

To Listen Is To Bind

by Yifan Gu

To write this introduction, I read my essay again, and tried to reflect on its ideas, which are, ironically, about how to reflect on and interpret writing. I found it interesting that self-reflexivity is integral here. Writing “To Listen Is To Bind” involved taking a journey to review my complex encounters with the different systems of literary interpretation from Chinese and English literary cultures, and my effort to establish my own way of interpreting literature as a bilingual reader. I believe this topic is crucial because we are in an era where cultures meet and clash and blend. Just as new types of cross-cultural texts are being written, there should also be new ways of interpretation so we can better appreciate them.

—Yifan Gu

Back in China, I was taught standard ways to examine a text, to determine its hidden idea, to disassemble it as if it were a sophisticated machine consisting of delicate components. However, when I was preparing for the SAT, the standard Chinese way of interpreting literature did not work anymore. The symbols and imagery used by Li Po and Du Fu are so different from those used by Western writers. Before, there was a secret code I shared with the author. But the code became invalid every time I tried to analyze works by writers from another culture. I began to question if the traditional way of literary interpretation that I learned in China still applies to a world in which different cultures meet, clash, merge, and blend incessantly.

Yiyun Li is a cross-cultural writer. She was born in China but started to write in English after she moved to America. In her essay “To Speak Is To Blunder,” she explains her decision to abandon her mother tongue, Chinese, for English, and the consequences she faced for this renunciation. After moving to America, she began to write, think, and dream in English. To describe her experience, she creates a distinction between public and private language: “When we enter a world—a new country, a new school, a party, a family or a class reunion, an army camp, a hospital—we speak the language it requires. The wisdom to adapt is the wisdom to have two languages: the one spoken to others, and the one spoken to oneself.” Public language requires the speaker to “assess the situations, construct sentences with the right words and the correct syntax, catch a mistake if one can avoid it, or else apologize and learn the lesson after a blunder.” In contrast, a private language is “spoken to oneself” (Li). The conversation in her private language, no matter how linguistically flawed, she feels “is the conversation that I have

always wanted, in the exact way I want it to be.” However, Li is still conflicted. She announces that her abandonment of Chinese is “personal, so deeply personal that I resist any interpretation—political or historical or ethnographical.”

In addition to her own resistance, others were skeptical of Li’s choice. Chinese immigrants criticized her English for being “simple” and not “native enough” (Li). An American professor told her to stop writing in English entirely. Li implicitly hints that her work was underappreciated at first because of the readers’ concern about “ownership of a language.” It occurs to me that as an outsider to both Chinese- and English-speaking readers, she is in an awkward position between two cultures. Having lived in both cultures and undergone the linguistic transition from Chinese to English, she has taken on a multilingual perspective, and Chinese culture would still have a major impact on the way she perceives the world even if she abandons it.

Why is it hard to speak, think, and interpret in cross-cultural contexts? Mary Louise Pratt, in her essay “Arts of the Contact Zone,” provides some answers. Pratt proposes the concept of “contact zones,” or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (34). According to Pratt, arts in the contact zone are underappreciated: “miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone” (37). In her essay, Pratt focuses on one particularly exceptional example of art in the contact zone: Guaman Poma’s *New Chronicle and Good Government*. Poma was an Incan living in Peru during the seventeenth century and the *New Chronicle* was a 1200-page letter he wrote to the king of Spain. In this manuscript, Poma adapts Bible stories to include Andean people, and criticizes Spanish rule over the Inca. Pratt points out that the document is an example of an “autoethnographic text,” which is “a text which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). Poma’s book is a typical “transculturation” phenomenon, the product of a “[process] whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (36). When Li came to America, she created a cultural contact zone between Chinese and American culture in which she was a minority trying to fit into a majority culture. When Li writes in her second language, she is writing autoethnographic text. Li uses her adopted language to self-reflect. The foreignness of English makes her feel safe, but it also puts her in the position of a cultural minority in both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking cultures. This places her work “in the contact zone.”

Although they at first appear quite different, there is a subtle analogy to be made between Poma and Li. Poma had a political purpose, while Li had a personal purpose. Nonetheless, each has a complicated and paradoxical relationship with their cultural backgrounds. Poma wrote against Spanish rule over the Inca, but he did so by using the country’s language and cultural references. Li writes in English to have private conversations with herself that are separate from her past, but she is still tied to Chinese culture. Poma is opposing the culture that has imposed itself on him and Li is

running away from the culture of her youth. Four hundred years lie between these two writers. Yet, Li and Poma face the same problem of having their motives misinterpreted.

What does this mean for our ability to appreciate “arts in the contact zone”? Susan Sontag, in her essay “Against Interpretation,” provides a new perspective on how to interpret artwork. Her main point is that the over-interpretation of artwork brings many undesired side-effects. Ancient Greeks, led by Plato, believed that art is a mimicry of reality, and therefore is useless. They separated form from content, and believed the content to be the only thing that matters, and that form is an “accessory” (4). Interpretation was their effort to dig up the content behind the form. Sontag, instead, believes that “Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (10). She states that the modern-day interpretation of artwork “poisons our sensibilities,” that it is “the revenge of the intellect upon art,” and its overall effect is to “impoverish, to deplete the world” (7). Marxist and Freudian literary criticism, for example, “excavates, and as it excavates, destroys” (6). While the Greek style of interpretation is respectful to the original art form, for Sontag, modern forms of analysis are like the greedy Spanish conquistadors that Poma wrote about. They deplete the original form in the way that miners cut down trees in the Amazon to try to find some gold underneath, but fail to realize the value of the forest they destroyed. At the end of her essay, Sontag illustrates the desirable ways to comment on art, and that is through transparency, which she defines as, “experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are” (13). Sontag advocates that to properly analyze a text, readers need to explore the forest itself rather than cutting it down to look for gold or hidden ideas. We should wander around and observe the trees; we should conduct research on the biological system. The forest is the “form,” and Sontag believes that it is as meaningful as the content.

Li attests to Sontag’s idea in her essay, saying that her decision to write only in English is easily overinterpreted. Some readers try to decode her personal choice by giving it political meanings. The irony is, Li herself struggles to interpret her own life. Throughout the essay, she implicitly hints that the reason she renounces Chinese is that her memories in China were miserable. She leaves her old life uninterpreted because “memories, left untranslated, can be disowned.” Perhaps that’s why she desperately looked for a private language: “Much of what one does—to avoid suffering, to seek happiness, to stay healthy—is to keep a safe space for one’s private language” (Li). She feels safe introspecting, reflecting, and talking to herself in her private language. English is the safe place she found that allows her to coexist with the old Li she ran away from; it is the decoder that connects the new Li to her old self. After switching to English, she finally finds a way to interpret herself. Just as English is the private language that helps Li connect to herself, the right way of interpreting artwork is by accessing a “private language” that helps readers connect to the author. When we as readers find ourselves baffled trying to interpret a piece of writing, it is not because there is no way to interpret it, it’s just we haven’t yet found the “private language,” the decoder.

I discovered this when I attempted to apply the code given to me at school in China to the work of Virginia Woolf. In Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall," the narrator sees a black mark on the wall and throughout the story, imagines multiple possibilities of what that mark could be. In the end, she discovers that it was only a snail. I was confused the first time I read this piece of literature. I did not understand what the author was trying to convey. I assumed that the snail must be some sort of symbol that all Western-educated students understood, and if only I knew what it was, the story's meaning would become clear. Later, I realized I was just like the narrator in Woolf's story. She was imagining possibilities, but the answer was obvious when she stood up and looked closer. As a reader, it would be better for me to just get closer to the text and observe and feel directly. We can employ Sontag's idea of transparency, of respecting art as it speaks to us in its "private language," looking for the decoder that binds us with them. We need to approach artwork with transparency, recognizing the beauty of the forest instead of just focusing on the gold underground. "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more," Sontag advocates (14). Does the mark on the wall symbolize the narrator's sense of loneliness or frustration? Well, stop guessing why the mark is there. Imagine being in the narrator's position, observing the mark, touching it with your hand, feeling its texture, discovering the snail. After all, to speak is to blunder. But to listen, is to bind.

Works Cited

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