

Dr. Nicolai Volland

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25

Transcendence and the Fax Machine

By YE SI

Translated by Terry Siu-han Yip, with Hardy C. Wilcoxon, Jr.

Ye Si 也斯 is the pen-name of Leung Ping Kwan 梁秉鈞 (*Liang Bingjun*, b. 1949), a poet and novelist. He received a Diploma in English from Hong Kong Baptist College and his PhD in literature from the University of California, San Diego. He has taught comparative literature and translation at Hong Kong Baptist College and the University of Hong Kong and is now a professor at Lingnan College. He is a prolific writer; his works of fiction have been collected in *Shimen the Dragon-keeper* (Yang long ren Shimen 養龍人師門, 1979), *Paper Cutting* (jianzhi 剪紙, 1982), *Island and Mainland* (Dao he dalu 島和大陸, 1987), *Three Fish* (San yu ji 三魚集, 1988), and *Postcards from Prague* (Bulaige de mingxin pian 布拉格的明信片, 1990). His prose writings have been collected in *Morning Greetings* from the Grey Pigeon (Huige zaochen de hua 灰鴿早晨的話, 1972), *Miracle Lunch* (Shenhua wucan 神話午餐, 1978), *Water-Coloured Figures* (Shanshui renwu 山水人物, 1981), *Landscape* (Shanguang shuiying 山光水影, 1985), and *The Flamingo in Kunming* (Kunming de hongjiu'ou 昆明紅嘴鸚鵡, 1991). He has published a number of collections of his poetry, namely, *Thunder Rumbles and Cicada Chirps* (Lei sheng yu chen ming 雷聲與蟬鳴, 1979), *Journeys* (You shi 游詩, 1985), *Cities of Memory*, *Cities of Fabrication* 記憶的城市·虛構的城市 (1992) and *Poems in Flux* (Youli de shi 游離的詩, 1994). He won the Hong Kong Urban Council's Biennial Award for Literature in 1991. The title of this story appeared in English in the original.



I turned thirty-seven this year. Single. I work as an assistant research fellow in a cultural studies institute. After my full-time work, I also work part-time for a finance company. My main hobby is reading—reading the Buddhist classics, the Bible, and the Koran. I used to specialize in Anglo-American literature. But ever since the local scholars set up a 'Chinese School' and bibliographic studies became very popular, I have not been on friendly terms with them. Every time they compiled a bibliography or published a volume of selected papers, they would exclude my name. Gradually, I felt the presence of these bibliographies everywhere. It seemed that there was an invisible Chinese brush moving above my head, brushing me off to non-existence. Since then I have started reading all sorts of books. I subscribe to French magazines and journals which discuss special topics in religion and literature. Perhaps people studying religion are more tolerant and inclusive. When I've sent them my manuscripts from time to time, I've actually received replies.

There is only one reason I have remained single: I am not very good at interpersonal communication. Before I was thirty-five, I could see different virtues and merits in every single girl I met. I idealized them and could find reasons for loving them all. Of course I suffered a lot as a consequence. To compensate, after the age of thirty-five, I began looking for and discovering many faults in the girls I knew. And so I no longer loved anyone, which gave me peace of mind and contentment.

But there is always an exception.

One drizzly evening I was having a couple of drinks with my photographer friend Li Biansheng when I happened to mention a conference on 'literature and transcendence' that was going to take place in France several months later. I told my friend that I had been invited to compile some data and write a paper for the conference, but correspondence with the conference organizers in France took up a lot of my time and I found the whole communication process very troublesome. Ah-Sheng urged me to buy myself a fax machine. Later, as we were walking along the streets of Causeway Bay, feeling a little light-headed, Ah-Sheng suddenly said, 'Didn't you want a fax machine?' propelling me into a nearby shop full of telephones and fax machines. I was proving true what the girls I knew used to say: walk aimlessly in the streets of Causeway Bay, and you'll wind up shopping. Since Ah-Sheng knew the manager of the shop, it did not even matter that I had no money with me. When I later left the shop,

I was no longer single. I was taking a fax machine home with me.

Her appearance was ordinary, but somehow I found her more and more pleasant to my eyes. Perhaps this was why people often said that love grows with time. A fax machine is used only to fax writings, which is not something one thinks of as especially important. But when I got mine, I no longer had to run all over the streets with my writings, trying to decide if the toy-like post-boxes were real or not. I did not have to stamp my feet before a closed post office. I did not have to walk along the busy tram lines looking for a place to deposit the written words in my hands—words that were fresh from my heart—very personal and confidential. I did not have to drift about like a lonely wandering spirit, visiting some communication centres or lingering at the clubs for expatriate journalists. I did not have to feel sad over the seemingly long-lasting Saturdays or Sundays. Even when the world outside was filled with bullies and deception, when interpersonal communication was full of traps and pitfalls, I was still certain that, on returning home, she would always be there, faithfully receiving and sending out information. She was my reliable link with the faraway.

Place a sheet of paper in the fax machine and its spirit would appear at the other end of the world. That was a comforting thought. It was not necessary for me, with my love for words, to give in to the ever-changing and ever-fading speech. My personal and private thoughts could be covered up secretly and poured out only to a 'black-coloured ear'. Even the most rude, rough customs officer would not be able to inspect the electronic waves in the air. I could actually leave a material record of my communication with the intellectual and spiritual world. It allowed me to secure a facsimile, a true copy, a true record of my spiritual journey. When my memory fails me in future years, I may still be able to recall traces of my heart and my feelings with certainty. What was more, I could avoid the troubles in the human world. I no longer had to listen to people's sighs on the other end of the telephone line, or watch tears running down people's faces. It was also not so easy to catch meanness and jealousy on paper as it was from people's voices. I no longer had to receive phone calls from my bad-tempered friends and let my ears suffer the shock when they slammed down the receiver. Really, the fax machine allowed me to readjust my position in the world. I could sleep with abandonment, vaguely hearing her murmuring voice in my dreams; like music which put my heart at peace. I felt carefree at last.

Gradually I began to rely on her. I was no longer used to expressing my feelings. And yet she seemed so innocent and uncalculating that it was only natural for her to become my only confidante. I could not help thinking of her during the day when I was caught up in the power politics of the office. I thought of her happy face, thinking that she seemed to represent a more substantial kind of communication. I wanted to stay with only her after work. I would prepare a bowl of spaghetti or salad, pour myself a glass of red wine, sit before her and feel relaxed and relieved. Together we would listen to music or lie in the sun. She alone supported me in my communication beyond this world. On the days when there were no messages, I would place my written words in the machine and naturally the words would be copied out. She would reprint phrases like '*The Concept of Transcendence in Romantic Poetry*' and '*Kant's View on the Concept of the Sublime*' on sheets of paper that bore her unique scent. It was like hearing her agreement and receiving her praise and approval. That gave me great confidence.

It was exactly because of this blissful state that the first tension between us came as an extremely painful experience. The sudden silence in the middle of a fax transmission appeared like a silent protest to the abstract of my essay. Was it a gesture of complaint when only a few sheets of paper were allowed to pass through the machine? Hastily I picked up my original script from the floor and read it again from another angle. Yes, perhaps I should combine points two and three. Perhaps the middle section on page two should be deleted. Were some of the issues too abstract? The conclusion . . . Yes, perhaps the conclusion was a bit too ambiguous for the younger generation—I have not forgotten that my fax machine was a product of the new generation and she inevitably would carry with her the values and standards of her generation—perhaps it was too positive, or was it too remote for them? So I sat down and went through the whole script one more time. The length of the script was reduced in the final version from the original four pages to three. I placed the script in the fax machine again and the first page passed through it smoothly. But the second page was half way through when the machine stopped. I waited for a long time. Finally I had to redial the number and send the script all over again. The same thing happened. The machine stopped again when it came to the middle of the third page. I could do nothing but re-fax the third page again. Although the two letters O.K. also appeared later, I was still unsure whether the script had actually reached the

other end. Was the fax machine's silence and strike today a protest against something? With a drumming heart and a disturbed mind, I came up with many reasons.

Then everything seemed fine again as if nothing had happened—until three or four weeks later. The same problem occurred again when I tried to fax a letter and a bibliography overseas. It stopped again in the middle of the second page. And when I pulled the original script out and thought of re-faxing it, the paper roller began to move, receiving new messages from outside. This interrupted my devoted efforts. As the paper slowly rolled out, I could read messages of all kinds: furniture sales by emigrants, second-hand cars, do you need a reliable part-time maid? Japanese *udon* noodles, long grain rice, and taxi surcharges. They were like characters in a novel, narrating another story. I read the messages carefully to make sure that they were not replies from overseas religious associations for me, rather than promised blessings from certain advertising companies and information agencies which had my number.

A practical joke? Perhaps it was not a practical joke. The second time I received such messages, I thought: is there any special meaning in their selection of me? I spent more time reading through the codes and signs. Their messages seemed to have no connection with the script I had sent out and yet they also seemed not unrelated. But what kind of relationship was it? I read the messages again and again, and as these advertising messages were faxed in continuously, I had no opportunity to send my messages to those faraway.

The murmuring sound finally stopped and the in-coming messages were completed. I picked up the letter I had put aside and tried to place it back on the fax machine. But somehow I felt worried and wanted to re-read it once more. Having read the messages I had just received, I could not help wishing to revise the plan of the academic paper I had mentioned in the letter I was holding in my hand. I thought that it was still not brief enough; it still carried too many heavy thoughts and was touched by too much idealism so that it sounded a bit lofty and unreal. So I began to revise the whole script once again.

But when I sent the letter to the priest, I carelessly picked up the ad on drainage repair and faxed that as well. The matter was not yet over. I decided to follow up the number on the ads and fax a message to each one of them, demanding them not to fax in so much junk mail everyday. But in doing so, by mistake I faxed out my letter to the priest as well. Like most people, I worked under great pressure

and could only complete my task at the last minute. In a hurry I finished faxing my message only to find that I had made an irrevocable mistake. The response from the two sides were more or less opposite. The lofty critics thought that the inclusion of a worldly edge to my transcendental thoughts showed an inclination toward the 'frivolous' and the 'shallow' on my part, and expressed their concern and worry. The replies from the advertising companies were, as usual, short and de-humanizing. However, they were certainly annoyed to find themselves entangled in the intellectual consideration of an entirely different world. The over-heavy seriousness of the other party—me—seemed to embarrass them. I knew not where to begin, but there were no words in the advertising world for such things. I could draw from their cold expressions that they thought I must be a religious fanatic who had lost touch with reality.

The writing of my conference paper was more difficult than I had imagined. It was not only because academic papers were usually very difficult to write, but also because I was so preoccupied by my present problems that it was hard to find a space in my mind to reconstruct my remote intellectual thoughts. Things like office politics, my mother's rheumatism, and rushing to come up with a budget proposal for the next financial year all weighed upon me so I could not breathe. Both the priest and the professor wrote to find out what had happened to me since the deadline for the paper submission was near and yet they had heard nothing from me. I squeezed my mind to come up with a humble letter, explaining my situation. I dialled the long-distance number and the fax machine sent back a loud signal. It did not get through the line. It was like sending out signals to the distant stars in the universe, lost in the flow of light and sound.

I stayed up several nights in a row working on my paper, but I still missed the deadline by one day. When I eventually managed to get my first draft out, there were still a few footnotes missing and a few points left for further elaboration. But I was already totally exhausted. I crawled toward my fax machine and when I looked up, I saw the time on the clock hanging on the wall. It was 4.30am.

Slowly and gently I placed the fresh, warm manuscript in the fax machine, trying hard not to hurt her. I moved the sheets softly, and caressed the small buttons. Then I leaned over on top of her, waiting quietly because this was the only communication I had with the distant world of the soul faraway. I devotedly hoped that everything would go well and the message would be transmitted and the response

properly received. I waited for the call tone to be changed, with the connection made, to an answering tone, clear and smooth in its melody. I moved the script, adjusted its position, trying to find a better connection. And yet the calling tone knocked on and on at a door that stayed shut, reverberating like a call to the far distance, or floating in the universe without a home. Some sensitive and mysterious things remained unconnected; the sacred door did not open to admit me.

It did not matter. We would try again. I thought of the respectable French priests and professors who were enjoying the beautiful sunset in the scenic south of France and singing psalms, free from the troubles of ordinary people like us. The songs of the psalms echoed and re-echoed in the air. I was really too tired. I dozed off, but woke up again. Fragrance of wine. Colours of Impressionist paintings. I woke up and dozed off and woke again. My script on literature and transcendence still could not be faxed, could not be sent to the land faraway. Gradually the red light on my fax machine began to blink. The red light followed by the green light, and then another red light. She was making all sorts of funny and strange sounds; then she gave off a fume of white smoke. She was sick.

I was in a terrible fluster. The deadline had passed. Certainly I wanted to catch up, to make a connection with that world of transcendence, which I believed to be good and beautiful, and to share my ideals. On the other hand, I had a strong feeling that the most important thing to do was to take care of this worldly fax machine before me. At a time when she needed me most, I should help her get over her troubles, to make her recover from her illness. I tried to massage her and press her with my fingers; I tried to feed her with all kinds of mild paper medicine; I checked her pulse and heartbeat. I used all my paper to test the machine, helping to keep her stomach and intestinal movement smooth and normal. My text on transcendence was mixed with the food remedy and the instructions of the plumber. I checked her pulse and pressed her acupoint, and the mixed sheets were faxed out smoothly. I had no idea where they would end up, or what the response of the receiver would be. I no longer cared so much. Being caught between transcendence and the fax machine, I could only do this much. I could only try my best and take care of the most urgent matters within my limits, hoping that that would let me find a way out.