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Imitation

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of multiple voices and styles already honed. We cannot speak but we listen, for that ringing on the page. And then we walk away from each translation with a clearer idea of what kind of writer we are, who we might be if we were to write poetry.

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IMITATION

TIMOTHY YU

The notion of poetic originality may seem elusive, even quaint, in the era of the global postmodern. The language of mimicry and hybridity frames our understanding of writing from postcolonial spaces, and more broadly helps us grasp the relationship of any minoritized or marginalized writing with regard to the dominant mode. And collage, appropriation of texts, and other styles of “uncreative writing” are the most prominent manifestations of the contemporary U.S. poetic avant-garde.

My own poetry collection, *100 Chinese Silences*, would seem to participate in this flight from originality. The poems in the book are all parodies, rewritings of poems by other modern and contemporary authors that thematize Asia

in some way. A deep irony I've been aware of throughout this project is that Asians themselves have often been stereotyped by the West as mere imitators, incapable of the originality and invention that allegedly characterize Western modernity. Having, supposedly, no voice of my own, I was reduced to rewriting the works of those who had already spoken for me. Indeed, I strove to be a diligent pupil, trying to capture the voice, style, and rhythms of each poet I was imitating.

But of course “imitation” is itself fundamental to poetry, whether in the broader sense of an “imitation of nature” or in the more specific sense of an apprenticeship grounded in the imitation of other poets' works. As a master term for global poetics, “imitation” may have the advantage of signifying a *conscious inhabitation* of another text or voice, one that is fully aware of its belated, secondary nature, and of the relationships of power that connect the “original” and the “copy.” And yet a poetic imitation is not *merely* a copy. It is an attempt to “sound like” someone else, but as a means toward finding one's own way of speaking.

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