of all beings because, without issue on all paths, he is cast out of every relation to the familiar and befallen by *atē*, ruin, catastrophe":

> Pre-eminent in the historical place, [creators of the *polis*] become at the same time *apolis*, without city and place, lonely, strange, without issue amid the essent as a whole,…without structure and order, because they themselves *as* creators must first create all this.
> (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1953)

"So many doors close once you pass them," writes Ha Jin, "Don't turn around…." *A Distant Center* is a book by a poet who understands poetry to be, precisely, *apolis* in Heidegger's sense and, in Ernest Sturm's terms, a theater of exiles. He writes,

> You don't know how I hate networking.
> Banquets of a dozen courses
> and endless parties cannot shrink
> the distances between people

and declares, in pain—and in classic iambic pentameter—"I dream of becoming a scar on China's face."

Ha Jin's final stance is simply to fulfill his destiny as a writer:

> You must cherish the blank paper in front of you
> and write out words that cannot be erased.
> If you are fortunate
> they will keep a story evergreen
> and will enter into your backbone.
>
> This piece of paper is a humble beginning,
> but no calumny, no power
> can shake your words in black and white.
> Your voice and timeless news
> will rise from here gradually.
> You must give all you have
> to the good paper in front of you.
>
> ("Paper")—

though even this is challenged by a poem appearing earlier in the book:

> My notebook has remained blank for months
> thanks to the light you shower
> around me. I have no use

for my pen, which lies
languorously without grief.

Nothing is better than to live
a storyless life that needs
no writing for meaning—
when I am gone, let others say
they lost a happy man,
though no one can tell how happy I was.

(“Missed Time”: the poem is written “after Dai
Wangshu,” translator of Baudelaire and Lorca.)

But I want to end with a stunning poem from a previous book, *Wreckage* (2001):

BETRAYAL

Come, you can’t forget those days
when the foreign rebels surrounded us.
There was no food left in the town.
Parents exchanged their babies—
to have them at other homes
bathed, killed, cooked and eaten.
When someone died of hunger or disease
people would rush over
to cut him up for meat.

Our starved troops were losing their morale,
so you had me dragged out. I still hear
you speak to the officers and soldiers:
“You all defend this city with
one heart for our Emperor.
I cannot offer you my limbs to eat
because I have to lead the defense,
but I dare not keep this woman.
Please have her.”

Have you forgotten what I said?—
“I’m still useful although
I’m merely a concubine.
Unlike your wife, I can read to you
and copy your writings.
Remember how I pleased you.”

Some of the men seemed uncomfortable
whispering that I was too young

and too pretty for the blade.
But you gave orders—
they took me apart.

Afterward they began butchering
girls and women; then boys
and old men ended up in kitchen pots.
My father too became a meal.
By the time the imperial army came to
break the siege, how many people had gone
through their countrymen's bowels?
Over four thousand. Even
the rebels might not have killed so many.

The Emperor promoted you to court
and awarded you a two-page biography
in the *Royal Records of Loyal Men*,
yet I'll never recant my words
that inflamed your mind
and cost me my flesh:
"You ought to surrender
so as to save the civilians.
To be human, we may have to face
the charge of betraying our country."

Carl Sandburg: "Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land…."

* One might strive *towards* something but to strive *into* something seems to me to be an effective misuse of the word.

Jack Foley has published fifteen books of poetry, five books of criticism, a book of stories, and a two-volume, 3,000-page "chronoencyclopedia," Visions & Affiliations: California Poetry 19402005. His recent publications include EYES (selected poems); The Tiger & Other Tales, a book of stories; Riverrun, a book of experimental poetry; and Grief Songs. When Sleep Comes: Shillelagh Songs, a book of poems, is forthcoming, as is a book edited by California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia commenting on and celebrating Visions & Affiliations. He has received Lifetime Achievement Awards from Marquis Who's Who and the Berkeley Poetry Festival.