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Voices of the Dead

Tao Yuanming and Emily Dickinson's Poems on Their Own Death

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Abstract Ancient Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (365-427) and American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) both write poems on a peculiar theme: the post-death condition with the voice 'I' in the poems presented as already dead. This paper explores this rare theme in the two poets and analyzes their similarities and differences in this respect. Both poets are hermits, sharpening their sensitivity to life, death and the natural world. Tao's vision of the after-death world is very certain, and forms a continuous and unified narrative, while Dickinson describes a new after-death scenario each time, highlighting her uncertainty of it. Yet, after all, these poems by Tao and Dickinson perhaps tell us more about their obsession with life, rather than death.

Keywords Tao Yuanming. Emily Dickinson. Death.

It is easy to suppose that Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365-427), a fourth- and fifth-century Chinese poet, and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), a nineteenth-century American poet, might have little in common. Yet, after careful reading, we find much significant overlapping between their works, including portrayals of nature and an acute appreciation and perception of the change of seasons and the fleeting of time. This paper will discuss some poems both poets wrote in the first person about death. For Tao Yuanming, these are the three elegies (wan ge 挽歌);¹ likewise, Dickinson has about

1 Elegy (wan ge 挽歌) was a common genre in the Wei and Jin dynasties, but not many elegies were written in the first person. Tao Yuanming's relationship with the literary tradition of elegies has been amply studied. His prose work «Lament for my own death» is unique in its format, showing us his liking for such subjects. For the titles of the three elegies written by Tao, there are two versions: «In Imitation of Elegies» («Niwan geci» 拟挽歌辞) or simply «Elegies» («Wan ge shi» 挽歌诗), of which the latter version is used here. Except for this, the texts of Tao cited in this paper are based on Yuan Xingpei's 袁行霈 annotated edition, Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 陶渊明集笺注 2003.

ten poems in this vein. Copied here is the third Elegy («Ni wange ci» 擬挽歌辭) by Tao, along with the poem «Twas just this time, last year, I died» (no. 445) by Dickinson:²

荒草何茫茫,白杨亦萧萧。严霜九月中,送我出远郊。四面无人居,高坟正嶕 峣。马为仰天鸣,风为自萧条。幽室一已闭,千年不复朝。千年不复朝,贤达无 奈何。向来相送人,各自还其家。亲戚或余悲,他人亦已歌。死去何所道,托体 同山阿。

The bleak grassland is vast, the white poplars are moaning. In the cold frost of September, I am taken far out of the city. Nobody lives around, and the tombs are high. The horses are neighing to the sky, and the desolate wind is blowing. Once the dark room is closed, there will be no dawn in thousands of years. There will be no dawn in thousands of years, and sages can do nothing about it. Those who saw me off return to their homes. My relatives may grieve, others are already singing. To die means to be nothing, and to entrust your body to the mountains. (*Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 2003, pp. 424-425)³

'Twas just this time, last year, I died.
I know I heard the Corn,
When I was carried by the Farms –
It had the Tassels on –
[...]
I wondered which would miss me, least,
And when Thanksgiving, came,
If Father'd multiply the plates –
To make an even Sum –

And would it blur the Christmas glee My stocking hang too high For any Santa Claus to reach The Altitude of me -

But this sort, grieved myself, And so, I thought the other way, How just this time, some perfect year – Themselves, should come to me – (Dickinson 1961, p. 214)

- 2 Emily Dickinson's poems cited in this paper are based on *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1961).
- 3 All translations of Tao Yuanming's poems are done by the Author of the paper.

Death is a perennial subject in poetry, significant in the poems of both Tao Yuanming and Dickinson. The image of Tao in history is that of a peaceful hermit, whose most anthologized and imitated poems are those about nature and a pastoral life, and whose concern for death is often neglected. Lu Xun pointed out the single-faceted nature of Tao's image, saying that Tao «could not forget death, which is often mentioned in his poems and prose. If this can be studied from another perspective, perhaps a different Tao will emerge» (Lu Xun 2005, pp. 538-539). Elsewhere, Lu Xun also argued that «in the eyes of posterity, Tao Yuanming has been graceful for too long». «He was great, exactly because he was not always solemn and quiet» (v. 6, p. 444). In poems by Dickinson, the dead, death and immortality are all recurring subjects.

Even so, among poems about death by Tao and Dickinson, the two poems presented at the beginning of this essay still seem unusual. This is first caused by their choice of narrator. Dickinson often speaks as 'I' in her poems. In many poems by Tao Yuanming, though the 'I' is not explicit there according to Chinese grammar, we can still see that the narrator is like Tao Yuanming, and the events narrated in the poems either actually happened or were externalizations of psychological states that could actually occur. 'I' appears in both poems presented here, but this narrator is narrating what happens after death. He/She is a dead narrator. In Western poetry, there are many instances of the dead speaking, for example in the Odyssey, Aeneid, and especially in Dante's Comedy, but in those works the dead speak to a living visitor. In Dante's Divine Comedy, the narrator is also the only living person. In the case of Tao Yuanming, in accordance with the Chinese tradition of writing elegies, he could choose to make the narrator a friend of the dead or a spectator, but he chose the first-person narrator. In other poems by the two poets, 'I' is living, yet in the two poems here, the narrator is already dead but can still speak, report and write a poem. This creates a distance between the poet and the narrator within the poem. In almost all works by Tao and Dickinson, the poet is almost identical with the speaker in the poems, giving an expectation of autobiographical reading. In the two poems here, the voices are still similar to Tao and Dickinson, as if the poet is narrating his/her own death, heightening the unusual impression it gives to the reader.

Both poems concern the death of the first-person narrator. Anticipating one's own death is again common in both Chinese and Western poetry, but it often takes the form of 'anticipating' a person who is positioned here and now imagining his/her death in the future. Dickinson has some poems in this vein, which stand in sharp contrast to poem no. 445. Those poems are in the future tense or the conditional mood, which agree with our own perception of time and thus appear 'normal'. Examples are «If I should die» (no. 54; Dickinson 1961, p. 29), «If I shouldn't be alive» (no. 182, p. 86), «But if I expire today» (no. 1654, p. 676). Yet in poem no. 445, Dickinson

adopts the past tense, and the death of 'I' already took place a year before. Because of this positioning in time, death, which is anticipated, now becomes something that is taking place right now or has already taken place. In such poems by Tao and Dickinson, a first-person narrator almost identical with the poet speaks from the time of dying or being already dead, and sometimes even from one year or many years after death. Such poems have a strong effect of 'de-familiarization'. They establish a new relationship with the reader, who, like Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, listens to a dead person narrating his/her death, which leads to a surprise or a shock. The corpus of work by Tao Yuanming and Dickinson is rich and colorful and multi-faceted. Their poems on life and its happiness are widely read, which somewhat balances the theme of narrating one's own death, so that it is difficult to label them as 'morbid' based on these poems alone.

These poems embody a deep concern for death, which is particularly strong in Tao and Dickinson, so that they sometimes imagine themselves as being dead. Seen from their biographies, both can be called hermits in their respective societies. Tao refused to be an official, and Dickinson decided to remain at home without leaving the family premises and without seeing strangers. Both choices went against the social mainstream. Tao Yuanming had to endure poverty and anonymity, and Dickinson had to endure loneliness. Compared with Dickinson's choice to stay in her own room, Tao Yuanming's life as a hermit was much more social. He still spent time together with his family, friends and neighbors, working, talking and drinking wine with them. Dickinson was much more isolated, withdrawing even from some important interpersonal relationships.

The two poets chose to be hermits, because, inferring from their works, we can guess that they believed that what people did in the public realms of politics or economics were secondary things or things that implied alienation. They withdrew into a private space, at the opposite end of the public sphere, in a hope to live more freely and more naturally. When the political and economic concerns and many profitless distractions having been pruned or subdued, life became simple. However, a quiet and eventless life does not mean a life that is without its problems. In their quiet and simplicity, some more fundamental problems presented themselves to the poets: existence, life and death, the relationship between human beings and nature. They had more time to spend in nature, cultivating a special spiritual support, but the problem of death was also urgent. Others, immersed in political, economic and social life, might think of death only intermittently and often find it difficult to face. Yet Tao Yuanming and Dickinson were different. They refused to compromise, made the choice of how to live and believed that choice was correct. Their way of life could be chosen, but their way of death could not. Death would take place at an unknown moment in the future, yet since their life trajectory was straight, death could be seen even from afar, and a long-time concern with it became almost an obsession.

Indeed, we can bring in Montaigne here. Montaigne also chose to withdraw from political life, and he also faced the problem of how to overcome the fear of death. For Montaigne, this was the whole point of philosophy (Montaigne 1991, pp. 89-108). He reasoned that death was fearful because it was unfamiliar; in order not to fear it, one needed to make oneself accustomed to it, think of it all the time and even wait for it all the time. Tao Yuanming and Dickinson were not philosophers, they did not choose to familiarize themselves with death on purpose, and it seems that they did not find a way to be always peaceful and reconciled. Yet their poetry vividly portrays from many perspectives the condition of facing death.

The environment they lived in also made death familiar. Death was then visible and almost public, in contrast to the situation now, when, with progress in medical science the mortality rate has drastically decreased, and when death becomes a private event, taking place in relatively isolated, structured and controlled places, not visible to outsiders. The dead now seem to have been more effectively separated from the living.

In the poems of Tao and Dickinson, the boundary between life and death was not that clear-cut. One routinely witnessed death scenes, graves and tombs. In Tao's poetry, there are many descriptions of tombs and ruins. Not only were there many tombs and ruins around his home and village, but sometimes he seemed to seek these places out. The poem «Some people enjoying themselves under the cypress tree at the Zhou tomb» (Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, pp. 106-108) is about a trip to a grave. The pleasure is so acutely felt exactly because of an awareness of the «person(s) under the cypress», i.e., the dead. «To think of the person(s) under the cypress, how can we not enjoy ourselves» («Gan bibo xia ren, an de bu wei huan» 感彼柏下人,安得不為歡; Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, p. 106). The poet recognizes that the tomb is another world, which makes life even more precious. Also, it is easy to exchange one's position with the person lying under the cypress. The phrase in the title of the poem, «under the cypress tree at the Zhou tomb», includes both the living and the dead. In his everyday life, Tao Yuanming not only saw separate tombs, but a ruin of a once prosperous community, which did not point to one dead person, but to many. A once flourishing world now became a piece of evidence for the line «everything will come to nothing». In his travels, Tao Yuanming again often saw tombs: «I did not see people who would agree with me, but I saw only ancient tombs. Two high tombs on the roadside, those of Bo Ya 伯牙 and Zhuang Zhou 莊周» («Ni guren zhi ba» 擬古人之八; Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, p. 334). Not only those who competed for worldly profits and benefits die, but even respected ancient sages die too. The «person(s) under the cypress tree» and those in the ruins are often anonymous, representing everybody. There is no need to grieve much for them, but it is easy to identify with them.

In Dickinson's poems, we also see a familiarity with death. She mentions how, as children, they played on the graves, how a neighbor died, and how a family just losing one member had to cope with the loss. Besides, as a woman, she sometimes ministered the dead herself, witnessing the process of dying and the changes of a dying body. She paid close attention to these details. We can say that she was intimately familiar with death.

The human world provides evidence of death to the poets, and nature provides another kind of evidence. Tao Yuanming and Dickinson can both be described as poets of the natural world. In their life as hermits, they came into intimate contact with nature, whose trees, grass, flowers and birds often appear in their works as 'characters'. Tao Yuanming's poems about nature are widely known. In springs and summers, he rejoices with nature, and there is no shadow or anxiety in his pleasure. Everything is at home, so is he. «Plants are growing in early summer, and trees are luxuriant around the house. The birds are happily at home, and I love my own home too» (*Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 2003, p. 393). The poet finds himself in a situation similar to the birds. He is content with his home and the choice he has made for his life.

However, nature has another face. In his poem «Flourishing trees» («Rongshu» 榮木), Tao Yuanming writes that «the flourishing trees are rooted here. They have flowers in the morning, and lose them in the evening». The withered plants can be associated with the withering of human beings. Autumn and winter are portrayed in many ways in the two poets' works, but they often are represented as desolate and bleak, engendering despair. In the poems narrating their own death, if the poets make explicit mention of season, the season is often cold. In Taoyuanming's third elegy, we find this line: «In the cold frost of September, I am taken far out of the city» (Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, p. 424). In his prose work lamenting his own death, the time is also September. Scholars like Liang Qichao believed that this was historical fact (Liang Qichao 1927, p. 26). In fact, in other works by Tao Yuanming, autumn is already the time which reminds him of death. In his poem «The Ninth Day of September in the Year Yi You» (Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, pp. 223-226), he links autumn and plants with his own death: «The sprawling grass is no longer green, and the trees in the garden are shedding leaves [...] Changes follow changes, and isn't life laborious? From time immemorial, all go to death, and when thinking of this, my heart is full of anxiety». This is exactly September. If he wants to imagine an appropriate season for death, September, when plants wither, seems to be a good choice. The 'September' in his elegy shows that he thinks here along the same line. Also, the elegy of course was written by Tao when he was still clear minded, no matter how much time was left in his life.

A cold season is a good season for death. Dickinson also likens death to frost in a poem (no. 1136). Among several of her poems narrating her

own death, no. 158 is set when there is snow. No. 712 also takes place when the weather turns cold and dewy. In this poem, the narrator finds herself in a chariot with Death, a gentleman-like character. It is only after the sun sets that the first person narrator finds that she is cold: «The Dews drew guivering and chill - | For only Gossamer, my Gown - | My Tippet - only Tulle». Now the journey with Death turns from a pleasant trip into almost abduction. At the beginning of the poem, Death is polite and civil, and the narrator is glad to have the journey with him. However, the trip becomes colder and more uncomfortable with time, and Death is no longer courteous. Another poem, no. 445, explicitly happens in autumn. Both poems no. 712 and 445 mention the farmland and grains the dead person passes, no. 445 also refers to the yellow corn, the red apples and how the farmers are waiting to take the pumpkins in. Again, it seems as if the narrator is being abducted, unable to «get out» from the hearse or the coffin. With its bright colors and harvests, autumn thus can also represent what is most precious in earthly life. For Dickinson, autumn can be either bleak or warm, but in any case it is often chosen by her as an appropriate season for death.

In the poems of the two poets, on the one hand, there is wonder and admiration for life. On the other hand, there are conjectures about death. Earthly life is lovely and precious because it is fleeting and is bound to be lost, and the dead who are deprived of life make one treasure one's life even more. When the dead are seen as a point of reference, the most insignificant detail of life seems to be precious. In Tao Yuanming's poem «Some people enjoying themselves under the cypress tree at the Zhou tomb», the poet writes that «today the weather is good, we play flute and *qin*. Thinking of the person(s) lying under the cypress tree, how can we not be happy?» Dickinson expresses similar sentiments in the following poem:

I know of people in the Grave Who would be very glad To know the news I know tonight If they the chance had had.

'Tis this expands the least event And swells the scantest deed -My right to walk upon the Earth If they this moment had. (Dickinson 1961, p. 680)

If the poems narrating their own death by Tao and Dickinson are read closely against one another, some features emerge which may not be obvious when the poems are read separately. The three elegies by Tao constitute a continuous and unified narrative, following roughly in chronologi-

cal order, with the first and second elegy telling of the dead still in the house, and the third about him being taken to the grave. The opening line, «Whoever lives must die, and to die early does not mean a short life», is an affirmative statement. In the following scenes of the narrator being taken to his grave, there are things that may or may not happen (the relatives 'may' grieve), but the destination of the dead is almost certain. The journey of life ends in the grave. In the first poem, we read «Where does the scattered soul and qi go?» (Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 2003, p. 420), but this question is immediately dismissed. The following narrative in fact answers the question indirectly: the soul and qi do not have a separate destination from the body. The dead narrator still has feelings and desires, which are of course effects of the soul and qi. Tao Yuanming does not have too many questions about the process of dying. He only wants to take the fact without regrets and discontents.

Dickinson's poems are different, depicting a new scenario each time. She wrote three poems about the moment of dying, each time imagining the critical moment in a different way. In no. 158, the first-person narrator is a girl who dies in the night when there is snow. She loses her way, and Jesus who is supposed to come does not come yet. Now she fervently hopes that her friend Dolly will come. The poem depicts a lost girl full of anxiety. Will Jesus come eventually? What will happen if he does come? For the girl, if Dolly comes, that will be a stronger support and comfort than Jesus, helping her to cope with death. no. 465 tells a different story. This time, 'I' lie in bed dying, waiting for 'the King' (either Jesus or Death, anyway the character who is in charge of the dead), yet unexpectedly there appears a fly in the room. no. 712 tells of how 'I' came to the grave in the same chariot with Death. The three poems are all dramatic and suspenseful, showing an anxiety of not knowing what will happen, and often end on a note of suspense. Although the poet has searched extremely far with her imagination, the situation after death seems to be in the last analysis beyond imagination and description. That the first-person narrator is often a simple child or a young woman heightens the surprise. When she is ready to die, there intervenes a fly. When she needs Jesus, he does not come. When she happily joins Death in a chariot, she is taken to a cold and unpleasant new home. In contrast, in the elegies of Tao Yuanming, there is not much drama or surprise. He does not very much doubt that death is what he imagines it to be. Yet in the poems by Dickinson, what will happen is often uncertain, with the scenarios in different poems mutually exclusive to and incompatible with one another.

Indeed in Dickinson's poems, a bigger uncertainty concerns whether

⁴ Perhaps Tao Yuanming is here following the three-poem format of Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303). Yet Lu Ji's three poems do not unite into a single narrative since the narrator is sometimes a spectator, sometimes the dead person.

she will go to heaven or to the grave. Heaven does not exist as an option to Tao Yuanming. In Dickinson, heaven is possible but its possibility becomes slimmer and slimmer, and the grave becomes more like a place where she might find herself forever. Dickinson's religious belief is itself a complex question. Even when she has religious belief, hers is not at all the conventional Christian faith. Sometimes she does not believe. If there is heaven, it cancels death. What is noteworthy is that she never thinks of the possibility of hell. If there are heaven and hell, she believes that she will end up in heaven. If there is no heaven, then there will be no hell, and all will end up in the grave.⁵

For Dickinson, death is always a riddle. Although she has seen many deaths, those only involve what can be superficially seen, which does not give her much of a clue. What will her own death be like? The answer can only be revealed when she dies, and only to herself. An acute perception of her own individuality makes her stories of death unique, something that can only happen to her. It is highly improbable that when others die, a fly will appear. In contrast, in the three elegies by Tao Yuanming, the boundary between oneself and others is blurred. What is quite unique to Tao Yuanming can be found in this line: «My only regret is that I did not drink enough wine when living» (*Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 2003, p. 420), and the rest of the narration can be applied to himself or to many others. Tao Yuanming did not feel himself very special, and did not think that extraordinary things will happen to him when he dies.

Tao Yuanming and Dickinson also both try to imagine the grave as a 'home'. This can be partly seen in the usage of the word 'return' (*gui* 歸) in Tao's poems. When acting as a government official away from home, he was eager to return to his village, hence «return to the village» («Gui yuan tian ju, gui qu lai kui» 歸園田居,歸去来兮). The word 'return' here not only implies a backward movement, but is a return to 'home', compared with which life outside of home is drifting on the road. Return to the village brings him quietness and happiness. However, when the problem of death rears its head, his house and his life lose their connotations of 'home', and 'return' becomes yet again drifting on the road: «My house is like a hotel, and I am the person who must leave. Where shall I go? I will return to my old home among the southern mountains» («Zashi zhi qi» 雜 詩之七).6 Here the grave among the southern mountains becomes a more essential home to return to. Such lines abound in Tao's poems: «Eventu-

⁵ Dickinson's poems about life after death in heaven are various. Sometimes she is ecstatic (no. 279), while at other times, heaven is either incredible or flawed or even cruel. There is no problem that 'I' deserve heaven. The problem is whether heaven deserves 'me'.

⁶ In his prose work «Lamenting my own death», Tao used similar wording: «Tao will say farewell to his hotel, and return permanently to his original home» (*Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 2003, p. 555).

ally return to nothing» («Zhong dang gui kong wu» 終當歸空無), «Life is sure to return to nothing» («Yun sheng hui gui jin» 運生會歸盡), «After a hundred years a return to the grave» («Bainian guiqiu long» 百年歸丘龍). In these lines, gui 歸 (return) points to nothingness, death and the grave, and life is a journey to the grave. The grave is the 'old home' (jiu zhai 舊宅) and the 'original home' (ben zhai 本宅), not warm or comfortable, but is inevitable. One cannot help but go there. In his third elegy, the dead person is shut permanently in this 'home', while those seeing him off return to their respective homes. They still have homes to return to, but the dead person can only treat the grave as his home. An inexorable gap now yawns between the living and the dead.

Dickinson does not believe herself at home either in the earthly world or in heaven. She imagines once a marriage with Death (no. 712), but the new bridal home is surprisingly and disappointingly low and claustrophobic. In another poem, she tries to make the grave a home to wait for her lover. However, since the lover is not yet here, the home is incomplete and empty. Her attempts to make the grave home seem futile: «The grave my little cottage is, | Where 'Keeping house' for thee | I make my parlor orderly | And lay the marble tea» (no. 1743). To liken the grave to a cottage is already an exaggeration, and there can surely be no 'parlor' in it. Also, the tea there, if any, can only be cold and 'marble'. Tidying up the parlor and laying the tea are traditional feminine functions at home, but here they unfold in a dark, narrow, closed space, evoking a sense of discomfort and claustrophobia.

The poems of Tao Yuanming and Dickinson narrating their own death are not only about death, but perhaps more about their obsession with and love for life. Death is often thought of as a deprivation and a lacking. Sometimes, Tao Yuanming can be reconciled with death. In one of his poems, the 'soul' or 'spirit' advises to «merge with the changes with neither happiness nor fear; whatever should end must end, and there is no need for worries» (xingying shen 形影神). In another piece, Tao writes «I will go along with the changes, and what doubts shall I have if I enjoy my destiny?» («Gui qu lai kui ci» 歸去来兮辭). In his prose work lamenting his own death, he also believes that «I can now die without regret», and «I am now attached to nothing» (ziji wen 自祭文). However, he has this peaceful state of mind only sometimes or only theoretically. Other times, he still has several doubts about death. In his elegies, we find an undercurrent of sorrow and regret. The first person narrator who likes drinking now cannot drink. «I want to speak but I have no voice; I want to see but there is no light in my eyes». His desires are still there but cannot be fulfilled. The desolate grassland is an uncomfortable place, and the bleak September is an uncomfortable month. Being in the grave is like being permanently imprisoned. The people who return to their own homes and the relatives who 'may' grieve all seem indifferent and apathetic, while the

singing people are even more so. Likewise, the dead in Dickinson's poems are most concerned about what is happening in the human world. These poems about death might more saliently show the preciousness of life to us as readers, when we are aware that the two poets are really dead. In addition, with Tao Yuanming living in the pre-modern era and Dickinson seen as a forerunner of modernism in the United States, this paper might help to show that the boundary between the pre-modern and the modern and between the East and the West is also shifting and blurred.

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