

From the Margin of a Painting to Plural Inner Selves

Hu Xudong

When I was a little boy, I liked very much the classical Chinese painting and attempted to be an artist. After I learned by myself how to make Chinese ink and wash, which is done on water-absorbing papers with a brush dipped in pure water and black ink, not oil, I got a big surprise: Some of my paintings were selected to be included in an exhibition. Then there came a serious problem. To obey the traditional rules of Chinese ink and wash, I had to write calligraphy of classical poems on the margin of the paintings, because without this kind of calligraphy a Chinese painting isn't considered finished. So I forced myself to write the first poems of my life, one hour before I handed these paintings to the curator. I really want to forget these stupid metrical poems since they were a sort of childish nightmare; however, they were the unconscious beginning of my poetry writing.

For most Chinese contemporary poets, such an experience sounds a little weird: starting with classical Chinese poetry then turning to modern or postmodern poetry—how could it be possible? Although lots of American scholars, like the erudite professor Stephen Owen from Harvard University, are fascinated by classical Chinese poetry, our classical poetry and contemporary poetry are totally separate from the beginning of the twentieth century; they use different Chinese language, different aesthetics and different rhetoric. It's very common for an American contemporary poet to write a sonnet, but it's quite ridiculous for a Chinese contemporary poet to write a seven-character octave in the classical Chinese language of Tang dynasty: Imagine the American poet John Ashbery writing in Latin!

Anyway, I continued to write Chinese classical poetry with the unique purpose of matching it with Chinese ink and wash until I went to Peking University at the age of 17. Peking University is just like the University of Iowa, with a strong tradition of poetry writing. Almost 60% of the important poets in the history of modern or contemporary Chinese literature are from this university. Although our university didn't offer any courses like the creative writing courses offered here, we had a dynamic community of good poets, and I still think this atmosphere, with informal links between newcomers and skillful poets, is more effective than any kind of course given by faculty. I benefited quite a lot from the interactions among this mafia-like community, and I began to write poetry with contemporaneity, seeking a variable inner-world inside my daily life with sensitive lines which are like barking hunters running in the forest of the words.

At the beginning of their writing careers, most young poets believe in what Seamus Heaney wrote in his poem "Personal Helicon":

... I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

To give unknown darkness a perfect shape, to place random imaginations in a discrete order, was my great pleasure in writing, but I failed to "see myself." I mean, I didn't, and still don't, think poetry will lead me to a single self. How about plural selves? How about unexpected selves? Poetry is something that will invent secretly other kinds of yourself when you are writing. So I became a fan of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Unlike Walt Whitman, who enlarged a unique self to a splendid capacity, Fernando Pessoa split himself into uncountable infinite. This guy is amazing: He is far beyond the creator of poems; he created at least 90 poets. All of these 90 poets are

pseudonyms of himself; they have their own backgrounds and careers, publishing poems in their own styles, criticizing or influencing each other, even interacting with the “real” Fernando Pessoa in magazines or journals. The most interesting thing is, Fernando Pessoa was not insane, but he sometimes believed that all his pseudonyms were real people. When dying, he yelled his pseudonyms one by one, just like a sad farewell to his family members. One of his famous pseudonyms, Alvaro de Campos, wrote in a poem “Resumo”:

Sentir tudo de todas as maneiras.
Sentir tudo excessivamente,
Porque todas as coisas são, em verdade, excessivas

I don't have the English translation in my hands, so I'll try to translate it like this:

To feel everything in all the ways,
To feel everything excessively,
Because all the things are, in fact, excessive.

This is very close to what I am doing in my poetry writing: putting all kinds of wires of my sensibility and discernment into a very concrete space, to see them make intensive short circuits. For example, in one of my poems, “White Cat Toqtamish,” I tried to condense various narrative fragments of both true and fake history about the remote empires of the steppes in Central Asia into an eccentric image of a white cat which I saw by chance on my way home on one of the most boring summer nights in Beijing. Each of these historical fragments contains one of my strange dimensions of being. I really want to read this poem; unfortunately, it's still waiting for translation.

One of my friends, the American poet Forrest Gander, wrote a short introduction about me in one of his essays, and I'd like to quote it here: “The brilliant, exuberant Hu Xudong, who teaches World Literature at Peking University and speaks of a plural inner self, writes a high speed, macaronic poetry that incorporates provincial dialects, advertisements, classical references, and surrealism.”

I think this short description of my works is better than most of the tedious critiques in China. In the end, if someone wonders why this Chinese poet doesn't mention more cultural or political icons of China, I would like to answer you in couple of lines from a poem “A Literatura como Turismo” (“Literature as Traveling”), written by the most important Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto:

Instead of leading us to the exact cities,
Reading gives us other nationalities.