CHAPTER 5

Self-Portrait as Sea Anemone, and Other Impersonations of Jiang Yan

Let us sculpt in hopeless silence all our dreams of speaking.

FERNANDO PESSOA

The first half of this book has examined imitation poetry as a phenomenon of Six Dynasties poetry in general. Jiang Yan is the central figure in this history, not only because he has a large body of imitations of different types, but also because the principles of imitation poetry recur visibly throughout his work, even in his writings in other poetic genres. This chapter examines the paradoxical way in which Jiang Yan’s works present a self-portrait that occludes or obliterates the author’s own identity. Whether in imitation poems or his other works, Jiang employs a set of devices that make it difficult to date his works. Though we can follow the narrative arc of Jiang’s official career, the rhetorical substitutions of his poems displace them from that very biography. His habit of presenting himself through alter egos seems to reflect something unique to his character. Jiang’s “Fu on Bitter Regret” sums up the various tendencies of his work, combining impersonations of historical figures to form a universal depiction of frustrated expression. At the end of his life, a mysterious case of writer’s block was the fitting dénouement to a literary career defined by self-concealment. This chapter examines imitation poetry at its most personal: in the context of the life of a poet for whom it became the most intimate means of expression.

Jiang Yan is an exceptional character even in the Six Dynasties, but he is exceptional in a representative way. Though this chapter’s focus is on Jiang Yan himself, we are reading him not only as a poet but as a reader of others’ poems. The way that Jiang Yan’s poems fail to disclose him to us reveals one aspect of his identity, one that is constructed from the Chinese literary tradition.

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Throughout this chapter, as throughout this book, we can never quite com-
plete the interpretive leap from work to life, or back again. We tend to lose
ourselves somewhere in between, waving forlornly to the shores of historical
understanding like Jiang Yan’s own totem, the sea anemone.

Jiang Yan and Prosopopoeia

The defining technique of Jiang Yan’s mature works is literary impersonation,
the substitution of other voices for his own. The most prominent examples of
this technique are his imitation poems, modeled after the works of earlier po-
ets. Even in his poems not explicitly identified as imitations, Jiang Yan fre-
quently adopts an alien persona. His literary impersonation of animals, plants,
historical figures, and other poets is related to the classical Greco-Roman trope
of prosopopoeia. Prosopopoeia was often used as a literary exercise—a stu-
dent would be assigned to compose a speech in the voice of a historical figure,
for example. Its function as a rhetorical device was thus comparatively narrow,
but its larger implications are already suggested in Quintilian’s description of
its utility for the various purposes of “persuading, rebuking, complaining,
praising, or condoling.” Prosopopoeia thus can take on many of the ordinary
functions of literature, which raises the question of whether there is any fun-
damental difference between writing in the voice of another and writing as
oneself. Paul de Man even called prosopopoeia “the trope of autobiography.”
He sees the autobiographical as a “a figure of reading or of understanding that
occurs, to some degree, in all texts;” yet because it is only a figure or represen-
tation, it always fails in some sense to speak for the self. Prosopopoeia is thus a
rhetorical manifestation of this more fundamental dilemma. For Jiang Yan,
prosopopoeia has a different but parallel kind of ambivalence. The correspon-
dences between the objects of impersonation and his own self-conception are
obvious and sometimes explicit, but the trope of prosopopoeia negates their
autobiographical import. His beautiful laments about the impossibility of self-
fulfillment are couched in the voices of others, denying himself that fulfillment
on yet another, rhetorical level.

There is an important strain of prosopopoeia in earlier Chinese literature,
particularly in the Chuci and fu, where the construction of an alternate

3 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, 9.2.30: “... et suadendo, obiurgando, querendo, laudando, mise-
5 Ibid., 70.