

## The Gothic in Yiyun Li's *The Vagrants* and Its Implications in the Post-Truth Age

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### Abstract

Set in Muddy River, a fictional, generic town in China in the late 1970s, Yiyun Li's novel *The Vagrants* opens with the denunciation ceremony of a young dissenter, Gu Shan, and provides a panorama of the townspeople's perception of and reaction to this event. This article reads Li's work through the lens of the Gothic, first examining how the tropes of graphic violence and ghosts reveal undercurrents of Muddy River that elude the official discourse. It further argues that the narrative's Gothicism lies in its multiple perspectives. In this regard, the focus on social outsiders and their localised, personal experiences highlights the tension between centre and margin, totality and alterity. Using *The Vagrants* as an illustration, the study also explores the relevance of literature in the current age of post-truth. It contends that literature's capacity to cultivate critical faculties, which are important in combating post-truth, is realised through Li's particular Gothic approach. While emotional appeal and perspectivism are utilised by post-truth rhetors to disseminate biases, in Li's hands, they function positively to promote reflection and slow reading. The novel demonstrates the importance of literary reading in an era of dishonesty and misinformation.

### Keywords

The Gothic, Yiyun Li, post-truth, perspectivism, emotional appeal

### Introduction

Yiyun Li's novel *The Vagrants* opens with the death of a young dissenter, Gu Shan, and details how this event ripples through the residents of Muddy River, the fictional town in which the story is set. While Shan's fate is the main narrative component that drives forward the story, the narrative never reveals the dissenter's point of view and instead attends to characters who are, in different

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ways, associated with her. Li's cast includes Tong, a village boy new to the town and eager to join the Communist Young Pioneers; Nini, a deformed girl; Bashi, a creepy idler; Kai, a radio news announcer who is married to the high-ranking official Han; and so on. Focalised through them, the work presents a panorama of Muddy River during a time of unrest through stories of resilience, sacrifice, perversion, and courage. Literary commentaries on *The Vagrants* have noticed its horror element. For example, Roger Gathman describes the narrative as "a gothic tale of corruption, murder and political paranoia," as Pico Iyer calls it "an anthology of horror stories." The text's fragmented structure has also attracted attention. Stephanie Merritt, for instance, observes that *The Vagrants* is "a series of linked vignettes rather than a linear narrative." Interestingly, while this nonlinearity is seen by Merritt as a hindrance to readerly engagement, Christopher Taylor evaluates it in a positive light. As the latter sees it, the multiplicity of perspectives effectively cultivates readers' sympathy for the lives of others.

This article first aims to establish *The Vagrants* as a Gothic work. While critics have separately noted the novel's horror content and fragmented structure, I read them holistically as constitutive of Li's Gothicism. As my analysis will show, the narrative employs Gothic tropes and engages with marginal perspectives to foreground alternative forms of being and knowing, offering an unofficial and unfiltered account of Muddy River that contrasts with the official portrayal. Building on this, the study further discusses how Li's Gothic text realises literature's capacity to foster critical faculties and therefore demonstrates the value of literary reading in countering the post-truth phenomenon. From my vantage point, the narrative appropriates the post-truth mechanisms of emotional appeal and perspectivism in a way that, instead of disseminating unfounded and biased claims, promotes reflection and slow reading, thus training readers to be critical thinkers and defenders of truth in real life.

Growing out of the Enlightenment and questioning its ideals of rationality, order, and progress, the Gothic explores the transgression of human norms and promotes non-privileged, alternative ways of being and knowing (Botting 13–16; Monnet 7–8; Punter 1–2). A genre of excess, the Gothic often presents emotional extremes that elicit horror, shock, and disgust to imagine things differently and see matters afresh. In this regard, the body often plays a central role. As Kelly Hurley argues, the human body with its morphic possibilities is a prominent site for the Gothic to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises (3–7).<sup>2</sup> Another feature of the Gothic is its engagement with ghostly figures. Intermixing life and

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<sup>2</sup> See also Xavier Aldana Reyes (3–8) and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (7).

death as well as other incompatibilities, otherworldly existence evokes buried memories or hints at a personal or cultural unconscious, upsetting what is believed to be normal and solid (Hogle 4). The genre's preoccupation with alterity makes it naturally attuned to the culturally invisible and marginalised. As Tabish Khair points out, Gothic fiction is a writing of Otherness and often highlights the ineradicability of difference and the uneasy relationship between the Self and the Other, centre and margin (157–74). In fact, it is when the Other enters—as Satan, the outsider, vampire, etc.—that the action of most Gothic narratives really commences (6). This study makes the case that Li's Gothicism lies in both content and form. For the former, the narrative draws on the tropes of graphic violence and ghosts to lay bare the hidden aspects of Muddy River and promote alternative understandings of it. Importantly, these observations from the perimeter are enabled by the narrative's multiple points of view. The text continually moves among characters who are social outsiders, and their accumulated perspectives present the town in multidimensionality, unsettling the official unifying representation. As Belinda Kong observes, the narrative component that most forcefully drives Li's work forward is not political spectacles but “the espying that occurs backstage” (114). The concern with marginal perspectives makes *The Vagrants* a writing of Otherness that highlights the inevitable tension between totality and alterity.

Li's emotive content and point of view are worth further investigation vis-à-vis the current age of post-truth. In November 2016, the Oxford Dictionary announced “post-truth” as Word of the Year. The term is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Word of the Year 2016”).<sup>3</sup> Emotion is part and parcel of the post-truth phenomenon. As Matthew D'Ancona points out, the post-truth era witnesses an ever-greater proportion of judgements and decisions banished to the realm of feeling, and the request for truth becomes a branch of emotional psychology without foundations. For many scholars (see, for example, D'Ancona; McIntyre 124–27; Pennock xii), one important drive of this “feeling” culture—the emphasis on subjective truth and hence the fad of alternative facts regardless of rational evidence—is arguably the postmodernist idea that objectivity is unattainable because all facts are socially constructed.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, while the centrality of feelings and subjective truths

<sup>3</sup> While the idea of post-truth has deep roots that go back thousands of years, the current post-truth phenomenon is the combined result of the evolution of cognitive irrationalities, the academic debate over the objective truth, and the changes in the media landscape (McIntyre 14).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Dennett even draws an absolute causality between the two, fully attributing the rise of post-truth to postmodernism. For a different view, see Truman Chen and Andrew Jones.

leads to distressing consequences in politics and media nowadays (Donald Trump's election in 2016 and 2024 is an example), Li's text appropriates them in a way that fosters readers' critical faculties, which many hold as essential to defend the values of veracity, honesty, and accountability (see D'Ancona; Higgins 9; McComiskey 40–41; McIntyre 151–72).

The significance of literature in cultivating critical awareness in the post-truth age has been highlighted by scholars like Christopher Schaberg and David R. Castillo. Besides, there are also discussions on how literature can utilise ideas of post-truth for the positive end of countering it. For instance, Jaclyn Partyka argues that since emotional appeal is so integral to the contemporary “feeling” culture, literary texts, in their ability to create emotional responses, can provide productive space for positive metacognitive reflection and are therefore part of the solution (184–86). Along related lines, Nazry Bahrawi examines how Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* employs post-truth rhetoric to challenge the truisms fuelling Islamophobia; he reads post-truth as a potential decolonial trope that pursues alternative forms of knowledge production. Similarly, Stephen Malcolm Hart and Jordan Hart explore how magical realism can function as a powerful tool to expose fake news and cultivate critical thinking by ostensibly disseminating untruth. Particularly relevant to the present study is Schaberg's commentary on *The Vagrants*, in which he talks about how the narrative employs perspectivism to promote reflection and openness rather than an absolute relativism advanced by post-truth rhetors (11–13). Building on and extending Schaberg's remarks, this article demonstrates how Li's Gothicism realises literature's potential to combat post-truth by engaging with aspects of it.

My discussion starts with an introduction to Muddy River and its ideology. It then dissects the narrative's Gothic content, particularly the elements of violence and otherworldly existence. This is followed by an analysis of the narrative's perspectivism, that is, its attention to and accumulation of individual experiences beyond the power centre. Lastly, the article investigates how Li's Gothic work speaks of the value of literary reading in the era of post-truth.

### **Muddy River and its ideology**

For Muddy River as well as the nation, the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979 are auspicious: News of national policies to develop technology and economy announces the coming of spring after ten long years of winter, forecasting a new era “full of love and progress” (Li, *The Vagrants* 14). According to the official rhetoric, people in the post-Cultural Revolution China live “as happily as if in a

jar of honey” (187). They are born “under the red flag of revolution” and grow up “in the honeypot the party has provided” (302). In particular, this rosy reality rests on indebtedness and absolute obedience to the state. As the school principal addresses the students, the relationship between an individual and the state is likened to that between children and parents but extends further: “I know you’ve all been taught to respect your parents, but what are they compared to the party, our foremost parents? You are the party’s children before you are the children of your parents” (303). In contrast to this positive portrayal of the Communist Party, opposing ideas are presented in derogatory language. As it is put, the public gathering for Shan is an “epidemic” and “virulent disease” that will infect everyone; the situation is so “urgent” that people need to cleanse hearts and souls “with the harshest disinfectant” (302). An epitome of this binary logic is Shan’s denunciation ceremony. On the way to the event venue, students and workers parade, chant, and laugh in a festive mood, all looking happy (72–73). At the ceremony, they denounce Shan harshly, though they know little about her, as the public announcement mentions nothing except that Shan has been sentenced to death and deprived of all her political rights. As a matter of fact, throughout the narrative, we never hear from Shan herself, and everything about her crime is described unilaterally by the government. As Kong remarks, “Shan is solely appearance, spoken for but never speaking” (115). As symbolised by her slashed vocal cord, her story is muffled. A sign of dissent and objection, she must die so that the severe consequence of deviating from the guiding ideology is shown. Confronted with this designated enemy, the masses feel confused and quickly lose interest, and the only thing they can do is to shout more slogans and sing more songs (Li, *The Vagrants* 94–95). The scene is reminiscent of Murray Edelman’s analysis of political spectacles, in which assumptions and beliefs about the social and political world are created, and the idea of fact becomes irrelevant as “every meaningful political object and person is an interpretation that reflects and perpetuates an ideology” (10).

In Muddy River, facts are manipulated to serve those in power. While the official reason for Shan’s arrest is her doubts about communism, her expedited trial and death have little to do with her political views. Unknown to the public, she dies so quickly because a top official needs kidney for organ transplantation (Li, *The Vagrants* 141). Shan’s fate therefore illustrates the workings of biopolitics—how individuals are caught up in the life-controlling machinery of a state and rendered vulnerable to misrepresentation. In such an environment, the rule of survival is to follow what the government says. Tong’s mother understands this all too well. She reveals to her son that his grandfather was never executed as an enemy of the state, as the official record claims; in

reality, he was punished for a personal conflict with an official over a widow. Yet she is reluctant to admit that the government made a mistake. Faced with Tong's bewilderment, she remains elusive and only says that the lesson for him is to never act against government officials (230). When the naïve boy later asks about the public gathering for Shan, the mother again submits to the authority, telling her son to always follow what is taught and that the side where his teachers and principal stand is right (331). But what the official says is not always correct. In what follows, I examine how Li's narrative draws on the Gothic tropes of graphic violence and ghosts to reveal aspects of Muddy River that unsettle the official discourse.

### **Muddy River and a world of monstrosity and corruption**

In *The Vagrants*, graphic depictions of the bodies as dead, tortured, and dismembered reflect individuals' subjection to politicised violence and deliver a critique of institutional degeneration. A vivid example is the dead body of a cleaner who falls from a leader's statue. Due to its imposing height, the stone statue becomes a local pride that attracts pilgrims and helps promote Muddy River from a regional town to a city (Li, *The Vagrants* 32). Ironically, the grand image that brings honour also costs life: The ghastly death of the cleaner casts a shadow on the Communist Party's rule. As the narrative describes, the dead man "lay face up with a small puddle of blood by his mouth," with his eyes "wide open and glassy-looking" and his limbs sticking out "at odd and impossible angles" (33). The corpse is reminiscent of "a kind of slug," "fleshy and moist," which, with a pinch of salt, will become "a small pool of white and sticky liquid" (33). Juxtaposed with the overbearing statue, the monstrous and metamorphosed body powerfully illustrates the insignificance of an individual before the state and how the latter alienates and deforms the former.

The most Gothic in the story, Shan's body embodies the cruelties inflicted by the authority as well as her fellowmen. The local authority first cuts Shan's vocal cords to silence her dissenting voice and then takes her kidneys for political advancement. Useless and lifeless, her body is deserted and later collected by Kwen, an old scoundrel who is paid by Shan's parents to bury the corpse, and Bashi, a young man who is morbidly curious about the female body. With the kidneys removed, Shan's middle part transmogrifies into "the bloody and gaping flesh opening like a mouth with an eerie smile" (Li, *The Vagrants* 113). Later, the already incomplete body is further humiliated and mutilated by Kwen. As observed by Bashi, "The woman's breasts were cut off, and her upper body, with the initial wound from the transplant operation and the massive cuts Kwen had made, was a mess of exposed flesh, dark red and gray and white. The same

mess extended down to between her legs” (131). The impressionist language here evokes strong sensations; it delays the meaning the scene signifies only to make it more shocking and disconcerting. Shan’s body records the acts of savagery that happen at both the vertical (inflicted by the authority on the people) and horizontal (among the people) levels in Muddy River. It shows how a dysfunctional society renders human beings monstrous: Shan is turned into a monster, despised and deprived of agency, while Kwen becomes one by taking pleasure in defiling corpses.

That violence has become internalised and quotidian also reflects in the commonplace of verbal abuse. In sharp contrast with the uplifting picture the official rhetoric describes, people’s daily life is full of animosity. When the curious and good-intentioned Tong smiles at a woman at the marketplace, he is called “a little rascal” and shouted at: “What are you looking at? Be careful or I’ll scoop out both your eyeballs” (Li, *The Vagrants* 161). Abusive language like this is also used among family members. Tong’s father is a male chauvinist who habitually bullies his wife. He once calls her a “brainless woman” and threatens to wring her neck with two fingers (225). To instil in Tong the idea of heroism and courage, the father tells the story of Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han dynasty, requesting from Xiang Yu, his toughest enemy, a bowl of meat paste made from the former’s dead families.<sup>5</sup> The father lectures the son that “If your heart is hard enough to eat your mother and your wife, nothing can beat you in life” (224). There are also Bashi and Nini, whose affection for each other is expressed morbidly. Desperate to show their willingness to suffer for each other, they take turns to make vicious oaths, as if only the most malicious punishment could match the depth of their love (312–13). In reality, however, their relationship is one of exploitation.<sup>6</sup> In a word, the day-to-day violence discloses the monstrosity of human relationships and questions the slogan that the new era is full of love and progress.

*The Vagrants* further employs the ghost trope to disturb the official discourse by foregrounding the power of an alternative epistemological system. It is important to note that while ghosts in Anglo-American Gothic writings are often presented as supernatural beings, they are perceived as part of the natural order in the Asian context. As Katarzyna Ancuta points out, in Asia, ghosts and

<sup>5</sup> In the Battle of Gaixia (a last stand fought in December 203 BC during the Chu-Han Contention between the forces of Liu Bang and Xiang Yu), Xiang Yu threatened to kill Liu Bang’s captured father and wife and have them cooked to force Liu Bang to surrender.

<sup>6</sup> Kong sees Bashi as a paedophile (118). Li has her opinion about the character. In an interview, she comments, “Sweet, terrible Bashi. You know, I never thought of him as a pedophile until I was almost through with the book, and one of my readers mentioned it. I was horrified!” (“Chinese Gothic”)

spirits are seen by the living as protective, and the typical relationship they foster is that of negotiation (211). This long-established belief, however, is regarded as unfit for the new era when China is rebuilding itself after the Cultural Revolution.

The local government of Muddy River upholds an atheist ideology by which any form of communicating with the dead is considered superstitious. As a result, Ching Ming, a traditional Chinese festival that honours family ancestors, is eliminated as a national holiday, and no celebration is allowed (Li, *The Vagrants* 190, 215). Despite this, the belief in spiritual existence is popular among the people. For example, it is a tradition that when a child dies, the parents burn his clothes to keep him warm and comfortable on the trip to the next world—this is exactly what Mrs. Gu does for her daughter Shan (10). It is also believed that if a living person sees the eyes of a dead person, he will be forever possessed by the dead's ghost—this is why Kwen wraps a towel around Shan's head before burying her (112). For many who once experienced traumatic events, ghost belief serves as a coping mechanism. Mr. Gu's nanny, for instance, is an uneducated woman who resorts to the supernatural to make sense of the tragedies in life. She comforts herself by thinking that her dead families are summoned by the otherworld to pay off their debts (62).

There are also cases where ghosts are conjured up to regulate people's behaviour. For example, Bashi asks Nini to take the vow that if she reveals his secret (the plan to kill Kwen's dog), his grandmother's ghost will not let her have a good death, because nobody fools around with dead people (155). Later, when Nini steals Bashi's money, the grandmother's ghost is again conjured up, as the girl worries that the spirit might be offended (157). When the two officials attempt to arrest Bashi for participating in the public gathering without evidence, the young man utilises spiritual existence as a weapon to win time: “[T]hink of the ghost of my grandma. . . . If you take me away without informing her, what if she followed me to the station? What if she made a mistake and followed you two home instead and disturbed your children's sleep?” (337–38) While insisting that they do not buy superstitious nonsense, the officials still back down in fear of the ghost. As Ancuta reminds us, Asian ghosts are generally viewed as protective beings to be respected and obeyed (211). True, they may evoke feelings of fear, but this fear concerns not so much their existence as the severe consequences of enraging them. In a post-Cultural Revolution China, the process of modernisation fails to wipe out older spiritual beliefs, and Li's novel gives voice to an epistemology that, though silenced by the official, is widely embraced by the people and participates in their daily activities. As my analysis shows, the invocation of ghosts lays bare the barbarity, corruption, and injustice that seep

into the daily life of Muddy River. This Gothic trope enables Li to say something nonconforming yet more revealing.

I have demonstrated how *The Vagrants* capitalises on the Gothic tropes of graphic violence and ghosts to uncover the hidden aspects of Muddy River. In what follows, I discuss how the narrative's point of view contributes to Li's project of Otherness. As Dale Townshend contends, to accommodate the Other, it is necessary to reject totality, which is founded on abstraction and reduction and strives to return the alterity to the order of the same through violence (283). Li's narrative achieves this by giving social outsiders the centre stage; the accumulation of their observations from the perimeter presents a dissenting force that challenges the official unified and auspicious narrative.

### Observations from the perimeter

Two social outcasts to whom the narrative pays particular attention are Bashi and Nini. Physically deformed, Nini is ignored and detested by the townsfolk. Even her parents, in their best mood, treat her like a piece of furniture (Li, *The Vagrants* 23). The son of a Communist hero, Bashi lives a comfortable life but grapples with suppressed sexual desires; he tails the girls in town and even fantasises about hiding in the public outhouse to have sight of female bodies. Despised as “a wolf and skunk and girl-chasing eel” (27), he is always given the cold shoulder and cautioned against. Interestingly, notwithstanding their social invisibility, Nini and Bashi act as important conduits for revealing what is veiled from the public. Their vantage points provide what Kong calls “vagrant witnessing”—a visual mode “distinct from state- or group-orchestrated collective spectatorship via its singular, surreptitious, peripheral, and sometimes purely accidental nature” (114). On the day of Shan's denunciation ceremony, Nini follows her parents' order and takes her younger sisters to the event venue. After having been denied entry for not belonging to any work unit, she hides behind a fence in a nearby alley. It is from here that she accidentally witnesses Shan's organ-removal surgery—a highly confidential and sinister scene that should be hidden from the public eye (Li, *The Vagrants* 98). The significance of the scene, however, escapes Nini and is later revealed through Bashi's vagrant witnessing. Not only a Gothic Other, Bashi is also an active consumer of Gothic transgressions. As Xavier Aldana Reyes remarks, morbid curiosity “charts our interest in forms of violence and radical alterity that are attractive precisely because they often lie outside the remit of our direct experience” (13). For Bashi, it is precisely the obsessive desire for the female body that drives him to lurk around Hunchback Island (the site where the executed are discarded) and later dig up Shan's corpse from the grave. For the voyeuristic young man, Shan's monstrous body is both revolting and alluring.

Fortuitously, this morbid fixation exposes to Bashi the ghastly crime done to Shan. Apart from the perpetrators, Bashi—a pariah—is the only person that witnesses (though belatedly) and comprehends Shan’s suffering. Working together, Nini’s and Bashi’s peripheral perspectives disclose the vice hidden behind the fanatic ceremony.

Li’s vagrant witnesses include not only human grotesques but also those falling outside the purview of human perception and reason. Animals, for instance, can be insightful observers. The widespread leaflets questioning Shan’s trial cause a stir in town. The local officials are also agitated; as the central government has not made its position clear, they are unsure what stance to take and worried about their political careers. Ear, Tong’s dog, also senses the unease. Unknown to his human master, he detects the suspicious muffled steps in the alley and the night stranger from the countryside (Li, *The Vagrants* 187–88). In this atmosphere of uncertainty and indecision, the dog joins the townspeople in fretfully awaiting what may come. The inanimate, too, is granted a point of view. A rising star in politics, Han divorces his wife Kai, a dissenter, to protect his family from political cleansing. Having signed the divorce application, Han sinks into his parents’ sofa and mourns the impossibility of a happy family life he has long envisioned. All of this is witnessed by a new television set, which, on its beautifully crafted stand, watches him “like a dark, unblinking eye” (276).

Notably, the television stand was made by a countryside carpenter and his apprentice who were exploited by the officials and paid only the minimum compensation (293). With the switch of perspective, Han changes from a subject to an object and from seeing to being seen. The narrative thus insinuates the dynamics and mechanics of the social system at hand (see also Schaberg 13). In Li’s storyworld, even a baby who exists outside typical structures of identity and subjectivity provides a noteworthy perspective to adopt. When it comes to Bashi’s and Nini’s intimacy, the narrative shifts the focalisation to Nini’s youngest sister, Little Sixth, backgrounding the two panting in their inexperienced joy and foregrounding the baby’s innocent behaviour. Without Nini’s supervision, Little Sixth enjoys her momentary freedom, exploring Bashi’s house and eventually settling down under the bed, where the two lovers are surrendering to the moment. She then randomly picks up a stick of ginseng, chews it, and throws it away in disgust (Li, *The Vagrants* 313). This juxtaposition of the love scene with the baby’s unawareness casts a shadow on Bashi’s and Nini’s romance. As indicated by the bittersweet ginseng that lands in one of their shoes, their union is “oddly touching as well as appallingly creepy” (Taylor). The discussed points of view go beyond the limitations of species, sentience, and age, opening us to

other possible lives and revealing the alterity of Muddy River missing from the official rhetoric.

Besides the highlight of marginal perspectives, Li's narrative also seeks to create a panorama of Muddy River. To this end, no one is focalised for too long. Recounting the morning of March 21, 1979—the day of Shan's execution, the text first looks through the main characters and their reactions to the event: the Gus, mourning the impending death of their daughter; Nini, busy with the morning chore of collecting coal; Bashi, pondering Shan's crime and body; Tong, an ideologue in the making, eager to witness Shan's punishment; and so on (Li, *The Vagrants* 7–34). It then zooms out and widens our view by including more anonymous characters in the picture: a fourth grader who finds to her horror that her silk Young Pioneer's kerchief is ripped on this important day and feels the immense worthlessness of life; a truck driver who grabs his wife for sex as the ceremony frees them from laborious work; a careless nurse who, in a hurry to finish her work before the ceremony, gives an infant the wrong dose of medicine; and a telephone operator who, scolding a peasant for delaying her preparations for the event, is herself berated by her senior for being slow (34–35). These perspectives accumulate and create a bottom-up, heterogeneous picture that contrasts with the totalising one the political spectacle symbolises. The fanatic ceremony is overshadowed by the tension, oversight, and violence occurring behind the scenes; at the individual level, such political events can be trivial and even detrimental. A similar moment of collage occurs at the end of Part One, where the narrative turns the spotlight on the agents of the state who participate in the day's disciplinary procedures. The narrative momentarily hovers at the Huas, who, touched by the Gus' misfortune, reminisce about their own daughters and then shifts to a broader view that includes more disturbed souls. A female prison guard wakes up from a nightmare; earlier at work she fainted during the operation that severed Shan's vocal cords. An old orderly at the police station suffers from insomnia; even a veteran like him cannot make sense of the bucket of blood he washed off the police jeep and turns to his wife for comfort. There is also a surgeon that removed Shan's kidneys and now reflects on his choice of practicality over conscience; deeply aware of the ugliness of the world, he reassures himself that he has chosen the best for his family (135–36). These personal, localised stories powerfully illuminate the large-scale trauma and distress Shan's punishment entails. They haunt and plague the established discourse, underlining the tension between centre and margin, totality and alterity.

Having discussed how the pluralisation of perspectives demonstrates Li's concern with alterity, I now turn to the work's relevance in the current post-truth

age. In a time of dishonesty where stories go viral quickly regardless of their truth value, literature seems to be of little help. Does not literature open the door to endless interpretations and hence affirm subjective truth? One may ask. Yet I want to make the point that literary reading can cultivate readers' critical faculties by training them to appreciate and learn from uncertainty and ambiguity—a habit of mind desperately needed in a culture where people are so quick to take a stand. Li's Gothic narrative realises this potential by appropriating unethical post-truth strategies for positive ends. While demagogues use emotional appeal and perspectivism to disseminate biases and hate speech, *The Vagrants* employs them to promote questioning and reflection, hence helping readers become better detectors and defenders of truth.

### ***The Vagrants* and the post-truth age**

As aforementioned, the post-truth age is characterised by a wilful blindness to evidence and an appeal to emotionally based arguments. Concomitant with this phenomenon is a rhetoric wherein facts become overrated and disappear from the epistemological continuum, and language is rendered purely strategic, without reference to anything other than itself (McComiskey 8). While ancient and modern experts in rhetoric always uphold an epistemological continuum between logos, pathos, and ethos, for post-truth rhetors, “ethos and pathos have themselves become effective sources of arguments, and logos is actually denigrated” (20). This use of emotive language regardless of facts echoes the prioritisation of efficacious impressions over representational accuracy typical of the Gothic. The genre's affective overload, though having yielded different critical responses, speaks of its intrinsic corporeality.<sup>7</sup> As Reyes contends, the Gothic is inherently somatic; it relies on readers' awareness of their own bodies, particularly of their vulnerability and shared experience of projected pain through vicarious feelings (2). Via extreme graphic content, the genre explores readers' embodied experiences to lay bare the flip side of normality and promote reflection and new understandings (Reyes 7; Hurley 5). In *The Vagrants*, the Gothic tropes often create sensational moments that seem lacking in substance yet effectively engage readers' affective faculties. For instance, while the sustained, impressionist descriptions of the cleaner's and Shan's dead bodies are arguably gratuitous, they are highly emotive and thus make prominent the reality of biopolitics. The details of verbal violence and spiritual haunting likewise lack rational justifications: Tong's father cannot possibly wring his wife's neck with

<sup>7</sup> The Gothic's affective overload has been criticised by some (for example, Joshi 190, 193) and defended by others (for example, Abel 29–59).

two fingers, nor is there concrete evidence of otherworldly existence. Despite so, they provoke fear and the realisation of the monstrosity of human relationships. As Li herself states in an interview, she is aware of the visceral and graphic nature of *The Vagrants* and has no intention of sparing her readers from it, believing that such exposure is necessary to develop a proper understanding of China at the time (“An Interview”). Both Li’s Gothic discourse and post-truth rhetoric appeal to audiences’ emotions to persuade. Differently, while demagogues feed biased hate speech to divide society, Li raises awareness of the limits of any single representation and pushes readers to critically weigh different accounts of Muddy River.

Postmodernism is often blamed as the academic root of the fad of alternative facts, or what Colin Wight calls “standpoint epistemology”—the idea that there is no one objective way the world is, only perspectives on what the world is like (17–18). One thesis often invoked in this regard is Friedrich Nietzsche’s perspectivism. According to Nietzsche, it is impossible to make sense of the notion of a thing in itself because all knowledge is proper to some particular, partial perspective, hence the famous claim that “facts do not exist, only interpretations” (*The Will to Power* 481). However, while this claim entails the absence of certainty, it does not mean the absence of truth and should not collapse into wholesale relativism (Anderson 16; Clark 131; Higgins 9). Judgements and beliefs are always conditioned, but they can be truer or falsier, and the pursuit of truth necessitates broadening and changing one’s perspective (Anderson 16–17). As Nietzsche also says, “the more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our ‘objectivity’” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 225). In the post-truth era, however, the idea of perspectivism has been abused and drifted into “a relativist morass” (Wight 24), as what are claimed to be “alternative truths” are often simply lies that do not correspond to reality.<sup>8</sup> *The Vagrants* demonstrates that the invitation to change perspectives, the pluralisation of viewpoints, is not a denial of objective truth but a precondition for realising it. As my analysis has showed, by moving constantly among different characters, particularly those excluded from the power centre, the narrative brings to light experiences left out of the grand picture. The accumulated voices of the individuals coexist with that of the state, creating a mosaic portrayal of Muddy River that transcends situated bias while retaining tension, ambiguity, and uncertainty. As Li emphasises, people’s stories do not always match (“Invitation”), and to include every possible angle is

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<sup>8</sup> See Emmanuel Alloa’s article on how post-truth politicians misuse Nietzsche’s idea and why it should be defended.

an act of sense-making (“An Interview”). For her, the creative intention of *The Vagrants* is not to say anything black and white but to present different shades of grey in between (“Talking”). Indeed, instead of giving any easy conclusions, the novel encourages readers to slow down and consider the relation between an event and its representations. The myriad scales of perspectives cultivate curiosity and openness with respect to others; these are important habits of mind in countering post-truth rhetoric (see McComiskey 38–40).

### Conclusion

This article has offered a reading of Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants* through the lens of the Gothic. I started with Li’s use of Gothic tropes of graphic violence and ghosts. As my analysis showed, bodily violence reveals a biopolitical society where ideology precedes individual life, and verbal violence shows the monstrosity of human relationships. In addition, the invocation of spiritual existence brings to light not only a repressed, alternative belief system but also Muddy River’s immorality. Working together, these Gothic elements disclose hidden aspects of the town that unsettle the rosy, harmonious description fed by the government. I then examined the narrative’s point of view, contending that its engagement with alternative, peripheral perspectives demonstrates Li’s Gothicism by highlighting the tension between centre and margin. The story places social outsiders who are denied the official attention in the spotlight. Their observations from the perimeter reveal what happens behind the political spectacle, producing a heterogeneous panorama that rejects totalising interpretations.

The study further used *The Vagrants* to illustrate the value of literary reading in the contemporary age of post-truth. Literature has the capacity to foster critical thinking and therefore make readers better detectors and defenders of truth in real life. In Li’s case, this potential is realised through the author’s particular Gothic approach. While emotional appeal and postmodernist perspectivism are exploited by post-truth rhetors to disseminate biases, *The Vagrants* appropriates them in a way that encourages reflection and slow reading. As I argued, the emotive content mobilises readers’ affective faculties to draw their attention to alternative forms of being and knowing and prompt them to think across varying representations of Muddy River. Perspectivism likewise functions positively. The work invites readers to constantly change perspectives and consider the continuity or tension between different standpoints. Utilising these post-truth mechanisms to nurture openness, the novel showcases literature’s great significance in combating post-truth.

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