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## Against autobiography: Towards a self- fictionalisation

### Abstract

I would like to start this essay with a poem whose author I will not reveal until the end of the piece:

OUYANG YU

## Against Autobiography: Towards a Self-Fictionalisation

I would like to start this essay with a poem whose author I will not reveal until the end of the piece:

### **Autobiography**

#### Volume I

Why write it?

#### Volume II

There are a dozen namesakes  
Including a few fictional ones  
How can I keep my uniqueness?

#### Volume III

I am not a woman  
And I am hardly a man

#### Volume IV

Nor am I from an extremely poor background  
As my mother said:  
You haven't lived an interesting enough life

#### Volume V

I am not an Asian wo(e)  
Man and suffering

#### Volume VI

What if everyone in the world knew me  
After I expose myself  
On every page?

#### Volume VII

I don't even know who I am  
Can I write an autobiography  
For someone else  
Like I did before  
Writing a love letter  
For a friend?

Volume VIII

Who knows?  
 How about getting someone else to write  
 My autobiography?

Volume VIII

Market it  
 Sell yourself

Volume X

One in a billion  
 A couple  
 Of billions

It was in late 2005 in Wuhan when I was preparing a lecture on my own writing that I realised I was someone else or, in other words, someone else was me. It was almost as if my name ‘Ouyang Yu’ had become a pen name or, worse, a fictional name. My internet search returned more than a dozen people that shared my name, word for word, or character for character. This came as a shock. My idea of self as a unique entity disintegrated. Was I this scholar by the name of Ouyang Yu who had lived more than 100 years ago or was I this ‘cold male’ by the name of Ouyang Yu in an e-novel in which he is brandishing a sword against a magical sky? (Anon, Chapter 10) And if someone intends to name his daughter Ouyang Yu ([viewjinhua.qianlong.com](http://viewjinhua.qianlong.com)), does this mean that a name, once given, can no longer be contained in a fixed identity and gender? When the owner of the name becomes plural, there seems little hope of ever retaining the self that makes the core of an autobiography.

As far as I can recall, it was an Australian novelist who introduced the idea of autobiography to me. In the late 1980s in Shanghai, where I studied for an MA in Australian literature, I learnt from him that autobiography was quite a marketable thing in the West. The idea haunted me for some time before I ditched it, for a simple reason. I did not like the smell of market in literature nor did I like the fact that there was probably not much in my life worth writing about. I was also made uncomfortable by the thought that I might be left with nothing else to write about once I exhausted my own life in a book of autobiography. It would be nice if I succeeded in turning my life into a success but if I did not, my life, or my attempt, would be a failure.

I now realise that there was a deeper reason for not pursuing this seemingly easy but potentially fraught option. From when I was a young child more than forty-five years ago, I had a feeling that I was being watched. I remember performing a babyish dance — I was a baby then — in bed feeling as if this was being recorded although there was no such word. I also remember bursting into tears seeing my own reflection in the window pane when I was about three; I could not possibly understand why there was someone else there looking at me

on a night when Mom was away at work. There always seems to be two, at least two, of me wherever I am. This came to a head in Hong Kong in 2002 where I was attending the Writers' Festival. Something so strange happened that whenever I wrote a poem and keyed in the letter 'I' for I, two 'I's would appear, a big 'I' side by side with a small 'i', like this: 'Ii'. This lasted the entire Festival before it disappeared although the impression remains to this day, becoming stronger after I went past the age of fifty, so strong that sometimes I think that I am this small 'i', keeping company with this big 'I', a total stranger whom it is my duty for the remainder of my life to follow and write about.

But who is this 'I', this big 'I'? Is he necessarily me? Who is he? Can he be someone that contains me? Or I? How many people are there in this 'I' person? Is he single or plural? Or single and plural?

To answer these questions or avoid answering them, let me refresh my memory with some incidents in my past life. At one stage, I fell passionately in love with Herman Hesse's writings in Chinese translation. I searched in vain for the particular ones I had read in my university days. The last impression left was this: that it was I, not Hesse, who had written them. The close I-identification, also I-ident-I-fiction, with Hesse was achieved when I thought his thoughts were mine and his emotions were mine or he was I who had expressed them, in another age, another place, and another time. Likewise, a friend of mine had read Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Chinese translation and expressed a similar sentiment. He told me that Rousseau had said everything that he had ever wanted to say. Perhaps, as J.S. Mill once put it (from memory), only by focusing on the one 'I' could one individual hope to reach other 'I's, multiple 'I's.

Now, I seem to defeat my own purpose by preaching the virtues of autobiography. Not so. While I admire Rousseau for his intellectual honesty and originality in introducing the genre of autobiography I do not wish to turn night into day by turning my life inside out. 'ren yinggai you ziji de mimi' [one should have one's own secrets]. These words were said more than thirty years ago by a middle-school classmate of mine in my home. After he left, my dad commented that it was well said. I resented that because I did not like the boy much. As I am writing this I have come to see the worth of his words. One's life is not a show, least of all a freak show, for the rest of the world. There are things in one's life that one can never begin to tell anyone, let alone oneself, because one has to work hard to find out their meaning, instead of exhibiting them in book form. While a lived life is easier to write, it is limiting in that there is little room left for imagination; there is little possibility for other lives to be lived.

Take *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, my second book of poetry written in English. When I wrote that book, I literally heard voices. I became multiple, multiplied, turning into a multitude of voices. After China, it seems, the original integrity of my soul could no longer hold together but must break into pieces of self at fissures of intense cross-cultural conflicts, speaking in a voice ringing

with a chorus of other voices. Later, when some of these cantos were collected in my *New and Selected* (2004), a reviewer refused to review the collection, citing ‘dislike’ and believing that I as the poet had a hatred for Australian humanity (King 83). He had committed the sad mistake of taking the book literally as one of autobiography. He did not know, could not possibly have known, that as I wrote the book the I in me had somehow vacated, reaching the state where, as Chinese woman poet Wang Xiaoni says, *zhiyou wo bu zai wo zhong* (only I is not in I) (qtd in Huang & Jiang 114), a multiple orgasmic state in which the I became a tool employed in the act of writing. If it was entirely an Ouyang Yu thing, why would an Australian woman, a total stranger, write from South Australia and tell me that she was moved to tears while reading it in bed at night?

Talking about books of autobiography, I find these examples of exhibitionism dressed in fanciful autobiographical colours hold less and less appeal for me, things like *Wild Swans* and *Mao's Last Cancer*, sorry, I mean *Mao's Last Dancer*.<sup>1</sup> It may be personal but when the person does not even like his own image there is no help whatsoever. I once showed a video-recorded TV interview with me on ABC to a group of friends at home but had to hide myself in another room because I could not bear to watch myself moving in another form. I once tried to listen to my own reading on Radio National, only to find myself switching the radio off in disgust because I simply could not stand my own voice. I wish I could be as beautiful as Narcissus and love myself as no-one would, till I die and turn into a flower of the same name. Curiously, though, it is there that fiction is born, the fictional flower born of the death of self.

There is a need, then, to fictionalise oneself, to bring out the woman in one, to depict the other embedded in the self, to live the death, if you like, to make history through self-realisation and to turn into a rose by any other name.

At one stage in my life, lured by all its trappings, I came dangerously close to writing an autobiography. In that 700-odd-page novel (*Loose: A Wild History*), I begin with the story of a fictional character by the name of Ouyang Yu, who lives a parallel life to that of my own, only to find that it becomes increasingly untenable and unsustainable until the character becomes reduced to a simple letter, O, who is every bit unlike me, reaching a fictional height above what is a merely autobiographical existence, fictionalising the self to the degree of non-recognition. By Book III, for example, a fictional character has taken over from Ouyang Yu to write a biography of Ouyang as he states here:

Today I have officially taken over the job of writing the Ouyang Yu biography after the trial period in the second volume of this book. I know Ouyang has got someone writing about him but he has since said no to that someone although I have never got a chance to take a look at the manuscript to see how he or she approaches him. My idea is offer a comparison between that person's biography or part biography and mine to give the reader a chance. We'll see how we go but I think I shall follow the pattern set out before.

As a writer's life resembles that of a chrysalis, s/he takes other lives and lives with them inside his or her cocoon. By the time s/he turns into a butterfly or a moth, his or her fiction is complete, the cocoon that is his or her autobiography abandoned like a shed skin. S/he becomes a new poem, as I did when I wrote the following poem:

### **The Great Chinese Loneliness**

Early morning, the empty door, the echoes somewhere upstairs  
The walls with blind ears, the bare buildings in the rain  
Noseless ones, the silenced trees, the lake slowly gathering  
Trickles of effluence of an affluent city, the cold seeping  
Into the pores of one quietly living his loneliness  
To the hilt, the dark windows during the day, reminiscent  
Of a packed Hong Kong with its millions of nonentities  
Of a Taipei reeking with hot airs of sewage  
Of a psychiatrically, classically Melbourne  
Of a Wuhan with a single cabdriver waiting all night  
Outside a bath station for a client to finish  
His business, the riverlets running down the panes, the voices of buying  
And selling, the one who left for America the Beautiful Country  
In 1847, almost all alone, the one who opened  
Fire on himself after an intense period of no  
Communications and full force, the sense of solitariness  
Descending on the Song Dynasty in Su's poetry, the shroud of fire  
Crackers bombarding the ears of the city, the woman's demented  
Fragments in Castro's novel, the one who seeks white  
Comfort, no fruition, in the 40s New York  
Chinatown, the one gone silent after ascending to the top  
Salary range, the one reading the Bible in the 21st century, loneliness  
Become her, the one with a balding head and words that I'd go  
Mental if continuing to live this way, the place full  
Of people talking to each other at once, without understanding  
Anyone else, the one spending his nights reading writing wreading riting  
Listening to the wind in the empty door, the hollowness  
Of the century, the full fury of the incessant working  
Beings, the constipated weather with unrainable  
Clouds, four fathoms deep, the heart divorced  
The bodies fragmented, far away, a lone voice saying  
Coming, I'm coming, 5000 years and now  
Basic living, from hand to mouth, from mouth to bums  
From heart to non-heart, from mind to unminded  
The door again, slamming itself against  
The untouchable wind, celebrating the idea  
Of one being no one  
Else

While the word 'alter-ego' means a second self, the Chinese expression, zhiji [知己], is not exactly the same, as it means, word for word, 'know self'. That is what is meant when they say 'it takes one to know one' although the Chinese 'know-

self’ is an infinitely positive one because it is not a second self but a different self that knows this self. The self does not know itself but needs another self to know it; it needs no more than one other self to know it. Sometimes there is not even one other self to know it or that knows it. Hence the birth of need for poetry for me, as shown here below, in my self-translation from Chinese:

**I don’t have friends**

I don’t have friends

All my friends are far away

Even when they are far away

My friends are not many

Among these few friends

Not one is a know-heart

Even if I count myself in

I dare not say I know my heart

Closest to me

On the edge of the quilt beneath which I nestle against the cold winter

Are my only two friends:

A cup of hot tea and this poem that will soon be finished (Zong 2007)<sup>2</sup>

In this poem, you will notice a slight change from ‘know-self’ to ‘know-heart’; these two are basically the same thing according to Chinese lexicographical definitions. In my own understanding, though, the know-heart (zhixin) [知心] is more intimate than the know-self (zhiji) [知己]. An unfathomable thing as the Chinese expression goes, ‘ren xin nan ce’ [人心难测], the heart defies any attempts to know it. I would be content if there were only one person in the whole world who could claim to know my heart if and when I let him or her know it. I would never hope to reach millions by exposing that heart to its full contents unless I wanted to become a transparent celebrity.

In an age addicted to *zilian* (self-love) [自恋], autophilia or narcissism, it would sound anachronistic to say the above but, given a self that resists penetration by private eyes, a self that is satisfied with no more than one know-self or know-heart, and a self that is bent on knowing more about itself and others, it is fair to dissociate the self from any autobiographical attempts, merely to meet the market demands, and to fictionalise the self in myriad forms, in a perpetual effort to search for the ultimate truth, truths, personal and otherwise. As Mario Vargas Llosa once said, and I identify strongly with him, ‘Since childhood, I have always been beset by the temptation to turn into fiction everything that happens to me, to such a degree that, at times, I feel that everything I do and that is done to me — all of my life — is nothing more than a pretext for inventing stories’ (Llosa 12).

In my recent attempts to fictionalise the self, I have aimed at the community at large by telling stories, reducing myself to the role of a cold observer and

combining my story with other stories in a fictional manner that do not limit them to an autobiographical level but elevate them above the market constraints in search of that lone know-self or know-heart that I am sure will lend his or her ears in a corner of this world. This has created an effect akin to Czeslaw Milosz's poetic description here: 'as if my life had not been/as if not my heart, not my blood,/not my duration/had created words and songs/but an unknown, impersonal voice' (Milosz 13). I shall end the piece with one of the poems from my collection *Listening To* by giving you a chance to listen to that 'unknown, impersonal voice':

**Listening to the poet talk about himself**

Sitting in his kitchen-washroom in Vauxhall, London  
 Under a sky of low clouds  
 I was amazed by the number of windows on the opposite building  
 Across a yard with a bicycle hanging, upside down, on an iron rack  
 When he said:

And the number of eyes behind those windows, mostly closed  
 But I won't see them for I draw my curtains  
 Against a world of sane madness  
 I didn't know who I was, English or Chinese  
 But I go beyond that now, I rise above  
 Nationalities, I am bound by no boundaries  
 My father was murdered when I was six  
 Having just woken up in a train station, in northern China  
 I have since adopted my mother's surname  
 Hell is London, not exactly the way you say Australia is  
 For you at least have sunshine which I'm sure will cure me of my disease  
 Here my face is a sky that smiles no smiles  
 My face, if anything, is a history turned inside out  
 With wrongly written characters  
 Newly put down in English letters  
 I speak not  
 To the old world where my love can't root  
 I speak to  
 Poets only  
 Spender, Porter, Brodsky  
 Have another glass of this  
 Marc Xero  
 A lovely white  
 Wine from Italy  
 In a little while  
 I'll walk you to Victoria  
 Where you can take the Victoria Line  
 To Blackfriars  
 And see Tate Modern  
 Right on the other side of the Thames  
 Hopefully, one day when you come back again  
 We could meet for the Peking duck again

In Vauxhall, of all the places, and I'm sure I'll remain poor  
 And love poetry as a most beautiful thing  
 Despite what you say  
 About its fascinating ugliness

By the way, you have probably guessed it, and your guess is as good as mine, that the poem I quoted at the beginning of this essay was written by no other person than the fictional one by the penname of Ouyang Yu.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It was in reading a friend's email that I thought I saw an intriguing title of a book, *Mao's Last Cancer*. On second looking, I realised it was *Mao's Last Dancer*. Nevertheless, I recorded the incident as an example of 'creative mistakes' in my coinage.
- <sup>2</sup> Ouyang Yu's English translation of his own Chinese poem, titled, 'wo meiyou pengyou', written on 11/12/2005 in Wuhan and included in the *Best Chinese Poetry 2006* (ed. Zong Renfa).

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