

A Philosophical Whisper of the Wanderer

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Abstract—This paper mainly studies Ouyang Yu's collection, *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-coloured Eyes*, in order to explore the sensation of being an exile under the guise of the lyrical tranquility. The study found that he transcended the boundaries imposed on him by his nationality, his place, even his own body to address the issue of humanity through his description of the floating spirit and his philosophical thinking.

Keywords—the floating spirit, philosophical thinking, identity crisis

I. INTRODUCTION

A Chinese-American poet, Nellie Wong once said that "some editors don't really want to hear about anything except about cultural ethnicity, or our families, thereby stereotyping us within the world of literature as well as without. In reality, writers of color write about everything—the world." [1] In his third collection, *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-coloured Eyes*, Ouyang Yu "explores the sensation of being an exile" under the guise of the lyrical tranquility [2]. But he doesn't stop there. He actually transcends the boundaries imposed on him by his nationality, his place, even his own body to address the weighty issues of humanity philosophically. Compared with his previous collection *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, the sensation in this collection doesn't burst out but oozes out from the cool mirror of the pages. He doesn't sing the songs, but he whispers. "He writes in a whisper but the words resonate loudly...." [2].

In this collection, the images Ouyang chooses are beautiful, but most of them carry an undertone of melancholy and loss at the same time, dragging the readers directly to the center of the poet's solitude and alienation, the representative of the New Chinese, as they confront the identity crisis [3]. His philosophical thinking about the meaning of life leaves readers heavy with thoughts too profound to be light-hearted.

II. THE FLOATING SPIRIT

In this collection, Ouyang casts the impression of tranquility and peacefulness. The images he chooses, the rain, autumn, the still lake, are extremely peaceful yet quite deceitful. Autumn is a symbolic image in Chinese culture. It is just one link of the eternal cycle, which represents the loss of youth and the looming of death [4]. The fine rain is always associated with melancholy and sadness. It can be said that in this collection, under tranquility runs deep the

melancholy and sadness of the poet Ouyang projects, such as *The Train*:

The leaves of the wutong tree sighing
the wind sound asleep in the green
dripping, chirping
one dimple after another on the water [5]

The dripping of the raindrops and the sighing of the wutong leaves evokes in the readers' mind *Shengshengman* by LI Qingzhao, especially the line, "wutong trees rustling, the drizzling falling till dusk, one drip after another." [6] Then, another question might arise, where do that sadness and loneliness come from?

An easy and presumptuous guess might be that the sadness comes from the poet's nostalgia for his own home country. However, a closer look at another poem, *My Two Women* will falsify such supposition. In the poem, the previous woman *hua* is too old, tough and imperious.

She wanted me to be loyal to her and
did not allow me to have two hearts [7]

And the current woman *ao* is too cruel, aloof and exclusive.

However deep I get into her
I can't get to her heart [7]

Therefore, the poet chooses to abandon both, as he says, "for the sake of freedom, both can be abandoned" [7]. To the poet, a recent PRC migrant, the decision to abandon both motherlands must be hard, for he would have nowhere to anchor his wandering spirit. But even though he doesn't abandon both lands, he could not find his sense of belonging. He is the "double man" [8], the representative of the New Chinese who are stuck in between, knowing clearly although it seems that they possess two countries, but actually outsiders belonging to neither China nor Australia. They are like traitors who can be loyal to neither of the two countries [9]. Frustrated with either, he deserts both of them. For the poet, they both become otherlands strange to him. Or he himself chooses to wander in order to gain his freedom from any bounds, to get rid of the load of duality.

But the poet's melancholy doesn't come from the ordinary sense of exile and separation. Perhaps, Magdalena Ball's statement may clarify this. "This collection explores the sensation of being an exile, and not just the kind of exile that comes with leaving your home country never to return, although that is certainly to be found here. There is

also a more icy kind of exile—the notion of loss and disjointedness from self.” [10] In *Second Drifting*, the poet dies twice, the first time when he leaves China for Australia, the second time when he leaves Australia for China. In this poem, the loss of country becomes a loss of self, a loss of heart, and the death of the body.

I used to have two hearts
one east and the other west
but I have nothing left now
only this instinct to wander again [11]

All Alizadeh points out that “it could perhaps be said that, according to Yu, a migrant is separated not only from his/her country of birth but also from the body, and that any attempts at repatriation or assimilation are ultimately futile—almost regardless of whether one is a ‘foreign matter’ in an apathetic and/or xenophobic country—because the body, the initial host of the soul, has been abandoned by the wandering spirit.” [12]

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the sense of alienation and loneliness as a wanderer is manifest in these poems, such as *The Train*. Here, the poet sees himself as a lonely friendless traveler traveling through unwelcoming lands:

One place after another I go
welcomed only
by the signal flags, peddlers on the platforms, and
travelers [13]

Forever drifting, the poet feels that “I knew not where my home was, I knew not where I was going?” [14] In this collection, the poet regards himself as a wanderer forever drifting from a strange place to another, forever lonely, yearning to search for a home in vain. Free though he is, he is drifting, wandering, homeless.

III. A PHILOSOPHICAL THINKER

Being a floating spirit, the poet feels free to contemplate the meaning of life. In the poems, he is always standing alone at night, forever thinking and reflecting. Thinking deeply, life for him becomes boring and routine as in *Ordinary Days*. The youthful days were lost that they can never be retrieved. All seems lost. A kind of disillusionment is manifest in *Night Thoughts*.

I often wonder what I should do
when sex no longer matters
when money no longer matters
when nothing really matters
that is valued in human life [15]

Since life there is pain, is endurance and death after death, the poet feels nothing worth cherishing. All is empty. Nothing really matters for him. He is disillusioned. There is a cute existential longing and awareness of emptiness in *Tonight is My Birthnight*.

Have I ever lived
have I? [16]

The poet presents the beautiful things that has come to

ruin or loss: the fish that used to swim in sunshine turning out to be heaps of bones in the same sunshine, the happy moment when father and son’ imitating frightens the birds dumbfounded fleeing in this collection, the beautiful woman in the supermarket turning into an animal in the dream, the girl he once liked would never know that he liked her. “He presents the reader with things of beauty—memory, dawn, a pretty face, a lovely scene, but there is always a slip side.” [17] Here, Ouyang’s witty humor actually is permeated with a sense of emptiness and disillusionment. It seems that life is so empty that all “becomes distilled to a kind of nothingness.” [17]

Since the earthly life is full of emptiness and alienation, the poet longs to be detached. It immediately brings into mind the ancient Chinese poet Su Shi, who longs to “fly freely accompanied by gods of immortality, living to eternity with the forever bright moon” [18]. The poet whom Ouyang projects also feels himself “fly with wings bound by the universe” [19]. Troubled by his sleepless nights, the poet stands in his backyard, watching the moon, reflecting that

In your eyes my life
is this red light on the end of a cigarette
that shortens as it burns
and you
are a changeless mirror over the centuries [20]

Here the poet is contemplating eternity and briefness. The moon exists forever, while human life is so short. Human life just occupies a brief period of the evolvement of the universe. Still, no matter how short it is, human life has a link to the eternal, changeless moon, like “this ascending blue smoke” [20].

As All Alizadeh reviews, “in the 2002 collection *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-coloured Eyes*, Yu’s desire for a detachment from geo-political zones, codes and classifications expands into a metaphysical overcoming of all things earthly and physical, be they the boundaries of countries or the regions of the poet’s own body.” [21] The poet projected by Ouyang seems detached, and metaphysical. Finally, like Su Shi, the poet also comes to settle with his earthly life, although it is lonely, boring, and painful.

The best advice to him
is that it’s better not to talk about solitude
but get by minute by sixty-second minute like this [22]

For him, man should live after all, even though it is boring and painful.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-coloured Eyes*, Ouyang Yu explores the sensation of being an exile. His poems are saturated with loneliness, alienation, the sense of loss. However, he transcends all these feelings and comes to ponder on the meaning of life, the way of living. Nicolas Jose’s words may conclude well. “He (Ouyang Yu) succeeds in riding a current that takes him beyond cultural

boundaries into broader ocean of human experience.” [23] In this collection, Ouyang Yu’s poems are full of melancholy images. His passion is controlled. “He whispers as a wanderer, but the words resonate loudly.” [24] His sense of wandering, loneliness, solitude strikes the strings of the readers’ heart so as to enable them to empathize with him. At the same time, his contemplation of the meaning of life forces the readers to think deeply. Life is still worth living. To the most wandering New Chinese, even though they have no definite identity of their own, a life without definite identity is still a life. Life is existence.

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