

Ouyang Yu, *The English Class* (Transit Lounge Publishing, 2010)

Several years ago, I was fortunate to see prolific Chinese/Australian poet Ouyang Yu reading and discussing some of his poems at Flinders University. Although at the time, I was far from being a snickering teenager, one poem in particular struck me: 'Looking for cunt'. The poem, unlike what the powerfully blunt title suggested, was about Yu's earnest quest to find through an electronic dictionary what the word 'cunt' means. The startling honesty and inherently comic premise made this poem vividly memorable. I was hoping that Yu's novel *The English Class* would contain the same elements that made the poem in question unforgettable, but it was not to be. Early in the book, there actually *is* one of the comical, potent images I associate with said poem. As a truck driver in China in the 1970s, protagonist Jing has to transport a truckload full of human excrement. This image works well as a symbol of how Jing sees the work he does and as a surreal contrast to his growing preoccupation with transporting ideas from one culture and language to another, but there could be more of such images in *The English Class* – a shitload more. [*Post-modernist pondering: Those last three words were unfair and self-indulgent, a slightly cruel trading of an author's integrity for a cheap laugh – if not po-faced confusion.*] Of course, it is not Yu's responsibility to write the novel *I* wanted him to write [*and how would he know?*], but *The English Class* did lack some of the widely agreed upon rules of engagement in storytelling.

The problem is that the first three quarters of the book focuses on ordinary lives of ordinary people, with a protagonist who remains unlikeable, yet never enough to become an interestingly evil anti-hero. So it can be difficult to really care about what happens to such an aloof and self-absorbed ordinary man – paradoxically, one who tries very hard to be something other than ordinary. We first encounter Jing at the start of his career as a truck driver, but his ambitious penchant for learning English words propels him forward to become a student of English at university, with the promise of eventual recognition as a writer. We the readers are co-opted as students within *The English Class*, and in the process we learn more about English and Chinese and the challenges of translating and thinking across the two languages. This contrivance is a good one but could have been used better, for the example explanations chosen do not read as particularly striking or profound.

There are clues within this novel that the author is aiming for a certain type of realism (and not the stylised variety). Jing himself reads the bleak and pessimistic Victorian writer, George Gissing. He also says that he read '*The Old Wives' Tale* by an Arnold Bennett [and] ... it is something so ordinary, so engrossing' (247). Unfortunately, this equation of the ordinary with the engrossing is not always valid. A novel that dwells too much on the banal can soon become the literary equivalent of TV's *Big Brother*. [*See post-modernist pondering above.*] Yu himself hints that he may be aware of the inherent challenge in this style of writing when, in one of many post-modernist reflections on the act of writing, he mentions 'these regular interruptions ... may be considered ... an excuse for your inability to weave an interesting yarn' (250). Many readers would love the ordinary world evoked through much of the novel, but it is not a new thought that more dramatic things can happen to real people than fictional ones. In George Gissing's 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, the realist writer Harold Biffen says with (uncommercial) defiance,

I shall never ... write anything like a dramatic scene. Such things do happen in life, but so very rarely that they are nothing to my purpose. Fiction hasn't yet outgrown the influence of the stage on which it originated. Whatever a man writes FOR EFFECT is wrong and bad.¹

Or is it? *The English Class* would benefit from greater dramatic intrigue and more of what Roland Barthes coyly called 'reticence'²: teasing out the story to build up suspense. And although Yu successfully creates an authentic and undeniably realistic other world, the time of the settings is not always apparent. The novel could use what Dorothy Sayers referred to as 'the trick of particularity':³ small details that make a fantasy world seem more real. But more importantly, in this case, they would serve as practical reminders of the era being portrayed, which is mostly the 1970s ... I think.

As mentioned, scattered through *The English Class* are the author's post-modernist ponderings. But as with many such post-modernist devices, once we are reminded that we are reading a created story and our willing suspension of disbelief is severed, then what? The points of these interruptions do not necessarily go anywhere or become integrated into the rest of the narrative in a meaningful way.

In the final section of the book, the story takes an unexpected turn and becomes more interesting and poetic when Jing moves to Australia and, with not uncomplicated identity re-assignment surgery, becomes Gene. Gene genie, let yourself go. And he does. The final scenes and reflections on Australia, combined with the prior Chinese context, qualify *The English Class* as a significant literary record of cultural interaction between Asia and Australia. And Gene's eventual mental, physical, spiritual and linguistic breakdown is genuinely surprising. This disturbing comment on the failure of language to save and transform a life may also be memorable in a quite different way from that of Yu's 'Looking for cunt'. It reflects the experience of some migrants who travel to a new country with optimism and become disillusioned and traumatised about the cultural differences that challenge and confuse their identity. The sense of hopelessness after reading *The English Class* may linger in the way that the desperation and pain of Gissing's characters, defeated by poverty, haunt the reader. Perhaps I've changed my mind. Twist ending book review.

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¹ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 1891, online, accessed 27 February 2014
<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/g/gissing/george/g53ne/chapter10.html>.

² Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001) xviii.

³ Philip Martin, 'Six Writing Tips from J.R.R. Tolkien', *Blue Zoo Writers – Online Learning Center*, 8 December 2012 <http://www.bluezoowriters.com/six-writing-tips-from-j-r-r-tolkien/>.