

(Un)tying a Firm Knot of Ideas: Reading Yang Mu's *The Skeptic*

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When *Yi Shen* (*The Skeptic: Notes on Poetical Discrepancies*) came out in 1993, it won immediate acclaim. In the same year, the book was elected one of the "Books of the Year" by the *China Times* and awarded "The Best Book Award" by *The Reader*.¹ Critics and readers were impressed by the humorous ways Yang Mu writes about his skepticism on religion. As a system of belief founded on texts, religion is taken as a "firm knot of ideas" (2) to be untied by the skeptic. Some reviewers, however, read the book as the author's attempt to supplant traditional religions with his own "religion" of poetry built on the Romantic notion of beauty and truth.² Of note here is a very interesting point: *The Skeptic*, a deconstructive reading of religious discourses, is now read against its grain. Such divergence, in fact, effects a self-evacuating irony on the book that precisely justifies the author's concerns about "poetical discrepancies." An investigation into these discrepancies, presented in the book and in its reception, not only demonstrates critical issues in interpretation and criticism of a literary kind, but also sheds light on some significant differences in the approach to language.

What first captured the attention of readers is the book's bilingual title, 疑神 [Yi Shen] *The Skeptic: Notes on Poetical Discrepancies*. Although the title in Chinese, *Yi Shen* [Doubting God], carries an explicit referent, "God," as the subject for scrutiny, the myriad meanings of the Chinese character, *shen*, such as "spirit," "higher being," "deity," "divinity," "supernatural," "magical" or even "uncanny," undermine its clarity. In contrast, the title in English supplied by the author, *The Skeptic: Notes on Poetical Discrepancies*, suggests no specific subject for

doubts. The gist of the book—the skeptical attitude—is personified as “the skeptic” who takes nothing for granted. Such attitude to life leads a person to observe various idiosyncrasies in the rhetorical articulation of faith and belief.

According to Geertz, it is “a cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system. For those who are committed to it, such a religious system seems to mediate genuine knowledge, knowledge of the essential conditions in terms of which life must, of necessity, be lived.”³ Reflecting a similar view, Yang Mu analyzes the transcendental concept, “god,” “dao,” or any logos, as a center which “is born of false conclusions drawn from far-fetched analogies; He [it] dies of textual research and deconstruction” (Yang 70). The notes present “discrepancies” of two major kinds: over-selectivity and distortion, as identified by Geertz. Like ideology, religion is subject to a pernicious selectivity in which only some aspects of actual life are emphasized. In addition, those aspects thus recognized are distorted to support the ideologues. What *The Skeptic* illustrates is that in most religious texts, over-selectivity and distortion work to formulate a closed system of signification within which “god” is installed.

Demonstrative of a signficatory act, the principal statement in the first section of *The Skeptic* is put in a poetic way: “Religion is merely a firm knot of ideas” (2). When Yang Mu renders the Chinese transliteration of “ideology,” he cleverly turns it into a four-character word “yi-di-lu-jie” [a firm knot of ideas]. It follows that in order to untie the “firm knot of ideas,” one must unravel the process of signification. “Everybody knows the images,” but the skeptical speaker claims in Section 5, “only I know the ways to display and preserve these images [...]. Everybody pays attention to images; I do not. I pay attention to the ways images are displayed and preserved” (64, emphasis mine). Images are indispensable since “god” ought to be inscrutable. Therefore, “god” needs to be mystified by images and hidden in shrines, in order to show how important or omnipotent he is.

In a way, what is poetic in religious language lies in its capacity to

create a new way of life and to open readers' eyes to new aspects of reality.⁴ In many sections of *The Skeptic*, the creative potentialities of the images of "god" are closely examined. There are all kinds of "god" in different cultures. Gods can be male or female. In the West, there are the Christian god and the Greek gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus. In Asia, in the coastal areas of China and in Taiwan, for example, there are sea goddesses worshipped by fishermen and sailors. In some oriental cultures, such as Japan, Kami (god) can reside in objects. People who are serious about drinking tea may admire "Tea gods" and study "Tea Bible" (296). Common to most cultures, images of god are primarily man-made in the form of verbal or plastic arts. It is believed that the Christian god created mankind in his image. In so saying, humans are endowed with a certain degree of divinity above other creatures and given a hope of resembling god in appearance and virtues. Race-conscious people, however, often question the validity of such claims because it is too "obvious" that the image of the Christian god, as embodied by Jesus Christ, is fashioned after the look of a White Caucasian male. The skeptic observes an interesting cultural difference: "The sculptures of arhats, are all individually given a unique appearance whereas all angels look more or less the same" (295). Plastic arts certainly give the most direct impression of a "god." Athena, Apollo and King David appeal to the skeptic through paintings and sculptures. Once, a picture of a bronze sculpture of Athena stuns him: "She is so beautiful that one dare not look at her in the face" (118). It is a beauty that is mystified by reproductions far removed from the "origin." Yet the "godliness" of Athena lies in this beauty. Comments like these do not aim to imply an expedience of research into the true face of the referent, be it arhats, angels or Athena, but to arouse readers' interest in the diverse methods of representation.

To deepen the understanding of signs, Yang Mu offers a Chinese perspective that ruptures the Saussurean notion of signification. In the Chinese language, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not entirely arbitrary. In section 19, noting that Chinese

pictorial writing offers a graphic resemblance to the physical landscape, the skeptic wonders about the order of appearance of an island, the signified, and the Chinese character, “dao” 島, the signifier.

No one knows whether there had been such an island before Cang Qie made the character “island” or there had been such a character before some mighty being made the island in the bay outside my window.

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Whichever came first, the power of imitation is incredible.

If the island has existed before the character, it [the character] is “a god-sent inscription.”

On the contrary, if the character has existed before the island, it [the island] is “the craft of god and spirit.”

Both are superb. (275-76)

His argument, in fact, reveals the inadequacy of Western linguistic theory when applied to a non-alphabetical and non-phonetic language. As a sign, the Chinese ideogram facilitates three ways of “looking” at the issue of signification. First, not every island resembles the Chinese character 島, so the relationship is arbitrary. Second, some islands do bear a close resemblance to the graphic sign, so there is a definitive mimetic relationship. Third, when the signifier is rendered in different calligraphic styles, they bear a visual resemblance to an island in different weathers, so that the signifiers and the signified are both indeterminate, but the matching can still be possible. The indeterminate, reversible link between the origin and the trace causes doubt. Whether it is an island that has existed before the character or vice versa, the skeptic ascribes the creation of the sign to the supernatural, as suggested by the god-affixed Chinese adjectival phrases. Thus, the relationship between the signifier and the signified oscillates between divine determinism and mimetic craftsmanship. At times, the question of distinguishing the origin from its imitation can be resolved by chance in the Chinese language. Such serendipity proves the supremacy of art, whether it is the verbal art of copying the shape of an island or the sculptor’s art of axing the landscape according to the character—“Both are superb.”

Driven by imagination and mysteries of life, man has needed to invent a sign to contain the metaphysical and arrived at a name, "god" (⊙). In *The Skeptic*, a variety of signs from different cultures orchestrate a play of poetical discrepancies, which become particularly conspicuous in translation. The Greek word "logos" was translated into the English word, "Word," capitalized to give it a mystic and divine flavor. In Chinese, "logos" is rendered by the character, "Dao" 道. In the Chinese translation of "The Gospel according to John," a back translation of the opening sentence reads: "In the beginning was Dao, Dao was with God, and Dao was God" (114). The Bible, in this light, seems to follow Laozi's (in the third century B.C.) explanation of the mysterious origin of the world: "I do not know its name and call it Dao" (115). The elasticity and inexactness of the term Dao plays a crucial role in this cultural transfer, linking ancient Chinese philosophy with Christianity. Readers are reminded of the Chinese concept of immanence as epitomized in the ever-present but inadducible Dao. "The Dao that can be verbalized is not the universal Dao" (116). In Chinese culture, to build a system on the unreproducible Dao is self-defeating. In spite of the constructedness of signs and traces, Section 16 illustrates how poetical representations of the abstract and ineffable have been institutionalized into systems of belief or disciplines: Dao into Daoism; god into theology and different religions; and words into poetry, poetics, and different schools of poetics.

From an ironic distance, the author sees through different strategies of signification but makes use of them at the same time. When a question of location "Where are gods and demons?" is posed, different religions and philosophies come up with different answers. To the skeptic, Christianity is a cultural construct composed of architecture, music, poetry, and visual arts. The composition of soaring vaults, melodious prayers, and variegated colours in a cathedral provides an ideal setting for reading Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. In this, "all the beauty of Western culture is contained" (9). Cathedrals are an exquisite design worked out by humans to house their god. So are temples for other gods. These images symbolize a sanctuary—in times of wars

and in holocaust movies in particular. Some religious systems do away with buildings and house their "god" in nature. In Buddhist scriptures, for instance, different Buddhas are found sitting under different trees (249-58). Sakyamuni, the most revered of Buddhas, is known to have been enlightened during his meditation under a Bodhi tree. Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher, often enshrined as god, is said to have been teaching under apricots (261-62).

As for the whereabouts of the Devil, a priest will say, "Devil is in your heart." When people wonder where Dao is, Zhuangzi's (369?-286? B.C.) reply is, "everywhere".

Then he elaborates it with examples and situates Dao in ants, in weeds, and in earthware. Finally, he actually comes up with "in urine and excrement." It is really getting worse and worse.

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//Deep in the mountain, there is a vast mansion, a Spanish monastery with a red-tiled roof. Greeting one's eyes are pineapples all over the mountain. A breeze blows. (20)

To Yang Mu, it is not the locations or the validity of such locations that matter. It is the ways the place is signified that deserve one's attention. His witty juxtaposition in fact teases the "confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism."⁵ After citing the contingent location of Dao "in urine and excrement," the author immediately cuts to a red-tiled Spanish monastery in the green and refreshes the air with the sweet-smelling breeze of pineapple. A game of jozzling signifiers is played here, in which disparate sets of images collide into one another head-on. Humor and irony are the marked style of the passages in *The Skeptic*, especially when they are read in a self-alienating approach.

Like a cultural critic, the skeptic examines the discursive logic in the theory and practice of a religion by engaging a wide range of texts; examples from numerous systems of belief are drawn. The mysterious reincarnation of a Tibetan Lama who died in March 1984 into a Spanish boy born on 12 February 1985 in Granada, a Catholic community, was a wonder to the world (33). The skeptic is amazed by such belief

in transcendence beyond temporal-spatial bounds. Greek myths of Apollo and Athena that extrapolate "truths" beyond human experience are also explored. As for the sedimentation of discourses, Christianity apparently excels in its number of publications and multi-mediumistic representations. Besides the Bible, there exists a vast amount of writings in different categories. In literature alone, representative texts discussed in *The Skeptic* include narratives such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Milton's Christian epic, *Paradise Lost*; and poetry such as the works of John Donne, religious verse by Hopkins, and the sacramental sonnets of the poet-monk, Edward Taylor. Set among monasteries and churches, Christian narratives repeatedly performed by pilgrims, knights, monks, and clergymen since the Medieval times have discursively established the religious system. Apart from this organized dissemination of the Christian doctrine through verbal texts, there are theatrical performances and cinematic versions dealing with the same story of crucifixion and salvation. In this connection, the skeptic looks into a modern mode of indoctrination featured by the theatrical rendition of the 1960s musical, "Jesus Christ, Superstar," which was later made into a movie. To him, the director plays god in an adaptation, and the biblical plot can be re-staged and re-cast in any setting, for example the Ming dynasty in China (13). Despite discrepancies in the artistic form of signification, the formulaic presentation serves to perpetuate the Christian logic.

From a literary point of view, striking resemblances in the depiction of death are found between religious texts and other forms of writing. The most famous contemplation of death, Hamlet's soliloquy of "To be or not to be," is used as a prelude to the topic in section 10. "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns, puzzles the will" solicits various attempts to explain and explore the region beyond this life. Yang Mu places in one category the serenity of philosophers confronted with death. As known from ancient writings about the sages' "biographies," Confucius knew his time had come and had actually prepared for it, whereas the execution of Socrates

was accepted by the victim: "If gods find this well, let it be." In another category, an ironic comparison is made between the ways Jesus Christ and Ah Q behave when death is near. By placing Christ, "a melancholic man," in the Bible with Ah Q, the despised clown in a famous vernacular Chinese fiction, the author reads them not as the son of "god" or a creation of a writer, but as different poetical embodiments of human reaction to death (147-50).

Apart from analyzing the literary and aesthetic process of image-building, the author meticulously checks the coherence of individual religious discourses and uncovers aberrations against reduction. In the skeptic's reading, some aspects of Christianity exhibit inherent contradictions.

God is almighty, within a system. (6)

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God decides everything, including your belief in god and my disbelief in god. God decides that I do not believe that god can decide everything. (8)

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The missionary's job is a riskless one because god has already decided who is to believe him and who is not. (8)

To an average reader, the illogic underscoring Christianity is too obvious to miss. Ideological aberrations are often required when one needs to make up his mind about what should be ascribed to god's grace, and what to his own faults. Needless to say, the decisions must fall within the system. Contradictions are to be suppressed by faith, and doubts dismissed by the admission of human limitations.

Similar tactics of over-selectivity and distortion are found in other kinds of discourse. Assuming the role of a literary critic in section 15, the skeptic does a close reading of Karl Marx's love letter to his wife, Jenny, in 1856 when he was in exile in London. With the practical skills of American formalism, the skeptic anatomizes the stylistic features of the text. To him, Marx's simile of comparing his yearning for love during a period of separation to the plants' need of sunlight and rain is too conceited, though the logic works well. However, Marx's allusions to Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach, a German phi-

losopher; Jacob Moleschott, a Dutch physiologist; and Pythagoras, an ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician, are rather strange in a love letter. As a materialist, Marx would probably refute the notion of rebirth, as formulated in the Brahman belief of reincarnation in Hinduism and Jesus Christ's resurrection in Christianity. But for love, Marx ends his love letter with a poetic line, "Buried in her arms, and be reborn in her kisses." This seems to be a reconciliatory note of Marx, forsaking his usual dialectical thinking and materialistic outlook for love. Such a romantic line in the love letter nonetheless stands up as a rupture to the Marxist logic. In *The Skeptic* (Section 15), Marx's well-argued love letter is placed side by side with a lover's speech in Gustave Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*. Rodolphe says to Madame Bovary in their first meeting after a six-week separation, "Oh, I think of you constantly. It drives me to despair, [...]. Forgive me! I'll leave you [...]. Good-bye! I'll go away, far away, and you'll hear no more of me."⁶ The approach-and-avoidance conflict of forbidden lovers is a cause for dramatization in literature. Emma and Rodolphe's manneristic indulgence in theatricality constitutes a sharp contrast to Marx's letter. There is no analogy by logical deduction, but an intense emotional outburst. Marx's conceit and Rodolphe's verbiage are divergent signifying practices that exhibit poetical discrepancies in the discourse of love, "real" and "fictional." The discrepancies distinguish a scientific socialist from an artist (Flaubert). The discussion also reveals contradictions within a person's language. Even Marx, the god who fathered Marxism, has to admit the irrelevance of his scientism and resort to transcendental imagery in the emotional aspects of human life. A major source of pleasure in reading *The Skeptic* is to retrace the way in which the author examines the language in a discourse—how the language follows, and at times, breaks away from the system that circumscribes it.

Most powerful is signification at the critical moment when one's religious faith is put to the test. Several instances of religious struggle are cited in *The Skeptic*, in which the author perceives a loss of subjectivity and a distortion of human nature. The coercive twist of natural

human responses into a stereotypical piety is exposed in the horror-stricken scenes of faithful Christians fighting lions in the colosseum and the bloody image of having Jesus nailed to the cross. The skeptic discerns that the repulsion and eeriness of these images are actually suppressed by faith and naturalized by rituals. Violence and blood are shock therapy to wandering souls. Sacrificial acts serve to revive disciples' sense of guilt and to repress their human responses. Besides, the suppression of romantic love and passion in the name of god is no less unnatural. To lodge a protest, Alexander Pope's poem, "Eloisa to Abelard," is read (36-44). Pope lends a voice to Eloisa's complaint, "Nature stands check'd; Religion disapproves" (line 259) and lets her prayer of religious anguish rise to an ecstasy of sexual orgasm. In the poetic treatment, the antagonistic entities, the Christian god and the forbidden lover, Abelard, merge into a referent of her intense yearning.

Unlike poetic language that opens one's imagination, religious language is embedded in an element of commitment. A dramatization of decision-making is indispensable in a religious discourse. Common to many systems of belief, conversion usually occurs in a momentary oblivion of the self, requiring the unconscious subjugation to the unknown in the process. In many cultural traditions, images of nature play a crucial role in signifying such experiences. The last few pages of *The Skeptic* describe how the skeptic, on waking up from a nap, is confronted with a reservoir of "religious" signifiers. The nap, a temporary loss of mastery over one's own intellect and senses, is awe-inspiring like death. Yet in an uncompromising manner, he defies the signs immediately available to him; these include a cross, a chapel, and scattering spots of light from the stained glass windows—the stock images in the Christian language of divine revelation. He refuses to allow his experiences to weave into a religious conversion. With a decisive statement, "I have to go now," the notes of poetic discrepancies end. The skeptic finally chooses to free himself from the scene of "godly" revelation and break away from the totalizing signification.

Above all, "epistemological tyranny" is a kind of power exercised in terms of and upon language by insisting on an invented set of signifying practices, so as to monopolize the linguistic signs (280). "Names and jargons are primarily fluid [...]. When signs are systematized, defined and restrained into a closed system, they are turned into terminology [...]. Selected words are polished, revised, and canonized" (281). Over-selectivity and distortion work to formulate a set of signifiers into terminology that helps produce a monolithic, repressive language to perpetuate tyranny. Resulting from this operation is the exclusive and dualistic "defensive" and "offensive" attitude of disciples in many religions, which the skeptic criticizes from the start (2). *The Skeptic* is an ideological critique that attacks the doctrinaire logic not by a theological debate, but by blowing up the arguments into an open image-field. The bits and pieces the author picks and puts together do not presume coherence in form. In the interrogative interaction between the notes, the language of power—on which the unity of any system will depend—breaks up.

Since its publication, *The Skeptic* has impressed many critics by its unconventional approach to religions. Despite the author's humorous unraveling of "the firm knot of ideas" in many religious discourses, some critics still rest assured with the monolithic belief that this book by Yang Mu is, without exception, about the quest of beauty and truth. In their reading, the author's challenges hurled at religions and authoritarian institutions are leveled down to serve as a backdrop. Chinese poetics is known for its traditional assumption of transparency in mediation, one that favors a reading of meaning in terms of the author's intention.⁷ Close to the historical-philological methods predominant in the pre-structuralist era in the West, the intentionalist hermeneutics underscores Chinese literary interpretation and criticism, resulting in a historical-biographical approach to texts.⁸ The reception of *The Skeptic* illustrates what happens when a text which delineates the post-structuralist doubts about language is received by readers who, under the dictates of Chinese tradition, prefer a reading for referent.⁹ This is another kind of "discrepancy" that calls for a

critical inquiry into the diverse approaches to language prevalent in different eras and cultures.

The Chinese intentionalist hermeneutics demands a rather clear-cut thematic reading of the text. Instead of having a suspension of belief and disbelief in the referent, many readers expect a configuration or refiguration of "god," and their reading is a search for coherence. In order to identify the author's intent in the text, some critics strive to provide a textual structure, by supplying other information to fill the gaps in the notes, when the reading is obstructed by indeterminacy. Ying Peian, for example, summarizes and reorganizes the notes into some concordant arguments in a question and answer form. He offers annotations to sharpen the author's points by drawing references from other sources.¹⁰ Amendments are also inserted to modify Yang Mu's views, for example concerning the meaning of "humility," which Ying finds incongruous with the ecclesiastical understanding.¹¹ In many cases, critics turn the text—notes on poetical discrepancies—against itself, and discuss it as merely an elaborate footnote to Yang Mu's romantic notion of beauty and truth.¹²

Other critics suspect that the skepticism in *The Skeptic* is merely a camouflage to erect a religion of poetry over other systems of belief.¹³ In Wu Qiancheng's opinion, "Like poets from Romanticism to Modernism, Yang Mu, knowingly or unknowingly, has often taken poetry as a religion or a semi-religion [...]."¹⁴ If Yang Mu's attempt of casting doubts on gods or religions aims only at replacing them with one's own god, as some critics have said, the whole discourse of *The Skeptic* is but a sheer legitimatization of the same though recodified totalizing power. The philosophical project of deconstructing the discourses of 'god' thus collapses. In fact, the author goes beyond the oppositional imagination of systems of belief. When disparate signifying practices are brought into contact in *The Skeptic*, the focus lies not in the power of one system over another, but in the power of signification.

As the dialogic relation of the book's English and Chinese titles implies, the book does not offer absolute answers to the doubts about god suggested in the Chinese title, instead it opens up a site of poetical

discrepancies discovered by the skeptic. The discrepancies are more poetical than religious in nature because they point to “the creative, revelatory, and deceptive powers of language” in different discourses of “god.”¹⁵ Recovered in the discrepancies are the plurality, incompleteness and ideological ruptures that have been repressed. The discursive construction of a religious text, like any other linguistic text, operates by a tying of drifting signifiers into a firm knot—“god.” By showing that signifiers are empty and free-floating but the ways of suturing them are unlimited, Yang Mu reveals the infiniteness of the discursivity of “god” in his deconstructive reading.

Verified by a historical-biographical reading of Yang Mu’s other publications, the critics’ conclusions about the author’s intention to install a religion of beauty and truth in *The Skeptic* are indeed an ironic turn to the book. Nonetheless, an insight can be gained from this resistance to discrepancies because in their commentaries one can clearly see a divergent approach to signification, with the process of over-selectivity and distortion working as in a religious discourse. All in all, from the untying and tying of the firm knots of ideas, as illustrated by *The Skeptic* and the critical responses the book elicits, the interesting dialectic tension between the Western post-structuralist scrutiny of language and the Chinese intentionalist pre-structuralist reading is thrown into relief.

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NOTES

¹Yang Mu (born in 1940) is one of the most important Chinese poets, writers, and literary scholars writing today. His publications include more than twenty books of creative writing of poetry and prose. Books and essays on literary criticism and comparative literature were published in Chinese and English. As professor of comparative literature, Yang has taught in the United States, Taiwan and Hong Kong. He was awarded the National Prize for Literature and Arts in 2000. In April of the same year, he was the “Poet in Residence” at Charles University, Prague. His poems were translated into English and German. Examples are *Forbidden Games and Video Poems: The Poetry of Yang Mu and Lo Ching*, trans. Joseph R. Allen (Seattle: The U of Washington P, 1993), *No Trace of the Gardener: Poems of*

Yang Mu, trans. Lawrence R. Smith and Michelle Yeh (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) and *Patt Beim Go: Gedichte chinesisch-deutsch*, trans. Susanne Hornfeck and Wang Jue (München: Al Verlag, 2002). Other scholarly works by Yang Mu include the Chinese translation of *Selected Poems of W. B. Yeats* and *The Tempest*. The book in discussion here is *Yi Shen*, hereafter referred to as *The Skeptic*. See *Yi Shen (The Skeptic: Notes on Poetical Discrepancies)* (Taipei: Hung-fan, 1993).

²Yang Mu's confessed affinity to the Romantic poets, John Keats, in particular, has been known to his readers since he published "Letters to Keats" in the early 1960s.

³Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 129.

⁴For a discussion of religious language as some kind of poetic language, see "Poetry and Possibility" in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 448-62.

⁵Paul de Man, *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 11.

⁶Yang Mu translated the speech into Chinese in section 15, *The Skeptic*, 223; the English version quoted here is taken from Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Alan Russell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950) 168.

⁷Zhang Longxi proposes the term "intentionalist hermeneutics" to describe the tendency in Chinese lyric tradition to take the intention of the poet as the highest authority in the interpretation of poetry. He finds a powerful endorsement of this intentionalist hermeneutics in the works of Mencius, whose exegetical method can be summed up in his own words: "the interpreter of a poem should not let the words obscure the text, or the text obscure the intention. To trace back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding: that is the way to do it." See Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992) 134.

⁸In *The Works of Mencius*, Book V: "Wan Zhang," Part II, ch. viii, it says, "He repeats their poems [poems of the men of antiquity], reads their books, and as he does not know what they were as men, to ascertain this, he considers their history." *The Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge, vol. 1 (Taipei: SMC, 1991) 392.

⁹Post-structuralist discourses in the latter half of the twentieth century highlight the instrumental role of language in fostering absolute power. Attention is drawn to the strategic use of language to mystify rather than to present the "truth" or "intention."

¹⁰Ying Peian, "Yi Shen—zai shangdi de huxucong zhong he huxucong wai" [*Yi Shen—Inside and Outside God's Beard*]. *Suye wenxue* 54 (August 1994): 14-23.

¹¹Ying 19.

¹²Besides Ying Peian's work, some reviews and essays that serve to homogenize the author's arguments by the notion of beauty and truth are He Jipeng, "Pingjie: Yi Shen" [A Review of *The Skeptic*]. *United Daily News*, 4 March 1993; and "Shiren sanwen de dianfan—lun Yang Mu sanwen zhi teshu gediao yu diwei" [Paradigm of

Poets' Prose—a Discussion on the Special Style and Status of Yang Mu's Prose], *Proceedings of the First Conference on Hualian Literature* (Hualian: Hualian Cultural Centre, 1998) 150-62; and Zhang Juanfen, "Yang Mu: Yi 'shen' yi 'quan'" [Yang Mu: Skeptical of "God" and "Power"] *China Times*, 23 December 1993.

¹³For example, Yang Zhao's, "Yishu zhouwei yizhong zhongzhao—ping Yang Mu de Yi Shen" [Art as Religion: A Review of Yang Mu's *Yi Shen*], in *Wenxue de yuanxiang* [The Prototype of Literature]. (Taipei: Lianjing, 1995) 209-11.

¹⁴Wu Qiancheng, "Pingjie: Yi Shen" [A Review of *The Skeptic*] *China Times*, 26 February 1993.

¹⁵Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 36.