

My Children Will Return Me to Solitude — On the Poetry of Yu Xiang

I cannot tell if the day
is ending, or the world, or if
the secret of secrets is inside me again.

— Anna Akhmatova, “A Land Not Mine”

Children — this is how Yu Xiang refers to her poems. Invested with affection and enigma, her rhetoric enacts metaphor and misnomer. Should one assume innocence or maternity in Yu’s poetry, reading “Satan” or “It Goes Without Saying” sets off an immediate mix of thrill and shock. Answerable to longevity, these children have an age that defies science. Within them, they carry life and muse. “Two birds are on the branch of a tree,” writes Simone Weil, quoting an Upanishad. “One eats the fruit, the other looks at it.”¹ While Yu Xiang foretells her waning years, abandoned by her children in one poem, she metamorphoses into a sorceress of lofty age in another. The poetic “I” theatricalizes her age in order to liberate herself from time: a female artist in her prime of womanhood, Yu gives birth to many healthy lives, yet builds her memorial through self-mythology and imagined suicides. Are these children “dead” once they are “born”? Are poems “dead” when pronounced “read”? Time offers a more inward resilience when the beginning is a return to some end, and the end a lucid revision of the beginning. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* — much as the poet resists elegy in which melancholia lays claim to the morbid guise of death, age as a conspiracy of time creates a foreign but forceful intrigue with narrative cues.

1. Weil, Simone. “Forms of the Implicit Love of God.” *Waiting for God*. Trans. Emma Craufurd. New York: HarperCollins Perennial Classics, 2001. 105.

Far from indifference, each of these poems is as an intimate address. Attentiveness is a virtue one finds in Yu's writing. Peeling silence with verses, she is a listener who seeks nearness — and the *other* listener. Critics have noted the deceiving starkness in her linguistic DNA, its minimalism — visual and musical — that invites a second visit. This restraint initiates a larger dialogue, one that enkindles earthly musings. In “The Key Turns in the Keyhole,” the poet champions, “I prefer a simple life, feeling unhindered.” Her yearning for simplicity becomes more audible when it recurs as a moral urge:

A simple love
We dress simply, love simply
so simply that we fall in love
once we meet

— “Street”

Contrary to popular opinion, a simple poem is a source of redemption. In an interview with *Antaeus*, Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert said, “To see things with illuminating clarity — and, if they are simple, to describe them simply and to learn to live with everyday despair, telling oneself that perhaps one must write but that it is not necessary to publish.”² In a parallel quest for clarity, Yu Xiang harbors a strange preference for “diseased” sentences — a linguistic oddity, but also an impetus for music from the imperfect language of our imperfect world. We live in an epoch of civic despair. Surely an honest language must reflect that anxiety, that mix of incoherence and intelligibility. Instead of rejecting technically bizarre or overly colloquial syntax, Yu makes a conscious attempt to work from everyday language that accepts errors, friction and edges. She pushes phrases forward. She lets words coalesce. She makes them tumble. “All imperfection is easier to tolerate if served up in

2. See Dobyns, Stephen. “Pacing.” *Best Words Best Order: Essays on Poetry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 135.

small doses,”³ chuckles Wisława Szymborska, Herbert’s compatriot. Perhaps this is why for its most part Yu Xiang’s earlier work celebrates brevity, while her longer poems — notably “To The One Who Writes Poetry Tonight” — are viewed as a gesture of an *écriture automatique* in which random, quick lines with jostling surprises and disjunctive tropes perform a kind of black magic on the page.

As it turns out, the use of diseased sentences is an external manifestation of Yu’s physical health. During her adolescence and young adulthood, she was fragile and prone to falling ill. Frequent visits to doctors were marked by periodic hospital stays. Over time, and in a playful way, she began to perceive the doctor as a lover. Between humor and parody, her poem “Doctor Lover” eroticizes the routine but feared experience with a doctor. I was also thinking of Stanley Kubrick’s black comedy *Doctor Strangelove* (1964), in particular the sadistically gleeful character, Dr. Strangelove, played by Peter Sellers:

don’t ask me about my past illnesses
once you befriend me you can’t flirt anymore
doctor lover, at this moment I watch
you take off your surgical mask and medical gloves
perform new movements
wiping off the notoriety for past debauchery
you now approach me
in a black lab coat, clutching a bag of shining knives

Embracing diseased sentences as they are — instead of mending them — on a page calls for a quirky lineation and a novel environment for plain talk. After reading “My Poem” and “So You Love Me,” an editor pointed out their disjointed sentences and awkward syntax. I thought of photographer Diane

3. Szymborska, Wisława. “The Poet and the World.” *Poems: New and Collected*.
Trans. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh. New York: Harcourt, 1998. xiii.

Arbus, “I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don’t like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.”⁴ Sentences behave as if incomplete because they must; verses end on an inverted cadence to oblige a closure somewhere else. “Half-sentences” or “half-thoughts” constitute the making of what Yu Xiang conceives as a “half-poem” in the way poems function as “half-poems” at our discretion. The form of a “poem” gets slippery — in turn contested — when the act of defining becomes as organic as its reading experience.

Yu Xiang’s lines are vertical thoughts that obey no grammar or rhetorical order. They come and go on their own terms, temporally and contextually, offering different logics to different readers. In “So You Love Me,” Yu chooses the title as a refrain phrase throughout the text, and assembles a collage of voices — from radio broadcasts, books, and songs — in the time-space of “one night.” Actualizing a sustained memory, this monologue insists on the absence of punctuation when thoughts eschew verbal dictation. Even the prevailing usage of passive voice in other poems lends a psychological read. This poses a challenge to translation, which is why most of the translated syntax and word choices are intuitive: they have to do more with eyes and ear, imagination and emotional histories, and cannot afford linguistic justification or reasoning. I go for their friction, a contemporary feel, sensual impressions, and syncopated jazz. Poetic language is a place for improvisation and intensity. I keep ears open for street talk, stammering and sibilance. I seek the gap between desire and expression, and tame the voice in the forward momentum of each poem. Here I should add that translating a woman means to think, feel and speak like a woman, and in the body of a woman — Anna Swir, for one, writes poetry by talking to her body — notwithstanding the inadvertent overtones of a feminist interpretation.

4. See Bosworth, Patricia. “The Dark World.” *Diane Arbus*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. 248.

Born in November 1970 in Ji'nan, the capital city of Shandong province, Yu Xiang began writing poetry in 2000 and rose to literary fame in China a few years later, after having published in various “non-official” magazines. Her debut collection, *Exhale*, appeared in 2006, and was followed by a chapbook, *Sorceress* in 2009. Aloof to fashion, fame, or competition, Yu is, for most poetry circles, a presence hard to grasp. In “What Have I Said” (2009), a manifesto of sorts, she states, “I am not interested in mass production and competitive writing.” Not meant as a rebuff, her candor on prestige and posterity is even more revealing, “I am not concerned with being discussed by others. I am interested in being forgotten by others. Inevitably this points toward a repute after death. Look, this gigantic caterpillar finally escapes from the awkwardness in the spotlight.”

Discreet and seldom a guest at mainstream poetry events, Yu Xiang lives the figurative interpretation of her own poem, “Low Key,” shying away from media attention and commercial literary activities. She considers her life uneventful and boring, and earns a living in an office as do most “ordinary beings” — “I am not interested in too many things. Life has no joy, so I write. I am actually interested in very few things, so I write,” she continues in her *credo*. On the other hand, she is adamant that a mundane life does not lack poetry. Rather, it lacks being discovered. For one who believes the music is stronger than the musician, poetry is neither career nor charity. The art is a privilege, the word a spiritual nourishment that helps her survive the tedium of life, and find meaning or beauty in an otherwise pessimistic and difficult society.

With her husband, Sun Lei — also a visual artist and poet — Yu Xiang was involved in the underground art scene. The artist is the work, the work the artist. Her poems contain cultural references such as *Pedro Páramo* (1955) by Juan Rulfo and *Hable con ella* (2002), a film by Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar. An avid reader, she finds little time to read novels these days, but keeps an eye out for nonfiction titles on spirituality and religion, contemporary Latin American literature, and writings by poet Duo Duo. She also

reads Elizabeth Bishop and Emil Cioran, and is familiar with classic works of art by the European masters Redon, Schiller, and Van Gogh.

Considered a representative figure of the post-70s poets, Yu Xiang belongs to a new generation that follows in the footsteps of the “Obscure” (“Misty”) and the post-“Obscure” poets. If identification is a shadow act of figuration, Yu does not care for any post-era or post-modern label. Her response to recent sociopolitics differs from her predecessors’ in the late eighties, partly because she discerns the concrete, and does so less from a slant. Nor does she write with a journalistic understanding of the downtrodden: impoverished villagers, traumatized mothers who lost their children in the collapse of “tofu-skin” schools during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake; disaster-hit families and 105 dead students from the 2005 Shalan Town flood in Heilongjiang. Ambiguities are marginalized when Yu avoids ironic bombast, the ravines and gullies of false eloquence. Instead, she depicts them with a comparative eye — two disasters two histories, side by side — not just as a witness, but from an epiphany, and from the gap between perception and the real.

To document the erasure, Yu Xiang adjusts woundable sentiments. It brings to mind a journal entry by American poet Adrienne Rich: “The moment when a feeling enters the body — is political. This touch is political.”⁵ In Yu’s “Two Poems” the conceit is jarring: the scandal of a “tofu-skin” school falling like cards during the Sichuan earthquake versus the child labor exploited for Mao’s crystal coffin in the wake of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. How appropriate can history be when it turns its back on its own victims? From her frequent allusion — “Since” as an example — to Mao’s lavish coffin in his Tian’anmen Mausoleum, the poet is clear about the ideological lies and collective amnesia when it comes to Mao and the Cultural Revolution. “An if we live, we live to tread on kings,” disavows Hotspur in Act V, Scene II of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*. In the face of the alleged triumph of a “new” democracy, national chauvinism, and the

5. Rich, Adrienne. “Dearest Arturo.” *What Is Found There — Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993. 24.

masses' manic pursuit of material comfort, Yu writes from the standpoint of a "spectator." Faith begins with an observer — in "a society whose modernization has reached the stage of integrated spectacle"⁶ — the poet thus keeps herself at a critical distance from her own work. Through pronoun shifts or implied authorship of certain verses, she alienates herself from the poem, and sets a bar against passive spectatorship. Such Brechtian praxis is refreshing when the material can be read as both polemic and not at all.

Unafraid of going near politically radioactive truths, Yu Xiang is not keen on scoring ideological points, or telling "her" side of a narrative. As artist or critic, she mistrusts the tale. I think of Emily Dickinson's wholesome vision, "As freezing persons recollect the snow, / First chill, then stupor, then the letting go." Narration is outmoded because it cannot catch up with time and lies. In spite of the wreckage, Yu revises the climate — to weather the promise of what it means to be free — when freedom is a world, not a republic.

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6. "The society whose modernization has reached the stage of integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal factors: incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies, and eternal present." Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Malcom Imrie. London: Verso, 1998. 11–12.