Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Yu Hsuan-Chi

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 12th, 2018

In an old colonial building, wracked with moss and mould, there is an installation in between two rooms that are galleries for the duration of the Kochi Biennale. Fans whir above you, a dog barks. It is a space to think about passing through, somehow liminal and central, a transition like we experience in a connecting flight or an overpass. What do we do when we are in-between? What happens when we are at customs or collecting our bag? How are we anchored?

There is nothing to suggest we need to be anchored, but I like a place to rest my head. I like the idea and feeling of 'home', and I am attached to specific places on the South West Australian coast. I write out of that country. I feel it in my bones even as the marrow comes from all over the world, from villages just near here in Kochi and further afield in Scotland. But that 'coming from' is also a myth that would place me in another place and time. I feel at home in my body because country is a heart matter. Country is a kind of love, a possibility and a reference point to guide us to where we need to go, which is into life itself.

We often hear about love *of* something. Love of a person, love of a country, love of a language. This could also be similar to love *for* a person, a country, a language. But when we think of love as something, when we ask what it is, we come up to the poetry that would suggest to us the outline, the silhouette, the suggestion. In other words, we need metaphors to describe it. It becomes analogous.

Love is a country. And what is a country? A country is not a place, is not a nation, is not a society, is not a culture, is not a people, is not a spirit, is not a myth, is not a dream. Country is a state of becoming. Love is one such country. It is the country that one carries with oneself in the heart, liver, kidney, stomach pit as if one held a worm so precious in the hand, a worm that had dug through the dirt; so precious as if one gutted a herring, as if one heard the black and red tailed black cockatoo that flew overhead, calling.

I like to think I have a country, a love of love itself, a state of becoming that I am still naming, that I see refracted in the people I know, in the places I rest in, in the words I am making. Country is where night turns to day, where we find a way, and so I am reminded of Yu Hsuan-Chi who writes:

> *Thoughts At Heart, Sent to Him*
>
> I long to send on red-stringed *ch'in* song

this tired tangle of thought and feeling.

We made clouds-and-rain love early on,

but never shared an orchid-scent heart:

the radiant peach and plum in my bloom

couldn’t slow your quest for high renown,

and azure-deep pine-and-cinnamon green

couldn’t still your longing for admiration.

Moon colors moss all clarity on the steps.

Song drifts depths of courtyard bamboo.

Red leaves lie thick at the gate. I’d sweep

for a man who fathoms my *ch’in* utterly.

But who are they? Who is the ‘I’ here and who is ‘he’ that ‘she’ sends the thoughts of her heart to? It could be you or me after all. They could be anyone or anything. But we feel it in our ‘heart’ and ‘bloom’. This is a body we recognise. Even I, from the other side of the world, would have to fly further than Dubai to get to the T’ang dynasty where Yu Hsuan-Chi wrote. Even I can recognise clouds and rain, orchid, peach and plum, pine and cinnamon, bamboo; even I know the meaning of the line ‘red leaves lie thick at the gate’. Winter is coming, but country is there to bring us home. In that way, it is a philosophy of a drive to be everywhere at home.

The homesickness that underpins our desire to return is the thought by which we learn to sweep ourselves into history, how we learn to accept being pushed backwards watching the memories fall at our feet. These are not only wreckage, not only plastics, debris, corpses, but the compost of books into which we can throw the seeds and watch the trees grow as we move into the distance. When the day comes that its red leaves fall, we will know that there will be a broom nearby for our future ancestors to sweep them up and turn them into soil again even if all the world is burning and your love is a long way from home.

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