

Writing for the wor(l)ds: the reflection on language in Yiyun Li's literary production

Martina Renata Prosperi

Abstract: Yiyun Li, b. 1972, moved from Beijing to the US in 1996, where she soon realized to be a talented writer. Although her early works, including the collections of short stories *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005) and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010), and the novels *The Vagrants* (2009) and *Kinder Than Solitude* (2014), still privileged Chinese settings and characters, after the publication of her memoir *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017) the literary landscape depicted by Li was amplified with autobiographical anecdotes and reflections on literature, human relations and language. Building upon psychoanalytical hints, this article offers a close reading of *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020), reflecting on Li's literature from a global perspective, and arguing that her contribution to world literature lies in her bold dissociation from any conventional, crystallized and thus imprisoning use of language.

Keywords: Yiyun Li, World Literature, Sinophone Studies, Exophony, Jacques Lacan.

“The fact that I
am writing to you
in English
already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:

how to explain to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else”
(Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Bilingual Blues*, 1995).

“English is my private language. Every word has to
be pondered before it becomes a word” (Li Yiyun,
“To Speak is to Blunder But I Venture,” 2017).

1. Yiyun Li and the matter of exophony

Considering there are about 50 million Chinese people living abroad, it is not surprising that those whose professions are especially bound to the use of words (teachers, writers, journalists, researchers, etc.) might often—by choice or necessity—write in their adopted language. As a consequence, Chinese-born exophonic writers are not extremely rare. One example of such writers is Lulu Wang (Wang Lulu 王露露, b. 1960), who has lived in the Netherlands since 1986 and

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publishes her work in Dutch. Ying Chen 应晨 (b. 1961), who moved to Canada in 1989, where she began writing in French, is another example. Zhang Lijia 张丽佳 (b. 1964) is another special case, as she writes in English despite living in China. Other famous examples are the younger Annie Wang (Wang Rui 王蕤, b. 1972) and Guo Xiaolu 郭小橧 (b. 1973), both of whom moved to the United States. Wang left China for the University of California in 1993, while Guo obtained a scholarship and moved to London in 2002. Both then became affirmed anglophone writers. As for the male front, it is almost superfluous to mention names such as François Cheng (Cheng Bao 程抱, b. 1929) and Dai Sijie 戴思杰 (b. 1954), both of whom adopted French. Likewise, Qiu Xiaolong 裘小龙 (b. 1953) and Ha Jin 哈金 (b. 1956) left as students for the United States, remained there after the dramatic events of 1989, and began their respective literary careers by writing in English. Several names of lesser-known authors should also be added to this list, as well as students and bloggers who live abroad for long periods of time and sometimes find a private, unconstrained, non-judgemental dimension in their adopted language, which can often be difficult to find in one's native language. A Czech proverb recites, "learn a new language and you will have a new soul." Naturally, this is scientifically questionable, as the speakers' inner change is not elicited by their adoption of a new language, but rather by the context in which this occurs (Grosjean and Li 2013, 41). Nevertheless, language is undeniably an integral and even foundational part of this context. Thus, we can justify the result that an adopted language, initially learned out of necessity, can offer an unexpected tool for personal introspection and analytical thinking over time.

The exophonic writer Yiyun Li (Li Yiyun 李翊雲, b. 1972), with her acute reflections on language, certainly represents a perfect example of this case. Her move to another country and to another language did not make her a political author, but a sharp intellectual inhabiting the convention of language with detachment and awareness. Li admits that, as a migrant writer, she has spent a good part of her life rejecting the scripts that others assigned to her, both in China and America, and she affirms that her strong refusal to be defined by the will of others is her "one and only political statement" (Li 2017, 47). Therefore, Li's contribution to global literature precisely originates from this life-long personal fight against external narratives, and it takes the form of this writer's multifarious boycott of any uncritical, crystallized and imprisoning use of language. This creative boycott is particularly evident in her exploration of silence—both as a topic and as a (paradoxical) means of communication—, in her systematic deconstruction of clichés, as well as in her recovery of dialogue as a narrative tool and as a building site of human relationships.

Building upon a close reading of Yiyun Li's most recent works, *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020), the present chapter offers concrete examples of this threefold critique of language, arguing that said critical approach is valid within any language-culture, and is not, on the contrary, derivative of it. In other words, it is not the English language (or any language of adoption) that frees Li from clichés and constraints of any kind, but rather a profound reflection on

the human condition of existing as linguistic beings. Otherwise said, this article demonstrates how the mobility of Yiyun Li as a migrant exophonic writer, does not consist simply in a departure from the motherland and the mother tongue, but also—and most importantly—in a detachment from language as a pure and blind convention. To any uncritical use of language Li contrasts a vigilant approach, making her literature a free space of encounter and intersection between Chinese and American language-cultures.

2. Yiyun Li's literary production

Born and raised in Beijing with her father, a nuclear physicist, and her mother, a school teacher, Li moved to America at the age of twenty-four. This is following time spent in the military service and a degree in medicine obtained from the Peking University. Still an immunology student, she became passionate about creative writing during an evening course she had originally taken to improve her English skills. Subsequently, she decided to leave scientific studies altogether and enroll in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which she completed in 2005.

Before receiving her MFA (Master of Fine Arts), she was already publishing short stories, mainly on *The New Yorker*, where the short story "Extra" appeared in 2003. She was also published in other magazines such as the *Gettysburg Review*, issuing "What Has That to Do with Me?" (2003). Li's literary career boost, however, was undoubtedly the success of her first story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), which solidified the recognition and visibility necessary for her to continue her writing career. The book won numerous awards—including the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and the PEN/Hemingway Award—and two of its stories, "The Princess of Nebraska" and "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," were also adapted into films by director Wayne Wang (Wang Ying 王穎).

In 2010, three years after the publication of her first novel, *The Vagrants* (2007), a second collection of short stories, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* were published. *The New Yorker* elected Li as one of the twenty best American writers under forty. Nonetheless, for Li, this was a period of severe personal crisis, to the point that in 2012 she attempted suicide twice. The novel *Kinder Than Solitude* (April 2013) was published just a few months after a suicidal attempt, followed by the long story "A Sheltered Woman" (March 2014) and the autobiographical account "Listening is Believing" (December 2014).

Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life, a collection of memoirs and autobiographical writings concerning the author's relationship with literature and language, was released in 2017. This collection included the essay "To Speak is to Blunder," which had already been published in *The New Yorker* in December 2016. The title of the book quotes a verse by Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923), one that particularly moved Li, as it well represents the period in which, after returning home from the hospital, she lived by taking refuge in the virtual existences of other writers, or spending her days among pages of diaries, correspondences and biographies (Laity 2017). The book, however, was not a

mere commendation of the “private language” and those writers—including Li’s mentor and friend, William Trevor—whom she felt saved her. After all, she explained, English was “as random a choice as any other language” for her (Li 2017, 102). Literature was just one of many things created in and for this world. However, there were moments, she affirmed, in which not even all of the things in the world would be enough “to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing” (Li 2017, 15).

Dear Friend did not describe any cathartic parable of superficial fulfilment of the American dream, or emancipation from the maternal figure, the homeland and Li’s own native language; it did not represent the happy-(American)-ending story that the American reader might expect. On the contrary, the essays hereby collected (but written and revised—by admission of the author herself—in different moments and states of mind), present a continuous but critical—and self-critical—intertwining of memories, anecdotes and personal reflections, which might sometimes contradict each other, suggesting the impossibility of reaching any definitive answer or salvation. The restlessness of *Dear Friend* was almost a premonition. In fact, shortly after its release, when Li was working on a new novel (*Must I Go*), the eldest of her two children, sixteen-year-old Vincent, took his own life. Thus, Li’s work on the new novel was immediately interrupted.

Yet, once again, Li found her a cure through words. She spent her time reading the condolence letters and poems sent by her son’s friends and absent-mindedly knitting a scarf, which—due to her frequent mistakes—she often had to undo and remake, much like restless Penelope. She reported about these reading and knitting activities in an autobiographical novel, published two years later in 2019. The title of this novel was once again a quotation, but this time from a verse by Elizabeth Bishop: *Where Reasons End*.¹ A brilliant essay by Zheng Haijuan points out the strongly metatextual character of this novel, and cleverly suggests that the image of the mother-narrator’s weaving habit is not a mere autobiographical detail, nor a simple homage to her son, who was passionate about this activity. Rather, it is a metaphor for the text itself, or of the literary creation as a fabric of words (Zheng 2019, 44). In short, by making and undoing language, Li, like the legendary Penelope, procrastinates her encounter with reality, and creates an impossible spacetime to converse with her son.

If in Li’s literary production death and language (including thematical declinations such as suicide, orphanage, reticence and silence) have always been recurring topics, *Where Reasons End* represents both the apex and the paradox of their combination. On one hand, the impossible dialogue imagined—thus created—within the text enlivens the impossible spacetime of the book. In other words, it is language that wins over death, as if this is possible for us (linguistic) human beings to defer it forever. On the other hand, however, that very same

¹ The original verse reads “all the way to where my reasons end” and is taken from the poem *Argument* (Elizabeth Bishop, “Argument,” *All Poetry*, <https://allpoetry.com/Argument>, Accessed July 20, 2022).

language is also a sharp and merciless tool of self-reflection and self-awareness, a complex fabric which can both comfort and deceive. It is a tightly-weaved veil that Li renounces to use as a mask, and use instead as a lens:

What I was doing was what I had always been doing: writing stories. In this one the child Nikolai (which was not his real name, but a name he had given himself, among many other names he had used) and his mother dear meet in a world unspecified in time and space. It was not a world of gods or spirits. And it was not a world dreamed up by me; even my dreams were mundane and landlocked in reality. It was a world made up by words, and words only. No images, no sounds (Li 2019, 8).

“No images, no sounds”: in other words, no body. Because no human language can exist without a body; in order to weave this literally ‘off-reason’ conversation, Li violates—consciously and overtly—the very nature of language itself, leaving it naked and defenseless for the reader to ponder.

In contrast, there is the discourse concerning the novel *Must I Go*, the book that Li had started writing before Vincent’s death, which was finally published in July 2020. If Li’s first production had mainly featured Chinese settings and characters—which surely applies to the collections *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, and to novels such as *The Vagrants* and *Kinder Than Solitude – Must I Go*’s protagonist is an American woman, “Lilia Liska from Benicia, California” (Li 2020, 129). The Sinophone world is merely mentioned by chance, from an external point of view, apparently devoid of any emotional connotation. For example, Lilia stumbles upon the names of ‘Shanghai’ and ‘Hong Kong’ as an old woman, while re-reading the diary left by Roland, a man she had fallen in love with during her youth and with whom she had had Lucy, her suicidal daughter. Roland’s diary mentions Hong Kong (and Shanghai, speaking of Hong Kong) as he had been there in 1931 for business reasons:

[Roland’s Diary:] 10 MARCH 1931.

Hong Kong. Arrived yesterday afternoon. Alan Prismall is working at the Maritime Customs Service, and has promised to help secure a position for me, either here or in Shanghai.

Far East. Am I then a member of the ‘Far West’ to the natives here? Far we are from one another, far from being equally human. From the dock to the Peninsula, the man who pulled the pedicab sweated profusely. Had he been a horse I would have halted the carriage and led him to a water trough. But everyone else seems to be at ease. [...] I tried out my minimal Cantonese on the pedicab driver and the bellhop, but both shook their heads disapprovingly and replied in pidgin English.

[Lilia’s comment:] THIS REMINDS ME: I should have a chat with Cecilia. She moved in last month, and she keeps too much to herself to be healthy. She and her husband were from Hong Kong. They immigrated to America after they married, and he had a dental practice in San Francisco (Li 2020, 205–6).

From a sinological viewpoint, Roland’s questions are undoubtedly interesting. Yet, in the economy of this character’s life, his diary and the novel itself,

they are actually isolated, marginal and irrelevant issues. Nonetheless, if Li had initially conquered readers with her unconventional portraits of a late twentieth-century China (e.g. *The Vagrants* and almost all of her early works: “Extra,” “After a Life,” “Immortality,” “Death Is Not a Bad Joke If Told the Right Way” etc.), or with stories of Chinese expats moving back and forth in time and space between China and the US (e.g. “The Princess of Nebraska,” “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “Sweeping Past,” and *Kinder Than Solitude*), the disappearance of any Chinese background in her later works does not mark a complete break with her previous publications.

Although her more recent stories, such as “A Flawless Silence” (released in 2018 but set in 2016 during the US presidential election), “All Will be Well” (2019), *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020) have an American setting (or do not have any setting at all, as in the case of *Where Reasons End*), their writing style presents many continuities with Li’s previous works. Most importantly, their plots continue to host a parallel, never-ending reflection on language. Therefore, the special and constant element distinguishing Li’s literature and making it a unique contribution within the panorama of international literature is not to be searched in this writer’s exophony, nor in her (Chinese) diasporic perspective, but rather in her delicate and precise linguistic labor. Transcending the Chinese variable, Li’s linguistic exploration often borders on philosophical speculation and sociological reflections, and might be paradoxically defined as poetics of silence, or of measure, reticence and restraint.

These poetics of silence can be seen as Li’s response to the poetics of historical memory. As a matter of fact, the reworking of historical memory constitutes an important theme for contemporary Chinese writers, both living in China and abroad, because it responds to a very current need for a (re)definition of one’s cultural, intellectual, and/or personal identity (Codeluppi 2018, 141). Yiyun Li’s literary practice, however, deviates from this case, both because her latest production shows a complete emancipation from the Chinese theme and because the historical elaborations she proposed in her previous works did not pursue any educational or informative mission, nor did they reflect any identity search. Proof of this statement lies in the fact that her historical narratives were not autobiographical, nor was it possible to identify any potential alter ego or spokesperson of the author among their characters.

The novel *The Vagrants*, for example, is set in a town called Muddy River, where two young women with very different lives and political beliefs are both sentenced to the death penalty and publicly executed within a short period of time. Although their stories are set in 1979, the narrative does not focus on the most iconic events of that year (e.g., the issue of Beijing’s Democracy Wall), but rather on the silent existences of Muddy River’s inhabitants, on their handicaps, desires and emotions. In other words, Li’s historical elaborations do not aim at tracing a clear separation between good and evil, fair and unfair. They do not linger on nostalgia, nor on any harsh critique of the past. Rather, they are simply a stage for well-rounded characters and the extremely realistic complexity of their lives. They are not a place for the author to affirm her own identity and are

not a means to articulate—or even package and sell—her own ‘Chineseness,’ as it evidently is not an object of any doubt or concern for Li and thus does not need to be proven or exhibited.

Indeed, in a passage from her memoir *Dear Friend*, she affirms that she chose to write to reduce herself to a silent void, or to a nonentity, which is the total opposite of writing to affirm one’s own identity: “When I gave up science, I had a blind confidence that in writing I could will myself into a nonentity” (Li 2017, 34). Nonetheless, this is not to be read as a suicidal affirmation. The entity Li intends to fight against does not coincide with her person in itself, but with that narrative of herself to which the conventional languages and external expectations have repeatedly menaced to reduce her. In another part of the memoir, Li returns to this subject, by explaining that she has spent a good part of her life rejecting the scripts that others assigned to her, both in China and America, and that her strong refusal to be defined by the will of others would be her “one and only political statement” (Li 2017, 47).

Li’s contribution to global literature precisely originates from this life-long personal fight against external narratives, and it takes the form of this writer’s multifarious and extremely creative boycott of any conventional, crystallized, imprisoning and uncritical use of language. Li’s literary production not only conveys and proposes a language used with freedom and awareness, but demonstrates how said awareness is valid in any language, and is not, on the contrary, derivative of it. In other words, it is not the English language (or any language of adoption) that frees us from clichés and constraints of any kind, but rather a profound reflection on human language in general. In Li’s literature, this reflection is particularly evident in three recurring themes: silence, the deconstruction of clichés and the revival of the art of dialogue.

3. Silence, clichés and dialogue: Li’s contribution to global literature

As for Li’s early publication, silence is undoubtedly the protagonist of “After a Life.” This story, which is part of the collection titled *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, speaks of a married couple with a spastic daughter whom they hide in their house to prevent the rest of the world from knowing of her. The body of the girl, eventually becoming a woman, confined in a bedroom for twenty-eight years (until her death) is a shapeless and aphasic body: a huge clot of silence, paradoxically eloquent within its impossibility of speaking. Silence as an attempt of hiding the truth metaphorically becomes a bulky, unavoidable presence, cumbering the private life of this couple and the narrow rooms of their apartment.

In the same collection, silence also takes the form of the intergenerational incommunicability permeating the account titled “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” The story tells of a widowed man, Mr. Shi, who leaves China to visit his daughter Ylan, who long ago moved to a small Midwest town in America. Ylan has recently divorced but Mr. Shi, obtusely anchored to a patriarchal concept of life, cannot understand the reasons for her divorce and insists that Ylan considers the idea of a second marriage before being deemed too old to remar-

ry. Ylan, however, speaks very little and dismisses her father's questions with the same coldness she reserves for the food he prepares for her. Neither the culinary language nor the Chinese language they share are able to scratch the wall of silence separating them, which they are both responsible for creating. Ylan, by keeping silent about the failure of her marriage, has most certainly played a part. Her father has played his part as well by concealing the truth about a scandal that, several years before and due to a misunderstanding, had unjustly cost him his job. Mr. Shi's silence at the time of the scandal was caused by a deep sense of embarrassment, or by fear of losing his face in front of his wife and daughter. However, Ylan's silence at the time of the narration is a reflection of that reticence she had breathed as a child: a fatally learned habit. "I don't talk well in Chinese," she explains to her father, "if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person" (Li 2006, 171). Finally, Mr. Shi has no choice but to go out and converse with Madam, an elderly Iranian lady whom he often meets in the park. As a paradox, the two of them successfully entertain each other with long chats in which each speaks his/her own language, mixed with broken English, without compromising the dialogue.

In addition to silence recurring thematically in short stories, it is also significantly frequent in her novels as well. In *The Vagrants*, a form of silence is that observed by Nini, a crippled and extremely taciturn girl whose deformity makes her invisible to most people, resulting in her ability to eavesdrop on adult conversations and obtain information which would normally be precluded to children. Nini's silence is that of disadvantaged and voiceless people, but is also a receptacle of sounds, noises, news, and emotions. Just as black is a non-color that absorbs all colors in itself, analogously, Nini's silence is a non-sound that absorbs all sounds, or the sounding board of everything said and done within the boundaries of Muddy River.

The restlessness of the elderly Lilia, the protagonist of *Must I Go*, instead revolves around the silence of Lucy, her suicidal daughter. Within the space of the novel, Lucy exists only as a silent name, only mentioned but never truly known. In fact, Lilia herself never managed to get to know the person her daughter really was. Now her unappealable silence, that of someone who is no longer alive, pushes Lilia to chase her daughter's shadow in the diaries of Roland, her natural father. By doing so, Lilia searches for clues that might help her see beyond her own pre-constructed idea of Lucy, or the version of herself that Lucy used to show her mother when she was still alive, in order to see Lucy herself: the true Lucy.

You can live a long life, surrounded by people, but you'll be darn lucky if one or two of them can take you as you are, not as who you are to them.

In our marriage Gilbert and I didn't make that mistake. We were always Gilbert and Lilia, not Gilbert's Lilia or Lilia's Gilbert.

Both Sidelle and Hetty took Roland as he was. What he was to them didn't matter. They saw through him. [...]

I see through him, too, but only now. Before his death and before reading his diaries I didn't take him for who he was, but for who he was to me, and to Lucy. Perhaps I also took Lucy as who she was to me, and to Roland, instead of who she was.

But who was Lucy? (Li 2020, 225).

Lucy's silence is the silence of someone who is no longer there, but it is also the silence of a person who has never existed at all beyond a fictitious form in which the Other's language (in this case Lilia's) had crystallized it.

The silence of Li's own suicidal son, thematized within the novel *Where Reasons End*, is somehow different from Lucy's. This is because Li, unlike Lilia, did see (or tried to see) through Vincent. As a consequence, Nikolai's silence—or Vincent's—does not represent a total absence; it is not an empty silence, but a speaking one. Although the dimension where Li and Nikolai's impossible conversation takes place is one with “no images” and “no sounds,” their dialogue still happens by paradoxically employing a bodiless language and soundless words. In other words, the spacetime Li creates within this novel reverses the causal relationship between subject and language. It is not the subject that causes the language by projecting himself or herself into words, but vice versa, it is the language itself that (re)creates the hologram of the subject. The following passages are examples of this affirmation:

We once gave Nikolai a life of flesh and blood; and I'm doing it over again, this time by words (Li 2019, 47).

[People] don't know what the dead want. And they're afraid of knowing, Nikolai said. They're afraid of not knowing, too, I said.

Are you?

Of knowing or not knowing? I'm not afraid of knowing.

Then you're afraid of not knowing?

Yes, I said. Sometimes. A little.

You can ask me.

That, I thought, was my fear. Whatever questions I asked I had to answer for him.

The world we shared was limited, even if our words were not (Li 2019, 114–15).

The limits the narrator discusses in the last passage derive exactly from this inverted relationship between subject and language. There is (no longer) a subject—Nikolai—who can produce language (for example, to answer questions). However, it is the language itself now—and the only possible one, namely Li's language—that recreates Nikolai's presence as a hologram, or gives him another life, albeit “by words.” It is surely on these pages that Li's research on language achieves one of its most outstanding results by nearly recovering a primordial function of language, one that creates a shape, an order, a cosmos. In the introduction to a collection of studies on Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955), a contemporary artist who is internationally famous for his brave reflections on language, the curators Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger Ames remind the reader of a simple but significant consideration:

Many of the world's cosmologies associate language and cosmic creativity, from "in the beginning was the word" to aboriginal Australians who believe that order is created and sustained through song. A major theme in the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes* 易经), a text that grounds the evolution of Confucian and Daoist cosmology, is the fertile and productive relationship between image, language, and meaning (Tsao and Ames 2011, xv).

As explained within the aforementioned passage, the language of cosmologies reminds us that human life is informed (that is to say, given form, or shaped) by language itself. The silence of death, standing for the opposite perspective, further corroborates the fact that language is constitutive, proper and characteristic only and exclusively of life. Differently said, any attempt to define and temporalize, or to linguistically codify reality, is a relative and illusory effort, which only concerns existence in the here and now, and has no *raison d'être* beyond its boundaries. The circumstance of her son's death-silence precisely reminds Li (and *Where Reasons End's* narrator) of this life-language and of its (almost) ineludible limits, and gently pushes her towards a recovery of the cosmogonic power of words.

An exhaustive list of examples concerning the theme of silence in Yiyun Li's literature could easily cover many pages. The aforementioned cases, however, already allow us to observe how such silence might be interpreted as a denial of expression, but also as a (paradoxical) form of expression.

Another articulation of Li's reflection on language is the deconstruction of clichés, which the author regularly practices in her works. This deconstruction also concerns pre-made metaphors and similes, as well as crystallizations of the language, which, being prefixed, preclude any direct contact with the message to be expressed. In *Dear Friend*, Li asks herself: "What language does one use to feel; or, does one need a language to feel?" (Li 2017, 109). Or—if the other side of the question is implicit—is it rather language that fatally ends up detaching us from feeling tout court with its compulsion to define and frame? Here is a first example of the ways in which Li identifies and deconstructs these clichés.

I was a generic parent grieving a generic child lost to an inexplicable tragedy. Already there were three clichés. I could wage my personal war against each one of them. Grieve: from Latin *gravare*, to burden, and *gravis*, grave, heavy. What kind of mother would consider it a burden to live in the vacancy left behind by a child? Explicate: from Latin *ex* (out) + *plicare* (fold), to unfold. But calling Nikolai's action inexplicable was like calling a migrant bird ending on a new continent lost. Who can say the vagrant doesn't have a reason to change the course of its flight? Nothing inexplicable for me—only I didn't want to explain: A mother's job is to enfold, not to unfold. Tragedy: Now that is an inexplicable word. What was a goat song, after all, which is what tragedy seemed to mean originally? (Li 2019, 7–8)

This passage is taken from *Where Reasons End* and illustrates the case (recurring both in this novel and in *Must I Go*) in which the cliché is deconstructed by questioning words themselves, by investigating their etymology, or by ap-

peeling to a property of and a *presence* within language. Although this is never fully reachable (see the ironic example of the “goat song”), it does still offer a possibility other than the illusoriness of clichés or those premade, impersonal phrases, devoid of any authentic meaning in which, to put it in Lacanian terms, the encounter with the Real is perennially destined to be missed.

Sometimes, however, it is possible to disassemble clichés and transform them into meaningful expressions. In these cases, Li manipulates clichés by introducing an unexpected or estranging element (as Šklovskij would say), which not only prevents the old cliché from going unnoticed, but even places the accent—and thus attracts attention—precisely where the *variatio* has been introduced. An example follows, again from *Where Reasons End*:

I was not an organized person. The other day I realized I couldn't find Nikolai's stocking. Many things slipped away like sand or water, but did it matter? Sand and water, Nikolai said.

I know, I said. Sometimes you can't avoid thinking in clichés.

They are clichés if you use them to describe time, he said. You're using it to describe a concrete object, which does not move itself (Li 2019, 89).

In *Must I Go*, it is instead the irony, Lilia's irony, that unmasks the clichés of the others' language, especially Roland's. At the time of the narration, Roland has long since passed away and an elderly Lilia is re-reading his personal diaries for the umpteenth time. In the aforementioned excerpt, Lilia narrates herself in the first person by turning to Katherine, Lucy's daughter. At the time of the story, Katherine, who's already a young mother, is the granddaughter with whom Lilia has the most intimate bond because Lilia has taken Lucy's place and raises little Katherine in her home following Lucy's suicide. Katherine is then the imaginary recipient of Lilia's annotations, in which the elderly woman alternates flashbacks of her past, personal considerations and passages from Roland's diaries (Roland being Lucy's natural father and therefore Katherine's grandfather). As for the following excerpt, it is an example of how Lilia's irony, anchoring itself to the words' literal meaning, manages to deconstruct two clichés about pain. Namely, she deconstructs two frequently-used ways of saying “broken heart” and “took something out of me”:

When Lucy died, I used the words that other people used. I said my heart was broken. That her death took something out of me. Can a broken heart have pumped blood steadily for thirty-six years, no, thirty-seven years now? A heart cannot break because none of our hearts is made of glass or porcelain. [...] Sometimes when I hear people use those expressions I want to say: Show me your heart, show me where it's broken; and what has been taken from you, a kidney or a liver or several ribs? Words are like grass. Like weeds. [...] But if I stopped saying things, even the simple words, [the doctors] would think that I'd gone cuckoo. And they'd ask you for more money so they could pack me off to another unit. So you see, words are the most useless things that we cannot afford to lose (Li 2020, 233).

How to resolve the paradox? That is, how to reconcile our life outside the linguistic universe with our language-bound existence? As the philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains, the universe in which we live is necessarily a linguistic one, because words divide the world into classes of nameable objects, raising these objects to the level of the only reality we are able to conceive (Bauman 2000, 207). So much so that, as Lacan already affirmed in his essay “The Instance of the Letter In the Unconscious or Reason since Freud,” words can only perpetually refer to other words, and we would fail from the start if we clung to the illusion that words respond to the function of representing meanings, or “that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever” (Lacan [1957] 2004, 449). This is a temptation of which Li is fully aware, and into which she is particularly careful not to fall, by facing her characters as if they were “hypotheses,” and working the same way with language. She does not seek any unique and unambiguous relationship between signifiers and meanings. Rather, she experiments with possibilities. Scientists, she jokes in an interview while referring to her former scientific formation, do not wait for any inspiration and are certainly not afraid of failure (Friani 2017). Therefore, Li conceives her literature as a laboratory to discover how language works, not so much on a logical or grammatical level but on a psychological one, as a vehicle of emotions and hidden preconceptions.

We have just seen how, in this ideal laboratory, Li investigates the crisis and potentialities of language by exploring the theme of silence and unmasking the noise of clichés. However, observing her production from a macroscopic point of view, it is thus inevitable to observe how Li’s texts are also rich in dialogues, if not built on the skeleton of dialogue. Stories like “Son,” “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “A Man Like Him,” “Prison,” or even the most recent “All Will Be Well” (to name only a few titles in which the dialogic dimension or the theme of dialogue is particularly relevant), or novels such as *Kinder Than Solitude* and *The Vagrants*, are clear examples of Li’s recovery of dialogue as a narrative device and a symbolic dimension. Beyond this, these stories are constructed through a pressing alternation of dialogued parts and narrated parts (the latter are often flashbacks through which Li gradually unravels the characters’ backstories). The dialogues included in these narratives take on the value of transformative spaces. In other words, Li’s characters do not evolve only through the events they face, but also—and most importantly—through the words they exchange, or by dialoguing with each other.

Within the novels *Where Reasons End* and *Must I Go*, the role of dialogue as a transformative space emerges very clearly. Both of these novels are respectively structured around two impossible conversations: the dialogue between a character-narrator and her suicidal son, and that of the elderly Lilia with the diaries of the now deceased Roland as well as with Katherine, the imaginary recipient of her reflections. These two macro-dialogues constitute the main body of their respective narratives on which flashbacks and other digressions are grafted, but they are not mere structural expedients. Some academic articles and book reviews concerning *Where Reasons End* even argue that the novel ultimately represents a con-

versation of the narrator with herself, or a monologue, where the semblance of the dialogue would solely derive from the fact that the narrator imagines a recipient—Nikolai—for questions she actually asks herself (Zheng 2019; Wang 2019, 4). This lack of attention to the dialogical dimension is also found in several studies concerning “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” (e.g. Lam 2011; Zhai 2013), a story in which the dialogical dimension does indeed play a crucial role. In this short masterpiece of Li’s, the dialogue—a successful one between Mr. Shi and the Iranian woman, but also an unsuccessful one between Mr. Shi and his daughter—clearly represents the place where the characters confess themselves to the other characters, to the reader, and even to themselves. It is far from being a mere narrative artifice and traces that parable of (self-)recognition, necessarily precluding any transformation. Quite a few articles on these stories are instead focused on the forms of linguistic hybridism employed by Li—e.g., translating Chinese proverbs into English—and on language as an obstacle to effective communication between father and daughter, neglecting to note how the crucial nodes of the story emerge and develop precisely through its dialogical parts (Lam 2011; Zhai 2013, 109). In fact, if Li had wanted to write *Where Reasons End* as a monologue, she would have written a monologue. Instead, she chose the form of dialogue, because it is due to the transformative space opened by this two-voice conversation that the narrator can evolve to the point of accepting to separate from Nikolai and returning to her life made of “days,” or to that linguistic universe of the time which—Bauman *docet*—is for us the only livable one. Similarly, it is precisely through her dialogue with Roland’s diaries, and with her niece Katherine to whom she addresses, that Lilia finally comes to “see through” Roland, accept the fact that she has never fully known Lucy, and admit that, despite having survived three husbands, the time will come for her too, sooner or later, to lay down her arms and go.

[From Roland’s diary:] 18 August 1987. [...] Hetty (Roland’s wife) died as she wished. At home, in her own bed, surrounded by no one, with her beloved husband under the same roof but not next to her. [...] Must you go, Hetty? But let me not ask the question that only a fool would ask. Fools we are not. We have done well by each other. Rather, I would say this: Must I go? [...]

[Lilia’s comment:] Roland was right about one thing. When you start writing about yourself, it feels like you can go on living forever. [...] I’ve never asked anyone, not even Lucy: Must you go? And that question Roland lived with every day of his life—I might as well order a gravestone with the question carved on it and have it delivered to his grave. Better late than never, don’t you think?

ROLAND VICTOR SYDNEY BOULEY

19 NOVEMBER 1910–19 JANUARY 1991

MUST I GO?

Yes, Roland, yes. We all must (Li 2020, 363–67).

The extract shown above exactly constitutes the end of the book, as it is interesting to note how this book’s ending, like *Where Reasons End*’s, is not a narrated one, but rather the exhaustion of its main dialogue.

Both Li's alter ego narrator in *Where Reasons End* and Lilia in *Must I Go* choose to escape the monologue of pain and tear open the veil of writing. By escaping the illusion that language can genuinely express their feelings, both narrators deviate from a type of discourse that would be given as absolute (the monologue of Nikolai's mother; Lilia's memoir) and offer the dimension—by its nature plural, and never definitive—of dialogue (respectively, with her son Nikolai, and with Roland's diaries). In short, if language is the trap, Li finds a loophole in the dimension of dialogue. She discovers a space in which language is not monologically given from the self, nor absolutely imposed from the outside, but rather it simply happens by articulating and interweaving itself in the Other's presence. In other words, the language of a dialogue is not made of inert words ("no images, no sounds"), but of exchanges in which the meaning occurs from time to time, manifesting itself by force of interaction. In a dialogue, the choice of a single word does not suffer from having mutilated the concept any more than it rejoices in having created something new and further in its encounter with the Other. Li's deviating from the constraints and illusions of language, then, does not mean moving from one language to another, but rather straining the language—whatever it may be—in constant dialogue with the Other and with herself. In conclusion, dialogue is a dimension of the word which leaves all of its possibilities of meaning in abeyance: dialogue vivifies what language immortalizes.

Finally, it is interesting to observe how, from a psychoanalytical point of view, the two novels *Where Reasons End* and *Must I Go* might represent the continuation of one another. This does not mean, however, that their respective drafts have offered Li a therapeutic path. The connection I intend to suggest simply concerns the two narratives as such, and in particular their respective endings. *Where Reasons End* (2019) closes with a metanarrative dialogue, or with a mutual questioning of mother and child about the nature of questions and answers. Thus, it ends by deferring the encounter with the Real (in its Lacanian sense) of death, the definitive end of any conversation. On the contrary, the ending of *Must I Go* (2020) is a plaque inscribed in capital letters, an unequivocal answer: "MUST I GO? Yes, Roland, yes. We all must." In short, the mother-narrator of *Where Reasons End* allowed her encounter with the Real to remain suspended in a dimension beyond history so that the assertiveness of death remained beyond the sayable, and thus unsaid. On the contrary, the irony, the verve and her advanced age give Lilia the decisive impetus of a fatal answer, the ability to sustain, if not the impossible encounter with the Real, at least the admission of its inevitable existence and magnetic attraction. Therefore, comparing *Where Reasons End's* and *Must I Go's* respective endings, it is possible to detect a psychoanalytical shift from the illusion of an eternal deferral of the encounter with the Real to the admission of its inevitability, or, differently said, from the postponement of death to the encounter with death: a novel-to-novel conversation, which is a narrative—if not even therapeutic—bridge-path.

4. Conclusions

Li's English writing has many points of undoubted resemblance to that of other Chinese exophonic writers. For example, the translation of Chinese sayings and their self-explanatory use within the narrative, or a declared melee with the use of the English pronoun "I," to which Chinese language often prefers the plural *women* 我们, "we," are typical elements of both Li and many other exophonic authors (Guo 2017, 204–6). It should also be said that many of the academic studies currently available on Yiyun Li's literature precisely focus on these linguistic strategies, interpreting them as practices of domestication or estrangement, and thus, relating them to a cultural-identity discourse (Dai 2013; Li Jing 2009; Li Bing 2015; Tang 2018; Lam 2011). These studies put Li's role as a migrant writer ahead of her being a writer tout court, so that the interest of her literature is promptly sought in her relationship with her own Chineseness and in the way in which this element emerges from the texts. However, as Zheng Haijuan explains, "although Li Yiyun can be counted among migrant writers, [in her works] she does not tend to emphasize this belonging, but tries to fit into a much broader [literary] tradition" (Zheng 2019, 40). As this contribution demonstrates, Li's exophony and the strategies through which she hybridizes her English language do not respond to any political agenda or search for identity. On the contrary, I argue that the peculiarity of her works is regardless of the language employed, and precisely lies in their looking through human language: beyond its clichés and its identity labels.

The condition of a migrant writer did not push Li to make her literature a place for nostalgic recovery and (re)construction of identity. On the contrary, in Li's life and literature being a migrant is just one of the many situations and experiences that have influenced her own way of perceiving and thus depicting the world. When she writes, Li is not just a migrant writer, she is a strong woman, a woman who suffered from depression, a daughter, a mother of a living son, a mother of a son who committed suicide, a voracious reader, a fan of Tolstoy and William Trevor, a Chinese woman, an American woman. When she writes, Li is all of this and even more, and her literature, which is not to please any reader, reminds us that no one is reducible to a label, to a name, that language is a convention, and that only as long as something remains unspeakable and unsaid, can we still say we are not prisoners of our own words.

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