

A WHISPER OF SOMETHING MORE:
THE POETRY OF BEGZIIN YAVUUHULAN

...the beautiful ideas
of ancient Mongolian verse come to mind,
and, deep in my heart,
whisper something more.

A middle-aged man in a blue and white checked shirt, his right hand resting on a tall pile of books, grasps another book in his left hand. The man looks to his left, to our right, he is frozen in time, the curve downward of a forefinger and his nose, the light revealing a cragginess in his face, and his lips seem to be held in a pose of almost speech, of waiting for a thought to formulate itself before being spoken gently into the world. A portrait, capturing this man's essence, his soft determination, his steely kindness, his spirit, his acuity, his resolve.

This portrait of Begziin Yavuuhulan, by the poet and painter Myagmarin Amarhuu, brings the eye up and over the pile of books, up the sitter's neck, up into his face and holds it there, in some sort of contemplation, in the potentiality of whatever Yavuuhulan is nearly doing or saying or thinking. It is such thoughtful calm which, in my opinion, defines the spirit of Yavuuhulan's poetry and sets him apart from the Mongolian poets of his generation.

Yavuuhulan was born in Tasarhai, near Otgontenger Mountain, in 1929, and studied literature in Moscow during the 1950s. He is generally credited with being a pioneer of the New Tendency Movement in Mongolian letters during the 1950s and 1960s, and in recent years, poets such as his student Gombojavyn Mend-Ooyo, and a new generation led by Tsogdorjin Bavuudorj, have continued to promote the best of Mongolian tradition in a literary style which reflects the contemporary spirit.

Yavuuhulan was also a prolific literary translator – albeit only from Russian originals or translations: he translated the work of the great Russian poet Sergei Esenin - and it was he who introduced and popularised the haiku genre from Japan. His relationship with the haiku was very similar to that of many non-Japanese writers who have attempted to translate the style into their own language and literary canon. He takes an image and splits its expression into three lines which feel somehow unusual. So, “winter” in his haiku treatment of the traditional Mongolian four seasons topos:

the rush of the winter camp, the
winter shelter growing dark,
the cattle track hurrying along

The idea is clearly that, just as a traditional Japanese haiku is a direct verbal response, beyond thought, to a specific experience, so this is how Yavuuhulan renders his perception of winter. Yavuuhulan's translation of the genre, in which he retains still the idea that the third line summarises what has come before, is very different from the later haiku of poets such as S

Biligsaihan, for whom the haiku is more a vehicle for thoughts put through a filter of structural brevity.

Nonetheless, in all Yavuuhulan's haiku, as in his poetry in general, it is how he processes what he sees which is of particular interest. He appears to observe, in great detail, that aspect of the world which he wants to express, it is as though he is contemplating perhaps how it exists and how it relates to the world around it, as though he is looking first through a telescope, through which he observes the minute details of the scene, and then as though he is opening the lens to reveal the context, which enhances the detail. This is very much the sense, I feel, of "Autumn Leaves:"

When I left the party,
the autumn leaves had been falling.
The sun of autumn was strung out
with birds through the calm skies.

The wind, though, had been silent,
and the yellowed leaves rustling.
The way of life, though, in my mind,
turned the hair white upon my temples.

All who had followed the birds
through the calm skies will return.
My youth, though, fluttering from me
like autumn leaves, will not return.

As with the four seasons, the turning of the leaves in autumn and the inaccessibility of past youth is a frequent theme in Mongolian literature. That it is a theme of other literatures should not obscure its particular significance within the nomadic tradition. Nomadic culture depends absolutely upon a profound understanding of the natural world, nature is not simply something to be appreciated, rather its integration within a nomadic society defines the existence of that society, and it is with this in mind that poems such as Yavuuhulan's should be understood.

Indeed, if we look at the structure of "The Nomad's Autumn," there is the feeling of continuity, of each image –

the yellowing steppe and
the cattle in the distance and
the herder's mind suddenly thrilled

– reflecting and interacting, there is the apprehension of nomadic experience, the way in which the changing land and sky expresses itself in, and equally responds to, the movement and life of the nomad. Thus the old idea of microcosmic man and macrocosmic universe is made more complex in description, but somehow far clearer in perception.

What is especially interesting to me about "Autumn Leaves," then, is that this is not explicitly a nomadic poem, but that it expresses the relationship between the poet and the world into which he steps. The world of autumn is such a shock to the poet after the "way of life" which he had, presumably,

experienced at the party, that his hair turns white. Yavuuhulan's image here is not, I think, a comment on nature, but rather it is a comment on how the human world has drawn him away from an authentic perception of the world.

One of Yavuuhulan's main themes, the driving force of his desire as a poet perhaps, is to negotiate the relationship between being an individual within the world and being an integral part of nature. Maybe the resolution of this problem is what Amarhuu sensed when he painted his portrait of Yavuuhulan, the poet lost in the presence of thought, meanwhile holding onto the books which defines him in the small world of humans.

This sense of melancholy, then, which we find in both "Autumn Leaves" and "The Nomads' Autumn" is at the very core of Yavuuhulan's work. For me, there is a yellowing at the edges of his poetry, a movement into stillness. But the promise of autumn for the nomad is the coming of spring and, at the end of "Autumn Leaves," Yavuuhulan writes poignantly about how the world will continue to turn even when he is gone.

The people who inhabit Yavuuhulan's poetry are very much secondary to the landscape and to the animals which inhabit it, they feature as the medium for nature to speak through the writer, rather than as characters actively involved in the narrative.

In one of his best-known poems, "Goat Peak," Yavuuhulan uses an interaction between himself and his father to talk about the way in which wild mountain goats experience their own oncoming death. The dedication of this poem to his father Begz is also noteworthy, for his father was a hunter, and like many native peoples, Mongolians realise that the hunter feels in some ways to be especially close with the animals which he kills.

Yavuuhulan sets the scene by making this high peak, inaccessible to humans, especially mysterious and gloomy. In fact, throughout the poem, the distance of this place, both metaphorical and literal, the fact that only the hardiest of creatures can climb to its summit, is emphasised. This again might call to mind the contemplative in Amarhuu's picture, seeking to enter perhaps into the mind of the landscape and of the animals through space and time. But this description also stresses once again the difference and distance between the human world, with its nomadic encampments, and the goats in their mountain fastnesses. The hunter, then, the poet's father, bridges this gap, his is a kind of shamanic role, the human who communes with, and understands, the way of being of the animal kingdom.

Although the father's speech is the figurative and literal center of the poem, there are other elements which should be noticed. I have already pointed to a characteristic of Yavuuhulan's approach, where he focuses upon detail from a wider catchment, and with the passing of a telescope from father to son, we have a kind of symbolic passing of this "single stretching eye," this ability to perceive what would otherwise escape one's notice.

And there is an eagle, circling the mountain peak, guarding its nest, another symbol of the aloneness of the landscape. But this is aloneness and not loneliness, and it is interesting that, of the humans in this story, only the father goes off alone, to hunt, to make contact with, to communicate with the animals. It would be easy to see such a description, such an analysis of this poem, as being romantic and unrealistic, but Yavuuhulan, as an educated man from a nomadic hunting family, clearly sensed a deep connection with

nature while remaining also the young man transformed through various opportunities afforded by the intellectual world of arts and letters into a literary figure. This subtle poignancy runs, as I have suggested, throughout his work, and it is felt especially in poems such as this, where Yavuuhulan presents a man – his father – whose present serves to emphasise the differences.

But his father does not speak from personal experience. Rather he prefaces every statement he makes with “they say,” and it is as if, in doing so, he is consigning the goat to mythic status, unperceived by human eye, a site for speculation and hearsay. And so the creature becomes more distant still.

All these pieces of common knowledge, moreover, are examples of how the behavior of the goat can be perceived as being almost, but not quite, human. For instance,

*They say it stands there, on the high summit,
for many days.
They say it looks back then
at its life.*

and

*They say that, in its final moments, it sees herds of
many like itself.
They say that, in its last moments, it sees
its motherland.*

Yavuuhulan’s account presents a human narrator, ostensibly somehow with a deep understanding (he is a hunter, he sits apart from the others, does not take tea with them, and thinks by himself), relating a kind of folk wisdom (or perhaps wisdom which he has discovered, but which, for whatever reason, he chooses not to take credit), the bringer of truth to explain both the goat which his son has seen, and the reason for this place being called Goat Peak.

On one level, then, this speech is a kind of initiation, designed to educate and to prepare the hunter’s son for the inevitable fate of the goat. Indeed, when the goat does finally die, the hunter “sat there, drinking tea, smiling happily/at what he saw.” There is a rightness to this outcome, an inevitability for sure, but a goodness too, as though the natural course of things was good in itself. This of course is at the center of the melancholy which pervades much of Mongolian poetry, the inevitable and onward course of nature, and the inability of humanity to counteract it, the need for acceptance whilst trying all along to remain forceful.

In the final section of the poem, the families move off. Yavuuhulan’s father turns to look at Goat Peak and says, quietly, “My homeland.” This secures in the reader’s mind the link between hunter, goat and mountain peak, but it also stresses this particular man’s explicit acknowledgement of this link. But the way this is reported – consigned to a single, simple verse – implies that this realisation is personal, and not societal, that we each of us have to come to the conclusion on our own. Yavuuhulan describes his father’s response in hushed tones, as though said to one side, away from the people with whom

he was travelling, as though it was somehow an agreement between him and the mountain and the piebald goat.

“Goat Peak” is, then, a poem which presents itself as a narrative whilst remaining somehow impervious to deep understanding. We can read the words, just like the people heard the hunter’s words, but without having a private and personal relationship with the natural world, we cannot perceive what Yavuuhulan’s father has perceived, and which Yavuuhulan wants to communicate to us.

We are thus beginning to see what the “something more” may be at which Yavuuhulan is hinting, what it is which Amarhuu captures him almost thinking or almost saying. It is an unseen, unspoken thing, this “something more,” it is a nexus perhaps of relationships, of interactions, of what Yavuuhulan believes is lost between living on the steppe and living in the city, between a life connected at a profound level with the natural world and a life to some extent (but only to some extent, for Yavuuhulan – like many Mongolians of his generation – retained his deep connection with the land upon which he was born) separated from the natural world.

I have suggested that humans take second place to nature and to animals in Yavuuhulan’s work, but this is not to discount his prowess as, maybe not so much a love poet, but a poet who writes about the experience of love. In “The Sound of a Silver Bridle,” he expresses passion by inferring expectation and anticipation:

I’m waiting for my lover to arrive,
the sound of horses’ hooves pressed upon my heart.
Outside, the night is soundless, peaceful, and
the moon lights up the rafters.

Sleep has fled and, on my orphaned pillow,
I am snared by lovesickness.
And the dull sound of a silver bridle
brings happiness to my passionate heart.

In just two stanzas, in just eight lines, we have the intensity of love and the associated irrational fear of loss broken by the sound of an approaching horse. Of course, Yavuuhulan does not confirm or deny that the person on the horse is the expected lover, even this is only hinted at, this is another “something more” to which we are not privy. Nonetheless, with the bright clarity of the silent moonlight, he opens up the scene and allows us to perceive and feel his yearning.

It is the uncertainty, indeed, of the sound which he hears, its “dull[ness],” which reveals the intensity of his feelings. Even in such stillness, it could be an oral hallucination (he is, after all, “snared by lovesickness”), a trick played by an expectant mind. It is only in rereading the poem, only in reconsidering what Yavuuhulan might here be suggesting, that we can understand that, once again, he is searching outside for something to which he does not give voice, something to which he might not even be able to give voice.

And, once again, it is the human who is in thrall to external forces and, by extension, by the horse bearing the bridle and, hopefully, the lover. But

Yavuuhulan does not criticise, he takes no particular stance, rather he is an observer, a commentator, his voice appears to bespeak a deep apprehension of human mental processes as they interact with the world, the natural world, outside. And, as we turn finally to the poem from which the opening quotation is drawn, “Mongolian Verse,” I would hazard that the “something more” of which he talks is precisely that experience, unspeakable, which connects humanity and the natural world, and of which humanity seems frequently unaware, it having been lost somewhere within the process of becoming human.

Like much Mongolian verse, “Mongolian Verse” is full of whispers. One of the ways in which Yavuuhulan slightly subverts the poetic tradition is to repeat, not entire stanzas, and not always regularly, but lines and couplets in often unexpected places. The effect is not haphazard, but it seems sometimes that there are voices heard here other than the poet’s, repeating his thoughts.

In “Mongolian Verse,” Yavuuhulan contrasts the various artistic wonders of the world – the Taj Mahal, the Mona Lisa, Ethiopian dance – with “the ideas” of Mongolian poetry. Note that this is not Mongolian poetry *per se*, not the form or the language or the prosody, but rather it is everything that these elements seek to communicate. And this is what he describes as “something more.”

The way in which ideas weave themselves through the core of this poem renders it both structurally and sonically complex. But it is not so much what Yavuuhulan says directly about Mongolian verse – that it calls to mind great art, the love of women, the desire of men – as the effect that it has upon the listener and the reader.

In the power of Mongolian verse,
in its singing of the beauty of women,
there is the key
to purify the mind.

How realistic is it to speak in these terms about literature, though? For Yavuuhulan, and for many other Mongolian poets, poetry has a quite extraordinary, almost shamanic, ability to transform the heart, to transform reality. But it is also the way in which that which is unspoken can be spoken, in which that which is not perceived by the gross senses can be perceived. As we saw with the poet’s father, explaining the way of death of goats and the meaning of Goat Peak, verbal expression, the sound and the meaning of words, do indeed provide “the key/to purify the mind.”

But Yavuuhulan is still very clear that nature is in a different league from human art. When he says,

Though nature in its splendor
is in every aspect art,
it really does not chime
with human beauty.

he is not denying that human art – his own included – has value and beauty. But nature is different, it produces female beauty, and since Yavuuhulan holds

woman to be “the mother of beauty,” so “beauty, better than all else/is gathered in ourselves.”

Such a treatment of female beauty is, admittedly, problematic to western sensibilities, but the place of the mother in nomadic Mongolian culture, located in a far more direct relationship to the natural cycle than it is in our occidental urban culture, is such that the connection made by Yavuuhulan between nature’s beauty and female beauty is entirely consequent.

By the end of the poem, Yavuuhulan has moved away from the mysterious “something more,” whispered to him by Mongolian verse. He chooses, instead, to acknowledge what Mongolian verse appears to have in common with these great works of art, especially with Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. It might be, of course, that he feels that a concrete example of human art conveys more successfully the idea which he wants to express, and this of course would tie in with his personal interest in translation, of presenting the world’s literary classics to Mongolian readers. But it could also be that the hints which he places in the center of this poem, to a more subtle, unspoken, intangible quality to which he believes Mongolian poetry approximates better than does that of other cultures, point to the limitation of the poet’s art and, from a more positive viewpoint, to the direct experience which is open to the individual alone, which comes from a clear apprehension of the place of humans within natural world and for which “the key/to purify the mind” is available.

Yavuuhulan died in 1982, at the relatively young age of fifty-three. His influence is still felt in the work of many contemporary Mongolian poets, most notably that of his student Mend-Ooyo, whose deep humanity and love of the natural world mirrors Yavuuhulan’s.

To look at Amarhoo’s picture and to think about Yavuuhulan’s poetry is to enter into a subtle landscape, where the Mongolian poetic tradition is slightly changed, where it is not the twentieth century which impinges upon a romantic world of Mongolian tradition, but the human world whose way is constantly divergent from, and running counter to, that of the natural world.

There is no knowing what Amarhoo’s Yavuuhulan has in mind, as he stares off, out of the picture frame, softly protecting his books. But Yavuuhulan’s poetry presents us with a man who realised that he could only point at what he saw, that he could only hint at the vast unperceived landscape in which the individual – himself, his father, his lover, whomever – experiences their own private world.

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