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The Rest of the World:
Inoperative Modernism and the Conditions of Translatability

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Inoperative Modernism and the Conditions of Translatability

By

Tze-Yin Teo
B.A. (Hons.), National University of Singapore, 2009

Advisor: Geoffrey Bennington
D.Phil., University of Oxford, 1984

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

The Rest of the World:
Inoperative Modernism and the Conditions of Translatability
By Tze-Yin Teo

In "The Rest of the World," I study modernist texts united by the difficulty they pose to translation when they braid the Chinese and English languages. At the same time, I show how transnational, global, and comparative critical paradigms depend on and are forestalled by difficult translations between two hegemonic languages in the current globalized world. Where critics of Anglo-American and Chinese modernism have affirmed both translation and untranslatability as enabling, generative, and ethical limit-encounters, I argue that the work of translation in modernist literature is necessarily and always incomplete. This incompletion then calls attention to the conditions of translatability. I situate the theoretical problem of translatability in the intersecting genealogies of modern western philosophy and discourses of Chinese modernity: where the former reposes itself on the putative illegibility of Chinese writing, the latter is legitimized through ready assimilations of western thought. Poised between the two traditions, my non-dialectical account presents a poetics of weak translatability: a minimal gesture politicized by its resistance to both appropriative conventions. To do so, I hone in on the epistemological and contextual constraints on translation in modernist literature: literary and cultural modernity from the west as embodied and rejected by Eileen Chang; event, history, and Yang Lian's excision of "European time" in his theory of Chinese poetic translation; a universalized materiality of language rendered as metaphor in Ezra Pound's revision of Ernest Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese ideograph; and a transnational affect between "America" and its others radically erased in Gertrude Stein's late writing. In these moments, translation is neither an instrument nor a process that creates anew. Rather, it brings a respite from the world-making labor at the encounter with alterity: I have sought to theorize this weak translatability as a means of thinking without force, bound to its conditions of possibility and figured in my title as a plural rest of the world.

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Acknowledgments
My Chances

First thanks are to my parents and my siblings. If writing is a patience that comes from love, then my writing has always originated from our history as a family.

I found my intellectual home in this department after writing about friendship and Derrida. Perhaps it is testament to its character that I leave it now further in the debts of friendship, Derrida, and yet more. Geoffrey Bennington's friendship—even more than the vigilant rigor of his reading—has been the defining gift of my graduate career. Everything I have to tell him, he already knows. My committee members were intellectually formative and steadfast in their encouragement. Elissa Marder resisted my insistences and insisted on my resistances: I trust she will recognize the strength of her voice in the resilience of mine. Years ago, on a particularly bad day, Deborah Elise White told me that I would write many books one day. Though she has likely forgotten, I write this here still hoping to prove her right. For this terrifying and sustaining prolepsis, for asking the sharpest questions, and for her support in so many moments of need, I would do anything for her with everything that I have. Last but not least, Haun Saussy's late addition to my committee belies the extent of his influence: I thank him for his exacting and generous readings—and most of all for the writing that led me to him.

Inasmuch as one can properly thank an imagined collective of people with precisely nothing in common, I thank the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory, which is lucky to have Alian Teach and Kathy Ly-Nguyen doing the work that contingently binds us each day. Early on, Luke Donahue demanded and embodied a friendship worthy of the name, and later (more banally) answered my occasional questions about Greek and German words. As I was finding my footing with this work, Claire Laville, Catherene Ngoh, Taylor Schey, and Mark Stoholski asked hard questions, refused easy answers, and helped me to laugh. They ensured that even when I was alone, I was never lonely.

Still, there remains something else that I cannot name: something that has allowed me to think what I have thought and to write what I have written in the time that I have had. But perhaps this is all it is, all it can be—and what a time it has been.

Atlanta, GA
September 2009—July 2015

Table of Contents

The Rest of the World:
Inoperative Modernism and the Conditions of Translatability

To Brent and Ambi
my rest from the world

Note on Translation, Script, and Romanization

The dissertation quotes extensively from Modern Chinese and, less frequently, French and German texts. In all cases, I have quoted the non-English text first, before providing translations either in the form of an equivalent passage or—in several instances where an equivalent is more problematic than usual—an extended commentary.

I have adopted existing translations where possible, modifying them as necessary for the argument and appending footnotes by way of explanation. Where there are no existing translations, I have translated the relevant passages myself. My strategies for translation vary significantly depending on the author and text. As such, these are addressed in the footnotes of the relevant chapters.

I generally include the Chinese original in my discussions. Whenever a word or term is first introduced, its Romanized form is interpolated in the text with square brackets along with an English translation. I have used 简体 [*jiǎntǐ* / the Simplified script] and the *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* system of romanization in accordance with present publishing conventions in the North American academy. Exceptions from this rule (e.g. Chinese dialects) are noted within the commentary.

Pīnyīn words are marked with the diacritics denoting their tones. This departs from convention, but is necessary for rendering legible the close poetic analysis undertaken in Chapter 2, especially for readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Chinese language.

1. Introduction

From Work to Work; or, Translation Without Force

> Say something about the method of composition itself: how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand. Assume that the intensity of the project is thereby attested, or that one's thoughts, from the very beginning, bear this project within them as their *telos*. So it is with the present portion of the work, which aims to characterize and to preserve the intervals of reflection, the distances lying between the most essential parts of this work, which are turned most intensively to the outside.
>
> - Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N1,3]

> To say that force is the origin of the phenomenon is to say nothing. By its very articulation force becomes a phenomenon. Hegel demonstrated convincingly that the explication of a phenomenon by a force is a tautology. But in saying this, one must refer to language's peculiar inability to emerge from itself in order to articulate its origin, and not to the *thought* of force. Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is.
>
> - Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification"

Preface: two works

Work began life as a verb: it toils. Then, a noun: not only marking the *act* of labor, but also, to some ears, foreclosing an open text, making it singular, univocal.[1] Gathered thus, these meanings also suggest that the closure cannot happen. At least in English, we can say: working prohibits the possibility of the work. Not necessarily a tautology, more my demonstration of how translation too can take place in a movement from work to work, an economy of work-for-work. Do the repetitious works stand in for labor or text? And then, to follow: what happens when I locate

[1] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 155-164.

these dimensions of work—and not force, articulation— at the origin of the epiphenomenon known as translation?

For all origins are complicated and internalized in their own ways; hence this preface. “The Rest of the World” has not always been a project about untranslatability and the premises of legibility in comparative literature. Yet after the many revisions that it has undergone, what remains is a work charged by its own weakness, its own conditions. Over years of careful and resistant thinking, I had set myself a necessary task: to compose my project through the frictions generated by the historically accidental encounter between my two languages and traditions, in a way that disputes the broader structures and conditions precipitating this encounter. Thus ensued a searching and indecisive few years during which I explored concepts (of non-conceptuality) that lay contiguous to, without naming, an interpellated China. And yet when it was time to decide—there it was.

Perhaps the mere existence of this project—that I have allowed myself to undertake it—is testament to its limited success. I am particularly glad that I have had a space for an oblique reflection on the relation between my writing and negotiations of institutional power: this has not made the writing easier, but ease was never the goal. I began with an interest in the possibility of a kinship between poetry and the deconstructive reading of democracy: both exceed conceptuality as such, and also (at least on an initially literal and non-deconstructive reading of democracy) are central to the formations of both the Chinese and U.S. American traditions. In its first and more volatile form, the project was staked in so many areas of interest that a committee member suggested I find a leading edge, with which I

might urge its theoretical interventions in a more concentrated way. I did not immediately take this perspicuous advice (although I perhaps should have), because my interest in the diffused "force" of democracy and the figure provisionally named as poetry was difficult to gather into a singular gesture, and I did not then see a way to do it.

When I finally made the decision to frame its intervention as bearing on translation and transnationalism, it was partly with the thought that this difficult diffusion—this singularity that was not *one* forceful gesture—was precisely the structure through which translation and transnational relation can be rethought without being violently assumed. Turned against its colloquial meaning, a phrase like "the rest of the world" gestured towards a rest that would be at once static, residual, and conditional for the sundering of totality in the comparatist work of translation. With its rich idiomatic resources, the phrase figures a stillness that nevertheless emerges—in my argument—from a bounded relation of dependence, rather than a single piece of *reste* or remainder.

This calm brings with it a history of misreadings of the Chinese place within the western tradition, tending towards abnegation, fetishization, or indifference; thus, it was well-suited to a non-recuperative negotiation of those given violences, while still vigilantly calling attention to my complicities. Indeed, I have found it difficult to decide *where* and *how* to address this misreading in my introduction: a misreading that begins within the western philosophical tradition that I study, but which has become directed towards my self insofar as I constitute a reluctant subject of this study, and inasmuch as I too write under the weight and patronage of

an academy that uncannily replicates and sustains the violences that I here name.

But all this is far from a corrective. If I include it as a preface—prior to and separate from the conceptual explication to follow—and since I have addressed it more or less directly, it is with the understanding that these are the effaced grounds on which my work stands. And if I have any minimal purpose in bringing these grounds to the surface where they do not properly belong, it is simply the naïve hope that through the force of description, the conditions I describe may one day wither away. These are the reasons I write these words here, against all common sense, and would write them again and again, as long as that day does not come.

Premises and argument

Can there be thought without force? *Is* there thought without force? The question—and the vital nuance between possibility and actualization as presented in these two articulations—quietly guides my own thinking throughout the dissertation. Initially abstract, the question becomes concretized when related to translation, especially as it has recently been theorized as a philosophical and theoretical problem within the field of comparative literature. If translation too enacts or even is a form of thought—analogous to the way in which literary theory affirms the possibility that literature enacts a mode of thinking contiguous to analytical reason and logic—then I am following its gestures and movements, in the hope that they may indeed help me to

think what it means to think without force.[2]

In asking this question, my aim is twofold: first, to describe and demonstrate how translation thinks in the absence of intention or subjectivity, which as I argue is a function of its conditionality, event-status, and shaded relation to alterity; second, to evacuate the force that is tacitly exerted from the future in the event of the impossible, as affirmed in deconstruction (and distinguished from the force of J.L. Austin's sense of performative language). My interest in the latter question is partly motivated by contemporary theory and the interest it has taken in the

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[2] What I am calling "without force" is related to, while taking distance from, the concept of the "inoperative" mobilized variously in the post-Hegelian thought of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben. In Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* [*The Inoperative Community*], he theorizes the inoperative by reading Georges Bataille's political community and communication of lovers. There, the community is "unworked" (in the sense of an œuvre being undone) when a sundered subject is exposed to an alterity apparently exterior yet constitutively interior to this subject. In the fractured space and relation between the two, there is nevertheless an originary sharing that constitutes a community, defining a space of the political. This exposure is also non-negative—a move drawn from Bataille's opening of the Hegelian dialectic towards a general economy—and in Nancy's Derridean idiom, the non-negation constitutes not a positive being but an inaugurating affirmation. Similarly, Agamben seeks to interrupt the workings of the Hegelian dialectic through posing his own idea of the inoperative in *The Coming Community* and elsewhere. In Agamben's thinking—often routed through Herman Melville's Bartleby who famously "prefers not to" work as a refusal of the existing conditions in which he finds himself—the inoperative marks a deferred power that inheres in an assumption of potentiality. If I declare myself inoperative today, I am saying no to my conditions by also saying no to exercising the fullness of my potential. The gesture gains force in the present partly insofar as I still contain the potential to be working and operational in the refused past and presumed future: my inoperativity must still be recuper*able*. That Agamben's "inoperative" has recourse to a power invested in the future is an intractable point of difficulty for my argument. What he calls "potentiality" also bears upon my thinking of "translatability," although in this regard I would rather follow Samuel Weber's extended meditation on the suffix "-ability" in Benjamin's thinking, in which the suffix denotes still a historical unfinishedness while registering the impossibility of the messianic event. Notably, both Agamben and Weber take Benjamin as an influential antecedent for their own work, but evidently differ in important ways.

deconstructive motif of the event, which has become a focal point for self-styled materialist thought: in this intellectual shift and the resulting slippage between the event of the im/possible and the event that *happens*, what has fallen away is the prior possibility that an event may also *not* happen—what I am provisionally calling its "without force." Yet in the Derridean account, it is this very prior impossibility that grants the event its surprise and status as event to begin with.

The thought of a translation without force thus emerges from the intersection of these two questions: where Derrida has earlier defined "force" as the originating condition and operation of language as a quasi-phenomenon (as suggested in my epigraph) and later connected it to his thinking of the event of the impossible, I am particularly interested in translation as it figures a paradigmatic relation of language to its own conditions, thwarting and in turn surprising this account of constituting an event in force.

How then am I approaching this idea of a translation without force? One possible (non-identical) twin to translation might be "reading": invoked here in a deconstructive register, reading suggests an approach to the text as a contingent other, committed to an originary exposure of relation and responsibility for a reader who is held in thrall by what or who is being read. It is not simply one possible methodological approach to a text among many, nor is it an aesthetic process or phenomenological intention; rather, it names the condition of possibility for thinking with and alongside any text at all, and thus is prior to aesthetics, phenomenology, and even comprehension as such.

Translation, I observe, is *prior* to the affirmations and resistances that

together constitute reading: more precisely, the question of translat*ability* precedes the question of reading.[3] [4] Although the two have much in common in naming a minimal and structural relation to alterity, what I am pursuing here are the theoretical imports of the fine *distinctions* between translation and the deconstructive moment of reading. These aspects of translation are not readily captured even in this most minimal sense of reading, and thus make translation irreducible to its structural similarity to reading. In my account, what distinguishes translation from reading is provisionally analogous to what distinguished work from force in my opening gesture: translation is a mode of mechanically *re*productive, contingently "automatic" (so to speak) reading in which the surprising and decisive force of the event might not in principle be fully registered as part of the definition of "reading."[5] In this way, translation is a limit case of reading. When I am translating, I am—as with reading—producing a new and other work still genetically bound to

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[3] By this, I am not referring to the empirical situation of someone unable to read a text written in an unknown language, which must then be translated into a language that is more readily comprehended: this common scene may well stage the question in a more explicit way, but it is not theoretically fundamental in the way that I am describing.

[4] See p. 103 of this dissertation: I am partially recanting some earlier words about translation's kinship to reading: when first beginning to consider the importance of translation for this project, I had hastily drawn the connection in Chapter 2 on Yang Lian, writing that "[t]ranslation here becomes indistinguishable from reading." These words remain in the text for the purposes of describing my translation strategies for a particularly difficult poet, but now they are only expository, and do not quite make the generalizable claim as previously implied. In my present argument, it follows that translation can indeed be distinguished from reading on a general level.

[5] I offer this formulation of a reproductive, mimetic, and "automatic reading" provisionally for the moment: it stems from an attempt to conjugate Benjamin's "Translator" essay with his "Work of Art" essay via the Benjaminian motif of the (untranslatable) aura. I aim to more fully develop this idea in the near future.

the one that is being translated. But even in the freedom of my translation, I tacitly *mimic* the original text in order to betray it; and, if I am writing a translation that seeks to foreignize my "target language," then it is my linguistic mimicry that shares and conjoins the other language with my own. Yet not simply a sharing—which preserves alterity—but also a mirroring, which fractures it. The open textuality of a translation inheres in the fraught relation between work and work, works that redouble on one another; that this relation has been possible in turn lays its claim upon each translatable and translated work in this axis. In the movement of translatability, translation comes closest (without being identical) to an impossibly pure, blind, and even mechanistic affirmation: it is reading without the reader's opening, reading without the reader's resistance, and a trace in which the spacing of difference takes place through a mimicry uneasily producing a claim to sameness and equivalence.

In focusing on translation as a minimally constituted event of reading, I also have in mind the tussle between theoretical and empirical approaches in the field of translation studies: a methodological gulf and organizing principle that has not yet crossed over into the (perhaps more theoretically inclined) field of comparative literature despite other forms of influence between the two. The thought here is that the thought-figure of the event—that both may and may not happen—could allow for traction between these two seemingly intractable methods, while additionally showing that there is much more at stake in the theory-empiricism distinction than can be captured in thinking about them as methodological approaches.

What is more, my investment in translation and the necessity of a

conceptually- and politically-motivated comparative gesture stems partly from the contemporary moment in which I am working (in a quasi-empiricist gesture that bears its own relation to deconstruction), and particularly the two specific languages, English and Chinese, between which I work. Working and translating in a critical register thus necessitates a similarly critical approach to the very fundaments of my comparative work, as a way to negotiate its invisible complicities with dominance. Here, I am thinking particularly of Lawrence Venuti's 1998 book *The Scandals of Translation*, in which he argues that the translator's complicity in his instrumentalization is nevertheless bound up with his potential for resisting cultural hegemony from the margins.[6] By bringing marginal texts into the dominant language, the translator implicitly challenges and transforms the dominance of the status quo. However, when working within a new *double* hegemony as marked in the co-existence of *both* English and Chinese as dominant languages, I would suggest that the model of a resistant margin is not tenable within this newer and emergent axis, which in turn structures the new status quo that has now moved beyond Venuti's historical moment. Thus, I argue for a theorization of the translator's resistance *between* the two possibilities offered by Venuti's work. Neither passive complicity nor active resistance: translation becomes an instrument with no operator, an operation with no object. There is nothing good or bad about this operation when it is considered in and of itself. Its ethical possibility emerges only when framed within the ongoing forces of globalization and capitalism described here: an ethics of translation that simply stays still, in a quiet gesture of neither

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[6] Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

complicity nor resistance. Yet this is not passive either, because it emerges from out of the collision of two languages that we think of as translation. This then is the gesture—a brittle resistance—of "The Rest of the World."

Compelled by these larger questions, the dissertation locates conditions of translatability in particularly intractable moments of modernist writing involving the English and Chinese languages. In contrast to critical arguments for an enabling and even generative encounter with alterity in Anglo-American and Chinese modernism, the project argues that these sites of difficult translation unsettle the premises of trans-linguistic, transnational, and transcultural paradigms. Translation emerges not as a given phenomenon of mediation, but as an event whose givenness remains always in question. The project thus reorients the comparatist affirmation of untranslatability towards a thinking of its conditions: a minimal gesture initiating an ethics of translatability.

Why do I look to modernist writing for thinking through translatability? Here, I am leaning on a historical privileging of translation-as-creativity in the modernist tradition, as well as the relation between translation and the rupture of modernity idiosyncratically articulated by Walter Benjamin (treated in greater detail in Chapter I). As has been observed many times over, however, the connection between modernism and modernity is a contentious one. Where modernity might be understood as a historical and intellectual mode that emphasizes "newness" as a mode of radical breakage from traditions of the past (per Benjamin and his heirs), modernism was provisionally understood as a style or condition of language, an aesthetic category with a determinable set of aesthetic features and values (such as

fragmented narratives and subjects, complexity of meaning-signification in a crisis of language, etc.), historically emerging from the Anglo-American and continental European literary traditions. Yet recently, modernism has also and simultaneously become a contestable corpus that comes under pressure from shifting analytical categories, through which writing on the colonial "peripheries" might challenge its limits and rethink modernism in terms that reject Eurocentric approaches of old.

This project heeds the call by considering modernism in two of its instantiations: Anglo-American and Chinese. Of these, the former hews closer to culturally dominant ideas of what constitutes modernism (at least in the North American and broadly "western" context, which is also the primary audience for my work), while the latter seldom falls under the rubric of "modernist studies" even in the aftermath of recent critical interventions, being framed instead within national and linguistic categories.

For my interest in thinking through translatability, I observe a further specificity in the chiastic structure that emerges in comparing these two modernisms: where Anglo-American modernist writers have often reposed their work on an opaque or *untranslatable* alterity that is concretized as a transcultural interaction (Pound's *Cantos* come to mind most readily here), Chinese modernism in its semi-colonial context has instead tended to assume the *translatable* as a kind of default approach to a foreign culture that can be appropriated as a ready means of enriching one's own history and political progress. As non-symmetrical doubles of one another, both the Anglo-American and Chinese instances reveal how the encounter with the other is typically framed as *enabling* the development of their

respective modernist styles, and can even be galvanizing in some instances.

The smaller moments studied in this dissertation tacitly work against these broader narratives: they are each at the very center of this chiasmus between translatable and untranslatable. Although the writers I study are all unquestionably modernist in the aesthetic senses of the term, their particular status *qua* modernists then renders these moments of difficulty all the more important for the ways in which they belie that very status. Indeed, I argue that these are not transitory aberrations from a still operative narrative of modernism; instead, they point towards the exemplary conditions of translatability that subtend modernism itself. But here I am still deferring some crucial questions: what *is* a condition of translatability, and *how* does it condition?

Chapter arguments

Variations of this question are set up and addressed in the four chapters of the dissertation: each examines one instance of a condition and one mode of conditionality. While they can be read in any order insofar as each provides a synecdoche for the broader argument, they are nevertheless presented in a loosely symmetrical (or chiastic) structure, and are structured as a narrative according to the commitments and arguments of this project.

Focused on the exemplarily modern Chinese prose writer 张爱玲 Eileen Chang (1920-1995), Chapter 1 makes the first move of undoing historicity as both political and theoretical necessity. By affirmatively reading an author whose resistance to historicity is staged on a literal level, the chapter argues for the

possibility of an exception from history that does not insist on exceptional*ism*. This argument is worked out as a problem of modernity and semi-colonial resistance: where it is generally held that the vital aspects of Chinese modernity—vernacular reform, feminism, national revolution, progressivist time—emerged from enthusiastic translations and assimilation of the western political doctrines that arrived through colonial contact, Chang's work instead suggests that even such translations also inadvertently generate contingent exceptions from history. Through her writing on Chinese-English translation, the modernization of the Chinese language, and the aesthetic strategies behind her refusal of historico-political representation, Chang ungrounds revolutionary address and futurity through the happenstances of translation. Such exceptions are distinguished from the historical ruptures of modernity (most often invoked by critics of modern Chinese literature through Benjamin's angel of history) for being insistently located in a present that prohibits the future; as such, I argue that Chang's exception from historicity cannot be modern. Figured in my epigraph as an attempt to take a nap on an uncomfortable bench, her a-modernity provides a passing moment of rest from revolutionary demands for historical consciousness.

Chapter 2 sustains this claims for a weak sense of a-historicity through a resistant reading of the contemporary Chinese poet 楊煉 Yang Lian (1955-). Where Chang insists on a history without future, Yang considers a history without time: in his reading of the Chinese translation of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Yang argues that the Chinese language lacks diachronic time, such that the movement of (European) temporality may only be restored through a supervening act of translation into the

English. Consequently, Yang makes a case for translation *into* the Chinese language as an exemplary locus for the interruption of progressivist time. Yet in his mournful poetic gestures on behalf of "the dead" in a long poetic sequence 《同心圓》[*tóng xīn yüán* / *Concentric Circles*], Yang's historical event—though implicitly uncoupled from the progressivist movement of time—still insists on the possibility of history. I argue that the stagnant agent making this history possible is Yang's qualified sense of "poetry," which in Chinese is a near-homonym for "history" and which in Yang's work is consistently linked to the materiality of "Chinese writing." In my resistant reading of Yang's poetry and poetics, this matter is no longer a logophilic and essentialist dogma inherited from ancient tradition, but one that has been transformed by its incursions into *and* escapes from "European time."

Chapter 3 develops the question of a material poetry by turning to its figural status in two of Yang's major Anglo-American antecedents: Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972). While Yang's material poetics is located within the *particular* resources of the Chinese language, Fenollosa and Pound generalize the isomorphic matter of the Chinese ideograph into a *universal* materiality of language (which they code as "nature"). The figure of a universal matter drives Fenollosa's claim of a ready translatability between English and Chinese. Yet as I argue, Fenollosa's universal matter is founded on an idiosyncratic reading of the material ideograph: in the process of generalization, the matter of language becomes conflated with its status as metaphor. Because the ideograph's metaphoricity is defined as "the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations," it in turn limits modernist appropriations of (Chinese-universal) matter.

The material nature enabling translatability instead turns out to be the "immaterial relations" variously affirmed in Fenollosa and Pound. Through detailed readings of Pound's imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro," its residues in his later *Cantos* and letters, and Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* prior to Pound's editorial interventions, I argue that activating the matter in poetic language is both a translator's ability *and* figural limit.

Finally, Chapter 4 examines affect in the work of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) as a point where figure and history converge. Calling attention to seemingly peripheral instances in her libretto *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) as well as a later essay titled "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), I argue that Stein's repeated statements of disinterest in the mass deaths of Chinese and anonymized peoples also disregard a move from the *figural* deaths of *Four Saints* to the *historical* deaths inflicted by the atomic bomb. Through my readings, I show how a "stupid" and "basic" material poetics that takes liberties with the rules of English may indeed be "Steinese" in the fullest sense of the neologism: still pejorative and pathologizing as in the original intention of the term, while additionally forcing through a translation prohibited from taking place. Stein's denials of figure-*as*-history and insistence on history-*as*-figure thus provide explicit ethico-political, transnational, and transcultural stakes for the trope of untranslatability: if translatability names only a tenuous relation between two poles—concretized as two languages, figured here as affect—then Stein would sever even that most minimal of relations. Where affect can forcefully transform figure into history, Stein cuts to the extreme implications of attenuating this force. In her material poetics and irrecuperable politics, my

argument faces its most radical, concrete test.

That "history" and "figure" are organizing concepts for my chapters on Chinese and Anglo-American writers respectively may be seen as reifying and repeating the Eurocentric thinking that led me to this comparative project in the first place. Yet if there is anything that unites this eclectic set of writers, it is their common resistance to the claims and paradigms that have historically (and retrospectively) been exerted upon them. Further, their respective appeals to translation and untranslatability—both explicit and implicit—then become staked *within* these problematic discourses: what might it mean to say that literary figuration is a work of translation? What might it mean to say that the concept of history is deconstructed via translation? Thus, the familiar violences and failures of this east-west specularity are not ossified in this project. Instead, they are softened (though not thereby under erasure), and brought into relation with one another in order to render malleable and reconfigure old hierarchies of power and difference.

One example of this strategic attention to the politics of comparative form is the transhistorical and conceptually-driven order in which I address my chosen authors. I have begun my argument by thinking about the Chinese modernists, before turning to address the Anglo-American modernists: this, despite the latter historically preceding the former. In this, I hope for the syntax of my argument to countervail existing critical tendencies to marginalize "non-western" modernism as contingencies of or ancillary to a western, pseudo-transcendental norm. Further, the strategy attends to a major point of asymmetry in the chiasmus I have identified: the semi-colonial context of Chinese modernity, in which translation was a direct

response to the incursions of colonial power, providing a means of assimilating and resisting it. The gesture thus calls attention to the ways in which my rhetorical chiasmus remains necessarily distended by particular historical violences.

Critical stakes

By opening and grounding the argument through readings of my chosen Chinese modernists, I am also establishing the grounds for my project's interventions. These interventions lie at the intersection of three fields: comparative literature and its vexed relationship to translation studies; modernist studies construed as Anglo-American, and attempts at broadening itself through comparative or transnational approaches; and Chinese/Sinophone studies. I will address each of these in turn.

The dissertation's argument participates in the long historical association between the discipline of comparative literature and the philological and philosophical study of China and Chinese writing. These figures have been paradigmatic of the discipline's investment in the conditions and limits of western thought, typically framed as a dyadic structure of difference or even opposition between "east" and "west," as exemplified by the work of Zhang Longxi, Rey Chow, and Haun Saussy amongst others.[7] It is in this context that Saussy observes, in his paraphrase of Hegel, that "the East cannot be translated into history, only

[7] Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between East and West* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

transcribed."[8] More recent work has called particular attention to the *figural* status of Chinese script and China, highlighting how that figurality is bound up with its circulation beyond the referentiality of Chineseness, in an expanded world of material difference that is no longer adequately named by a term like "the West": comparatists working in this vein include Andrea Bachner, Eric Hayot, and Christopher Bush.[9] The gradual shift in this critical focus points also to a shift in the discipline's organization from dyadic or dialogical comparisons, such as in the east-west divide, to a more fluid understanding of difference precipitated by the interest in world literature as the global circulation of texts in a mode of cultural influence and production.

The field's recent turn to translation studies, led by Emily Apter, then seems to be highlighting an issue that was already murmurously present in the Eurocentric figure of a comparative and theoretical China. Apter's position "against world literature" takes aim at the assumption of translatability as an engine of a commodified and co-opted World Literature.[10] Instead, she argues persuasively for thinking about points of *un*translatability as a means for orienting comparative readings of "world literatures," her name for the sum total of the literatures

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[8] Saussy, *Chinese Aesthetic*, 165.

[9] Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[10] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013). See also Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

produced globally. The goal in emphasizing the ethics and politics of the untranslatable is to provide a deflationary gesture in the face of this ongoing fetish. The gesture is thus a strategic and polemical one, made in the full knowledge that translatable and untranslatable are not simple opposites, but in fact orbit the same theoretical and philosophical problem, notably raised by Jacques Derrida in his writing on translation and monolingualism.

Indeed, in a moment quoted in the Preface to the English translation of Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles* [*Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*],[11] supervising translators and editors Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood quote Derrida to precisely this effect:

> Non que je cultive l'intraduisible. Rien n'est intraduisible pour peu qu'on se donne le temps de la dépense ou l'expansion d'un discours compétent qui se mesure à la puissance de l'original. Mais « intraduisible » demeure - doit rester, me dit ma loi - l'économie poétique de l'idiome, celui qui m'importe, car je mourrais encore plus vite sans lui, et qui m'importe, moi-même à moi-même, là où une « quantité » formelle donnée échoue toujours à restituer l'événement singulier de l'original, c'est-à-dire à le faire oublier, une fois enregistré, à emporter son nombre, l'ombre prosodique de son quantum. Un mot pour un mot, si tu veux, syllabe par syllabe. Dès lors qu'on renonce à

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[11] *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). The *Dictionary*'s English translation notably attempts to transcend its origin in the European languages, also explained by the editors in the Preface.

cette équivalence économique, d'ailleurs strictement impossible, on peut tout traduire, mais dans une traduction lâche au sens lâche du mot « traduction ». Je ne parle même pas de poésie, seulement de prosodie, de métrique (l'accent et la quantité dans le temps de la prononciation). Rien n'est intraduisible en un sens, mais en un autre sens tout est intraduisible, la traduction est un autre nom de l'impossible. En un autre sens du mot « traduction », bien sûr, et d'un sens à l'autre il m'est facile de tenir toujours ferme entre ces deux hyperboles qui sont au fond la même et se traduisent encore l'une l'autre.[12]

[Not that I am cultivating the untranslatable. Nothing is untranslatable, if only one give oneself the time for the expenditure or expansion of a competent discourse that measures itself against the power of the original. But what remains untranslatable—should remain, as my law tells me—is the poetic economy of the idiom, the one that is important to me, for I would die even more quickly without it, and which is important to me, myself to myself, where a given formal “quantity” always fails to restore the singular event of the original, that is, to let it be forgotten once recorded, to carry away its numbers, the prosodic shadow of its quantum. Word for word, if you like, syllable by syllable. From the moment this economic equivalence—strictly impossible, by the way—is renounced, everything can be translated, but in a loose translation, in the loose sense of the word “translation.” I am not even talking about poetry, only about prosody, about metrics (accent and quantity

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 100-103.

> in the time of pronunciation). In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible. In another sense of the word "translation," of course, and from one sense to the other—it is easy for me always to hold firm between these two hyperboles which are fundamentally the same, and always translate each other.][13]

There are then two senses of un/translatability that are disambiguated and still braided here: an expansive and loosening sense; and a restorative sense. Translation might be an expansive attempt to account for and bear witness to the singular event (this is the sense in which everything is translatable), which in its growing scale still cannot restore the poetic economy of the event (the sense in which everything is untranslatable). This is because, as Derrida argues, the word-for-word economy of equivalence between two languages—which in Benjamin is only an impossible promise to be broken rather than a secured possibility for which the translator should strive—is strictly impossible. Everything is "loosely" translatable given time, competence, and a willingness to break or at least loosen the promise of equivalence by renouncing it in its quantifiable dimensions while still rigorously holding oneself accountable to the original. This is one sense of translatability: a translation that must dissolve pure equivalence. It is in the aftermath of that dissolution that Derrida works in the second sense: the poetic economy of the idiom that must fall away.

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[13] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 56-57. I have silently amended some errors in the published English translation that put up serious obstacles to comprehension. Thanks as ever to Geoffrey Bennington's sharp eye for calling my attention to these errors and their reproduction in the *Dictionary*.

Where a translator cannot give one word for one word, she may still be able to give a sentence, or paragraph, or even a book: yet more words as never-complete substitutes for something that began only as a single word. What this does not restore is the event of the poetic idiom. This is why the two hyperboles are contiguous to one another, at once a generative gift of time and an irrecuperable loss of the event, two operations operating on one another in a manner that Derrida still calls "translation."[14]

In light of this Derridean account of a translatability seeking to account for the untranslatable, my concern in this project is to propose a nuance on what Apter frames as a politics of untranslatability. Locating my work between these two hyperboles—so to speak—would enable me to maintain a vital and necessary resistance to a western and European tradition that insists on an untranslatable China. Where Apter wishes to insist on the quasi-universal right to *un*translatability, I would instead observe that the western tradition has insistently imputed untranslatability and illegibility to its figured China. To re-stage Chinese writing as untranslatable would thus be complicit with the problem at hand. Where a different set of texts and traditions might rightfully clamor for the right to untranslatability,

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[14] In a related moment, Paul de Man reports witnessing Jacques Derrida confusing (via Maurice de Gandillac's French translation) Walter Benjamin's "translatable" pure language for, instead, an "untranslatable" pure language. About this generative misreading of a pivotal moment in Benjamin's text, de Man remarks: "I'm sure Derrida could explain that it was the same… and I mean that in a positive sense, it *is* the same, but still, it is not the same without some additional explanation." This moment in *Monolingualism* might then be the "additional explanation" that de Man anticipates: they are not exactly "the same" but rather answer to different and complementary senses and operations of translation. See Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'", in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 80.

this set called "China" has already received it in spades, though certainly not cast in the language of rights or singular idioms. Thus, in seeking to reimagine the place of Chinese writing in the field of comparative literature and literary theory, I would argue that a more appropriate locus of resistance is a weak translatability that remains resistant to the implied transparencies and transactions of world literature, and affirmative of the idioms that compel the literary work of radical translation. The goal then is *not* to reject the political force of the untranslatable, but rather to cast it in a different light: a different light that would account for the problem marked especially by the figuration of China in the originating constitution of comparative literature. My turn to thinking about the *conditions* of this weak translatability takes place with these necessary critiques in mind.[15] Furthermore, where Apter is concerned to orient "world literatures" around untranslatable *philosophical* concepts and geopolitical nodes in world systems, I additionally orient my work towards the *literary* elements of radical translation with which every translator grapples. In doing so, I am shifting the critical emphasis from an implicitly positivist language—is it translatable or not?—to a meta-discourse that considers how translation happens or does not happen in any given number of ways. Thinking

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[15] See Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 32. Liu writes: "In my study of translingual practice, I am interested in conditions under which 'confrontations' occur between China, Japan, and the West at the site of translation or wherever the languages happen to meet, for this is where the irreducible differences between the host language and the guest language are fought out, authorities invoked or challenged, and ambiguities dissolved or created." In her work, Liu reasonably assumes that these confrontations do in fact take place, such that translingual moments do emerge as sites of praxis in the full Marxian sense. Affirming Liu's work, my own is particularly interested in elaborating the premises of Liu's "conditionality" and "praxis" via the recent imbrications of translation studies with literary theory and philosophy.

about the conditions of translatability thus frames translation as an event that emerges from these unstable grounds. If translation is a literary praxis, then it intervenes in its conditions inasmuch as it is mediated through this problem of translatability.

In a similar vein, my argument is aligned with an ongoing global turn that gathers modernist, Chinese, and Sinophone studies. As an analytic category, the "global" is most problematic in contestations over world literature and the forms of translatability that it assumes. However, it is conversely most valorized and productive in critical attempts to recover a globally produced modernism, as well a globally dispersive sense of Sinophone identity not indebted to the nationalist chauvinism haunting the cultural claims of "Chineseness" as routed through post-1949 China, otherwise known as the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.).

As explained previously, the recent postcolonial and comparative interventions by scholars such as Rebecca Walkowitz, Jessica Berman, and Joseph Slaughter have led to "modernism" becoming a capacious signifier hospitable to the minoritarian interventions of writing across space and time.[16] This then puts particular pressure on the Western and Eurocentric categories that subtend modernism to begin with: a pressure first exerted by Saussy in his theoretical work on the almost-untranslatable category of the aesthetic (where the theorizing is accomplished through taking the Chinese tradition as an ordinal point for western

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[16] Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

aesthetics), and then intensified by critics like Hayot and Bush whose works outline China's recalcitrant places within the ambit of European modernism. In a radically different context, scholars such as Chow, Lydia Liu, and Tsu Jing have also sought to rethink configurations of "China" in a more general globalized context (still related to modernism), particularly through conversation with Shu-mei Shih's emergent theorization of the Sinophone field as a discursive resistance to Sinocentrism.[17]

I justify my uncommon juxtaposition of these fields by historicizing and conceptualizing the interactions of their respective literary objects *qua* translation, and also by outlining the failures and conditions of those interactions as nodes of untranslatability. For modernist writing, the stakes of translation and untranslatability lie not only in the very founding of Anglo-American modernism, as comprehensively outlined by Steven Yao;[18] they also lie in the possibility of a global and comparative modernism as such, as has been suggested by the work of Gayle Rogers, Matthew Hart, and Joshua Miller parsing the translinguistic and vernacular aspects of modernist writing in national and transnational Anglophone contexts;[19] as well as the intellectual constitution of Chinese modernity and its negotiations

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[17] Tsu Jing, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[18] Steven Yao, *Translation and the Languages of Modernism: Gender, Politics, Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[19] Gayle Rogers, *Modernism and the New Spain: Britain, Cosmopolitan Europe, and Literary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

with the west, as examined by Liu, Shih, Shuang Shen, Bonnie MacDougall, and Perry Link amongst others.[20] Here, I am not so much suggesting that placing an emphasis on untranslatability would render the global paradigm untenable. Rather, I am simply following Liu's exhortation that "a cross-cultural study must examine its own condition of possibility. Constituted as a translingual act itself, it enters, rather than sits above, the dynamic history of the relationship between words, concepts, categories, and discourse."[21]

At once translingual and transdiscursive, the critical gesture of my dissertation resides in showing how even a quasi-universal situation framed as untranslatability—and the difficult intermingling of languages in translation—remains indebted to the epistemological and political situations of modernist writing and its cultural debts. In the process, I describe untranslatability not as a situation nor historical accident, but as a *judgement* whose stuttering subject of enunciation is constituted by the conditions of translatability.

Failures; or, hopes

If it accedes to the axioms on which it is built, then this project was bound to fail from the start. Hoping to think and write without force is already, as Derrida notes,

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[20] Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Shuang Shen, *Cosmopolitan Publics: Anglophone Print Culture in Semi-Colonial Shanghai* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Bonnie MacDougall, *Translation Zones in Modern China: Authoritarian Command Versus Gift Exchange* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011); Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[21] Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 20.

answerable to the minimal force exerted in stating this hope. Moreover, the claim extends beyond its initial articulation within a linguistic paradigm: in saying that I would like to think without the conditions under which I think, here I am already undertaking that very prohibition, and have already brought those conditions into the force of my thought. And so it is at the very least not surprising that I have failed to programmatically define what I mean (or intend) by "conditionality." Beyond a dictionary definition of being bound under given conditions, I had hoped to parse and analyze Benjamin's desire to characterize and to preserve the *totality* of a reflection produced within a specific moment in time. These are the impossible straits through which messianic history separates promise from force. I make no excuses for this striking omission: only a tenuous promise of further thinking that is not without its own force.

Perhaps the only hope lies in *not* acceding to the axioms that have served as a frame for these thoughts. But not to write and think without language and its limits —a perverse madness reserved for a different place and time—but to decouple (forcelessly perhaps) the thought of language from the force of the event, without which language would not be what it is. And thus also to chance upon a language (or languages) that would be irremediably changed: for now, let us call this kind of chancy thinking "translation." Translation is joined to the thought of transmission and transmissibility in the following chapter, in which we begin by considering what and how a hope without historical future might come to be.

Chapter 1

Modernity:
Eileen Chang and the Exception from History

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至于我们大多数的学生，我们对于战争所抱的态度，可以打个譬喻，是像一个人坐在硬板凳上打瞌盹，虽然不舒服，而且没结没完地抱怨着，到底还是睡着了。

- 张爱玲，“烬余录”

For most of us students, however, our attitude toward the war can be summed up by a metaphor: we were like someone sitting on a hard plank bench, trying to take a nap. Despite terrible discomfort and unending complaints, sleep still came in the end.

- Eileen Chang, “From the Ashes”[22]

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If the text is called “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: *Aufgabe*, task, can also mean the one who has to give up… It is in that sense also the defeat, the giving up, of the translator. The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original.

- Paul de Man,
“Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator’”

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<u>The insomnia of history</u>

It is not always easy to fall asleep, nor might it even be a *fall* in the full sense of the term: as the modern Chinese writer 张爱玲 [Zhāng Àilíng, Eileen Chang]

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[22] Unless otherwise stated, all provided translations are from the published standard English translations. I have undertaken translations only where none are available in publication. The final sentence of this translation by Andrew Jones has been modified to reflect its lack of a pronoun in the original Chinese: pronouns provide a problem of translation that comes under further pressure later in this chapter.

(1920-1995) writes in my epigraph, surviving in the ruins of historical disaster can so often be more work than grace. Yet here it is a radically different form of work, connected to a fraught grace: there is little lapsarian rest to be had in this nap on a hard plank bench, only the bifurcating impulses of melancholic complaint and a minimal will to seek only the most minimal of sleeps.

When sleep eventually happens, it is almost and yet not quite an event: "着" [*zháo*] in the context of sleep might mean to *enter* sleep, but also signifies the completion of an action when paired with a verb (here, "sleep"), while connoting on the wayside an accomplished affect or affliction of the noun with which it is paired: for example, "着凉" [*zháoliáng* "got a cold"], or "着急" [*zhāojí* "became anxious"]. If sleep here is a *fait accompli* of an event, then it is one into which I might enter (already prematurely asserting my "I") but which might also come towards me, in order to afflict me. And when I awake from this dreamless sleep—awoken by the war that continues in the air around me—it will almost be as if it never happened.

Chang's "瞌盹" ["nap"] carries a further charm, this time meta-textually connecting *and* severing our fitfully sleeping students to and from the historical violences in which they lie: in a passage that is written entirely in the modernized vernacular of standard Mandarin Chinese, only this small word is rendered in the 吴

[*Wú*] dialect common in Chang's Shanghai.[23] Crucially, it is not at all difficult to find an equivalent in Mandarin Chinese, and yet Chang insists on the Wu. Only somewhat legible within the context, this word—carrying with it the burden of the minoritized language-system from which it historically emerges—provides still a brief respite from the hegemonic language of Chinese modernity. If in the Chinese context translation is one of the operations that enforces the radical breaks of modernity, then here Chang provides a slighter kind of translation out of and into the modern: a somnolent and unassimilated vestige of a past that a progressivist version of history demands she leave behind. The figural "nap" snatched from the clear-eyed insomnia of a mimetically political history is completely translatable. Yet it remains untranslated, in a perverse insistence that might be mistaken for resistance if only one was careless enough.

Chang's minute gesture—set against the translating mechanisms of Chinese

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[23] The Wu dialect has a long history tied to the south of China, dating back to Middle Chinese; despite governmental attempts at eradicating its use through the imposition of a standard vernacular, Wu remained and remains spoken by many local southerners albeit in a somewhat more tolerated 'Mandarinized' form (as demonstrated in Chang's writing here). Indeed, Chang's knowledge of and affection for the Wu dialect is evident in her translation of 韩邦庆 Hán Bāngqìng's late-Qing courtesan novel 《海上花列传》[*Hǎishàng huā lièzhuàn / The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (1892)] from Wu into Mandarin Chinese. The novel provided an important example for advocates of modern standardized Chinese such as 胡适 Hú Shì, who noted that the critically-acclaimed novel's main obstacle to a wider readership was precisely its dialog written entirely in Wu (intended as an accurate representation of the courtesan world). By translating the novel into Mandarin Chinese, Chang thus gesturally places herself within the conversation on linguistic modernization. Much later in her life after moving to the United States, Chang also translated the same novel into English (though it is not clear if she would have been working from the Wu or her own Mandarin Chinese translation). The manuscript of the English translation was presumed lost until it was coincidentally identified amongst her papers reposed at the University of Southern California; it was subsequently prepared for publication by Columbia University Press in 2005.

modernity—calls for comparison to a somewhat more indirect dynamic connecting translation to modernity in Walter Benjamin's thinking. For Benjamin, between translation and modernity is the question of translatability. Translatability is tied to the transmissibility of what is so often desirously called 'the original,' or 'the source,' and so is always a historical concept. The original becomes transmissible and translatable only through submission to a dialectic of destruction. The passage into the modern thus destroys the very material that paves the passage itself. What the translator has to give up—as Paul de Man observes in his own reading of Benjamin's "Task of the Translator"—is not simply the original, but the ability to "refind" and *reproduce* what Benjamin would call the 'aura': untranslatable and unreproducible material traces and lived experiences, transmissible only when brought into language and langua*ges*, therefore and thereby destroyed.

In this chapter, then, I put some pressure on Benjamin's thought-figure of a historical modernity predicated on the enabling violence of translation: a relation that has been partially and vexingly assimilated in the context of discussions about Chinese modernity, and which I would suggest has particular pertinence for Chang's (non-)relation to history. What paradoxical and non-dialectizable modernity can emerge out of un-translating just such an enabling violence?

To do so, I explore a paradox surrounding Eileen Chang and the richly symptomatic critical afterlife she has generated, beginning in her own heyday in the 1940s and only increasing in fervor in the last twenty years after her death. The paradox is this: where Chang typically frames her work as existing in a complicated and irreducible *separation* from historicity, her work is most often read in reference

to or oriented towards history, frequently as its negation (that nevertheless dialectically brings history towards its fullest expression), and particularly as a quintessence of a Chinese modernity that is frequently articulated through Walter Benjamin's thinking. Addressing critics who read and reclaim Chang as a necessarily negative participant in the work or struggle for history, I contend that it is precisely and ironically her literal insistence on an *exception* from history that has not been and must be accounted for.

How might this exception be understood? First, *via negativa*: what I am calling an exception is not exactly negative in its construal in Chang's work, cannot and should not be reclaimed or recuperated, and cannot be read as positive action or its inverse, sublation/overcoming. Importantly, this concept of the exception is also not premised on a sovereign subject vested with a theologized and totalitarian power to declare the exception, such as in Carl Schmitt's infamous formulation of the idea; nor is it yoked to the more general suspension of the rule of law that Giorgio Agamben reads as constitutive of law itself in his genealogical exploration of this fraught political gesture. Rather, as I hope my readings of Chang will show, the difficult thought that I am grappling with here is the thought of an exception from history, taking place *within* history but radically enclosed. Necessarily non-transcendental, this exception lies within and remains subject to the laws of historicity and its companion in translation—language. Indeed, it is precisely *because* the exception lies within these laws that it may transform or at least strain the lawfulness of historicity itself. Thus framed, these exceptions do not then exert a claim for exceptional*ism*.

The task of the work that follows is to provide a positive presentation of the "exception" that I have only negatively defined thus far. I first examine the historical-contextual and discursive ways in which Chang—as work, person, and metonymical figure—has been situated within the modern Chinese literary canon. Then, I consider major critical attempts at thinking through and complicating the dominant historicist paradigms that have tacitly or explicitly inflected readings of Chang's work, particularly as they have been influenced by various readings of Walter Benjamin and his version of dialectical modernity. Following this with two sections of extended readings, I focus on two tropes for translation that work to disrupt simplistic readings of Chang's 'modernity': (1) her interest in the translingual changes taking place when the Chinese language was modernized in contact with western ones, particularly as these translations might revise the structures of address inflecting her narrative technique; and (2) "参差的对照" [*cēncī dè duìzhào*] (provisionally translated as "uneven interval"—this is my translation that will be clarified over the course of the reading), an enigmatic description of her narrative technique presented as a way to "reveal" an analogical relation between literature and history, affect and revolution. Through these readings, I show that Chang's exceptions from history are figured as intervals contingently bounded by her always-translated structures of address, which in turn modulate her insistence on a narrative present without future. In a short coda, I then outline the implications of this argument for future work on Eileen Chang's literary writing and self-translations, together with dominant ideas of a necessary raising of historical consciousness in the Chinese context, especially as they have been framed through

魯迅 Lǔ Xǜn's well-known metaphor of the iron house of tradition.

The aura of Eileen Chang

The dramatic turns of her early life certainly provide many ways of (not) reading Eileen Chang. She was born in 1920 in Beijing and raised in Shanghai in a wealthy, politically prominent, and unhappy family. Her early writings were marked by a stubborn and unsentimental attachment to her privileged lifestyle as a child and young woman, and a fascination with the remnants of the old feudalist order. Her parents were estranged, due to her father's opium and womanizing habits, which were (unusually for the time and place) not tolerated by her educated mother, whose education was also unusual and a further mark of both her and Chang's privilege. She was first made to live with her father and stepmother in an opulent feudalist home, where she was gravely mistreated and physically abused. After a runaway episode, she was allowed to live with her mother and aunt (father's sister) in a modern apartment in Shanghai, during which her mother spent much time away studying in France. Under the custody of these western-educated women, Chang was educated at a local all-female English-language institution. In these intersecting milieus, she developed her bilingualism, staunchly feminist views, affectionately detailed eye for the homosocial interactions between women, and trenchant observations of cosmopolitanism at work.

These myriad influences came to a head amidst her coming of age at the tail end of Chinese modernization, near the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Shanghai fell to the Japanese in 1937: as a result, Chang was unable to

claim the full scholarship she had received to study English at the University of London. Instead, she enrolled in the University of Hong Kong in 1939 to study English in then British-administered Hong Kong, but returned to Shanghai in 1941 when Hong Kong too fell to the Japanese. Beginning in the early 1940s, Chang published much of her early work under, and set in, Japanese-occupied Shanghai, and eventually rose to become the most popular fiction writer and essayist in wartime Shanghai, surviving the authoritarian and intellectual policing rife during the occupation through delicate preterition of these wartime conditions. In this time, she published her early and best novellas and short stories collected under the title 《传奇》[*Chuánqí / Romances* (1944)], as well as the occasional autobiographical essays included in her volume of essays 《流言》[*Liúyán / Written on Water*

(1945)].[24]

Chang fell further out of official favor when the Communist government took over in 1949. Concerned with the interior and psychic spaces of lovers (primarily aristocratic women), her work was perceived as bourgeois, anti-nationalist, and lacking in revolutionary intent; this was not helped by her secret marriage to her

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[24] The reference to the British Romantic poet John Keats' epitaph "Here lies one whose name is writ in water" is not an accident of translation: in Chinese, Chang's title literally means "flowing speech" (possibly also connoting fluency, eloquence with language), but the Chinese word for "flowing," 流 *liú*, is additionally a homonym for a different word meaning "to leave behind" 留 *liú*. The title thus reads visually as 流言 "flowing speech" but is simultaneously audible as 留言 "speech left behind, final words." Chang herself has commented that the title is partly inspired by an unnamed Romantic poet. If one pursues this pun further afield, one might additionally consider Chang's several remarks on her own multiple names, having been named 张瑛 [*Zhāng Yīng*] (in Chinese) as a child, and "Eileen" in English as her mother was filling out a form for her entry into the English-language school at the age of ten. It was only after this that "Eileen" was transliterated into Chinese as Chang's pen-name *Àilíng*. Inhabiting multiple names is not unusual in the Chinese tradition, though certainly much less common in recent times: the usual distinction is between a name given at birth—reflecting one's family, place within it, and the hopes of the parent/s—and a name given by one's teacher upon beginning an education, reflecting the teacher's aspirations for the named student (usually male). Some modern Chinese writers have also adopted idiosyncratic pen-names related to their writing 'styles' and inferable political stances: examples include the socialist writer 矛盾 [*Máo Dùn* / 'Contradiction'], 莫言 [*Mò Yán* / 'Without Speech, Don't Speak'— particularly ironic for a pen-name], and 北岛 [*Běi Dǎo* / 'North Island']. As well, the Confucian doctrine of 正名 [*zhèngmíng,* "rectification of names"] observes the political importance of stabilizing reference such that words refer precisely to their specific referents; failure to do so would result in social disorder stemming from an epistemological dissociation with reality, which is in turn precipitated by the instability of language-names. Ezra Pound also takes a strong interest in this doctrine. Chang addresses both her own names and the Confucian doctrine in an essay titled "It is Essential that Names be Right" (her citation of Confucius) collected in *Written on Water*.

first husband 胡兰成 [*Hú Lánchéng*],[25] a collaborator during the Japanese Occupation. Thus, in 1952, she left Shanghai for Hong Kong (returned to British custody after the Japanese surrendered in 1945), where she lived for three years working and translating for presses receiving sponsorship from the United States Information Service (USIS). Supporting herself thus, she produced historic-realist novels in English depicting the hardship of rural Chinese life under the Communist government, aimed at a U.S. audience that turned out to be indifferent. Notably, Chang herself was no supporter of the Communist government, although it is not clear that she would have chosen this uncharacteristic subject matter and approach if her livelihood and eventual passage to the United States had not depended on it. At the same time, she was also translating U.S. American classics like Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings, making them available to the Chinese-speaking world.

In 1955, Chang moved first to New Hampshire; and after this, to New York City, the Bay Area, and eventually to Los Angeles. In the midst of this itinerant life, she met and married her second husband, screenwriter and theater director Ferdinand Reyher, who eventually died in L.A. of a series of strokes in 1967. Chang lived the rest of her life in L.A. as a recluse, mailing or faxing occasional stories and essays to her editor in Taiwan for publication. Late in her life, she lived off the

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[25] The marriage ended acrimoniously due to Hu's infidelity. David Der-wei Wang offers a fascinating and comprehensive chapter on Hu Lancheng: in Wang's account, Hu emerges as a compelling thinker of poetry, and one whose unconventional ways of thinking rendered him ultimately unassimilable into the cultural *Zeitgeist* of then China. David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 188.

royalties accrued from the revival of her work in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1980s and 90s. The craze over her writing intensified in 1995 after newspaper reports of her solitary death in her apartment, where her body was found a full seven days after her death. It would be some time until publishers in mainland China would officially take on her work, although it was certainly in circulation through less official means. Today, her work is freely available and endures in popularity throughout the Chinese-speaking world, with a growing interest in the U.S. market following the 2007 film adaptation of her story《色，戒》[*sè jiè* / *Lust, Caution*] by Ang Lee.

Much of Chang's more recent popularity can be attributed to a critical rehabilitation initiated by the Chinese American critic C.T. Hsia. Hsia's influential *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961) was written with the intent of introducing modern Chinese fiction to a Western audience, seeking to bring marginalized authors like Chang into a revised canon contesting the "crude reformist and propagandist energies"[26] of Communist and leftist writing. The long chapter devoted to Chang's work was written upon the publication of Chang's anti-Communist English-language novel *The Rice-Sprout Song* in the United States, seeking to contextualize a U.S. American reader's rough familiarity with the novel within the starkly different tenor of Chang's earlier work.

Yet despite criticizing the crudity of reformist agendas and historical demands in Chinese literature, Hsia's work remains in the (perhaps equally crude)

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[26] C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction: Second Edition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), 498.

register of critical approbation that takes its bearings from a humanist "critical judgement" or "literary standards." For him, Chang is admitted into his canon for her "astonishing combination—a Chaucerian gusto for life and all its little enjoyments plus an adult[27] and tragic awareness of the human condition"[28] as well as her rich imagery bringing with it "a strong historical awareness"[29] suggesting "the persistence of the past in the present, the continuity of Chinese modes of behavior in apparently changing material circumstances."[30] In these ways, "[e]ach character in *Romances* is sharply defined against his social and economic background, against his parents, and by extension against a culture in decadence."[31]

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[27] I cannot uncritically pass over the fact that Hsia praises a 46-year-old woman for possessing an "adult" sensibility. A generous reading might suggest that he has in mind the "precocious" start of her career, a critical commonplace to the present day: Chang is known to have started publishing in newspapers and literary journals at the age of 18, while *Romances* was published in 1944 when she was 24 years old, at which time she was at the height of her popularity in Shanghai. Yet this is not an isolated incident of Hsia's faint praise carrying strong hints of misogyny. Elsewhere, he writes, again with a paternal tone of moral approval: "Eileen Chang could not have made significant contributions to Chinese literature if she had broken down under her severe trials as a child and adolescent. Partly because of her keen appetite for life and partly because of her precocious interest in human passions, which intrigued and amused her even when under great sorrow or anguish, one can discern in her writings only the slightest trace of neurotic self-pity with which young women writers are often afflicted" (392). Needless to say, Hsia does not pathologize the psychological tensions of Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* in quite the same way: there, the madness of a protagonist who believes that he is living in a society of cannibals is an essential aspect and natural expression of the human condition in response to violent and absurd historical circumstances, not a neurosis to be anesthetized for affective effect. See also my following discussion of Hsia's "handmaiden."

[28] Ibid, 392-393.

[29] Ibid, 396.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 397.

For his broader attempts at a revisionary account of Chinese literary history —as exemplified in his invocations of Chang's counter-intuitive and micro-political sense of "historical awareness"—Hsia came under fire from Jaroslav Průšek, then a leading Sinologist of the social-realist Prague School, in the latter's review of Hsia's work. The ensuing exchange, which has been constitutive for Chinese literary studies to the present day, turns again on an ideological problem of history, historiography, and the relation between literature and history: where Průšek complains that Hsia's critical standards lack objectivity, and worse still, that Hsia is "incapable of justly evaluating the function and mission of literature in any given period, of correctly grasping and showing its historical role,"[32] Hsia responds tartly against Průšek's "intentionalist" approach to literature that renders it "the handmaiden of history":[33]

> Průšek is apparently unaware of the danger of using the literary record merely as a record of history, as a testament to the spirit of the age. I believe, on the contrary, that the literary historian should go about his work empirically: he should not allow preconceived notions of history to determine his quest for excellence, and he should form his own opinion about the vitality and culture of an age precisely on the strength of the literary record he has examined.[34]

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[32] Jaroslav Průšek, "Basic Problems of the History of Modern Chinese Literature and C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*," in *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 198.

[33] Hsia, *History,* 239.

[34] Ibid.

While I have found much to respect in Hsia's robust defense of (his idea of) literature that does not transparently depict or answer to a banalized notion of historical *Zeitgeist*, his approach is no less ideological and tacitly masculinist in claiming that there can even be an "empirical" way to determine the "excellence" (surely the emptiest of empty signifiers) and "vitality" (etc.) of a literary work in order to exculpate it from the fate of being a feminized "handmaiden" to history. What Hsia deems dangerous about Průšek's dogmatic historicism is not simply that it is *itself* problematic to assume literature's transparently mimetic relation to history, or to use history as an objective hermeneutic lens with which to unlock readings of literature. His objection lies closer to home: such a historicist approach would prevent the critic from exercising his own critical judgment, eliding works of aesthetic superiority whose relation to the historical *Zeitgeist* of Chinese history remain underwritten or only implicit (such as Chang's).

Yet despite his conservatism, what emerges strongly for me from this exchange is Hsia's account of the literary within history. He positions historical judgment and the historicist reading as *derivative* of the literary text, relying still on the inductive (if not empiricist) critic, who stands between the two as a conduit and arbiter of their dialectical and non-oppositional relation. By stabilizing the critical focus on the literary, Hsia suggests *not* that the two are separate or opposed, but rather that literature can present a far more complicated and nuanced account of history from within its aegis. That is, literature too (and the literary critic per Hsia) can be a dialecticizing force for history. In the section that follows, I will trace in particular one recurring instantiation of and resistance to this dialectical approach

to history as it plays out in readings of Chinese modernity.

Benjamin and "the modern" in modern Chinese literary studies

Thus framed by the pivotal exchange between Hsia and Průšek, it should not be surprising that the history of criticism for modern Chinese literature also demonstrates many related ways of (not) reading Eileen Chang historically. That Chang can be read as an indexical metonym for the historical vicissitudes structuring Chinese modernity is by now a critical commonplace. Here, I am particularly concerned with how that modernity is construed dialectically, and chiefly through the nuanced dialectics of Walter Benjamin. What these critics all mark is the difficulty of the relationship between the literary work and its historical constitution, and consequently its status qua "modern" literature. While they are not all readers of Chang's work, their recalibrations of the historicist paradigm have provided the critical backdrop against which Chang's work has been assessed and reassessed.

> A good place to begin might be where David Der-wei Wang ruefully observes:
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> Writers and critics of the revolutionary discourse did not welcome Chang's vision. But Chang need not serve only as a reactionary example insofar as her writing entertains a negative dialectic of history and progress. It has become a cliché in the field of modern Chinese literary studies to discuss the dubious agency of modernity in terms of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, who is blown by the wind of the modern backwards toward the future while facing

the debris of the past.[35]

Wang argues that it is possible to recuperate Chang as a non-reactionary through the workings of the negative dialectic of the Frankfurt school (exemplified by Benjamin in the context of modern Chinese literary studies, as noted here[36]). Indeed, as he goes on to suggest, what Chang offers is a radically different figure of history that does not have to make recourse to Benjamin's tired cliché. Instead of a *re*volutionary discourse, Chang's is "an involutionary discourse, in that it points to an introverted

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[35] David Der-wei Wang, "Introduction," in *The Fall of the Pagoda* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), xviii.

[36] To some ears, Wang's phrasing may recall Theodor Adorno's post-Holocaust work *Negative Dialectics* (1966), although the speed and obscurity with which the reference occurs makes it unclear if he intends it in Adorno's sense of the term, or if he is simply referring to the negation that is a necessary moment in the movement of the Hegelian dialectic. The former seems unlikely in light of the general indifference towards Adorno in Chinese literary studies, although curiously enough it seems like both possibilities might work with Wang's argument about Chang. Indeed, Wang himself elsewhere mentions Adorno's well-known remark from *ND* (now a cliché too) about the impossibility of lyric poetry after Auschwitz (*Monster* 4), but does not say more. In the context of Wang's argument for Chang's dialectical approach to the politics of her time: it seems as if Chang is precisely fitting within the negative dialectic of Adorno, whereas Wang—in concert with generations of critics before him—'positivizes'/sublates her negativity into a legible mode of historical agency, which is precisely the Hegelian and Marxist movement of the dialectic that Adorno contests in his *ND*. Relatedly, one might speculate on the reasons for Chinese literary studies not taking up Adorno's work with the same enthusiasm shown for Benjamin's, though at present it is not entirely clear to me what if anything might be at stake in this differential engagement. While both Frankfurt School thinkers had struck ambivalent postures with relation to Marxist dogma and the utopian possibility for social transformation, a possible guess is that Adorno's stringently anti-positivist and 'pessimistic'/'conservative' thinking may have rendered his work unattractive for discussions of a dialectical modernity and (at least on the dominant reading of Benjamin's idiosyncratic Marxism) the potential ends of a Messianic history. If so, then the critical silence on Adorno would be the uncanny negative of the critical adulation of Eileen Chang. On another reading of Adorno, his fraught insistence on the repressed utopian 'otherwise' of even the darkest and most exhausted work of art might well be unthinkable in the Chinese context (?). See also my following discussion of Wang Ban. I note these fragmented observations for future reference.

tendency, a move that expands… through the replication and elaboration of an inherited pattern of thoughts and deeds."[37]

Wang's engagement with Chang and Benjamin emerges from a broader interest in the intricate relation between literature and historical experience, or—put another way, in which the aesthetic force of literature on history is already tacitly assumed, and in which literature is always already historical—between aesthetics and politics. In his *The Monster that is History*, which takes as its starting point the protean figure of the mythological Chinese demon 梼杌 [*táowù*] as a corrective to historicist paradigms, Wang tackles the representational burdens of history placed upon literary writers and critics alike. By examining representations of historical violence in modern Chinese literature, Wang argues that another, related violence is endemic in modes of representation calling for the mutual co-implication of historicity and realist narrative. Both modes of "violence" become complicit in their respective perpetuation: the call to represent violence may well be an ethical resistance to the fact of violence (as contemporary thinkers so ardently believed), but it may well also be of a piece with it. It is in this vein that "[t]ranscribing both the visible and invisible forms of violence poses a lasting challenge to mimesis"[38] as the definitive and hegemonic approach to reading modern Chinese literature within its historical context. Yet here we still have a dialectical move, since for the Chinese intellectuals that Wang studies, writing and

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[37] David Wang, "Introduction," xix.

[38] David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

reading remain potentially transformative of historical trauma. Thus Wang articulates his figural monster of history as a close kin to Benjamin's angel:

> monstrosity may serve as the precondition of all civilized self-understanding. Such an understanding prods one to face the fearsome nature of the Chinese modern, which is as much a revolt against as it is a recapitulation of its historical monstrosity. What I hope this book accomplishes, accordingly, is to project the ferocious anomaly of contemporary intellectual life back upon historicity itself, sighting but not necessarily taming the monster that is Chinese history.[39]

At once revolting against and recapitulating the angel of history, Wang's compelling dialecticization of historical experience and historicity does not simply face the ruined past from the present. Instead, the ruins that Wang's monster figurally faces-without-a-face are, appositely, the ruins of historicity that ground its very figuration from the beginning.

Working along similar but perhaps more humanist lines, Wang Ban argues for a re-calibrated and proliferated relationship between tradition and modernity via the alternative structures offered by traumatic memory. Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter to the influence of Benjamin upon the Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s, with an especial focus on Benjamin's conceptions of allegory and experience:

> Remarkably, writers and critics have been drawn to Benjamin's idea of allegory as a persuasive way of understanding history and its shocks. That the notion of allegory, among others, could be so favored indicates its fecund

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[39] Ibid, 13.

> capacity in addressing perplexities of certain historical times… The allegorical structure is symptomatic of the mind penetrated by forces of history… The turn to Benjamin helps to find a language to describe this work of memory.[40]

Wang argues that the Chinese-modern reading of Benjamin is a primarily traumatic one, drawn to Benjamin's work through an attempt to come to terms with historical trauma and its structural repetitions *qua* memory. These fragmented repetitions are symptoms of the residue from the traumatic event that cannot be fully assimilated. Thus for Wang the aesthetic work also takes on the task of providing a language for this problem: situated within the ruins in which it is written, the art work will equally be in ruins, in a mimetic *as well as* allegorical relation to the problem it describes. This provides one basis for what Wang calls a critical historical consciousness, built not on the activist and revolutionary fervor of the May Fourth movement, but on the allegorical structure of experience, framed in Benjamin's writing as the shock of the modern. Later in my chapter, I will examine in greater detail a moment in Chang's text in which she is particularly concerned with the possibility of "the mind penetrated by the forces of history," but presented with a drastically different modality for this affective and aesthetic force. For present purposes, I note only that the relation between "mind" (subjectivity) and history here is framed as an aesthetically and ideologically forceful one.

Though not explicitly a reader of Walter Benjamin, Shu-mei Shih nevertheless implicitly engages his conception of modernity when she suggests that the linear

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[40] Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 94-95.

and progressivist time of western modernity was an enabling condition for Chinese agents and writers. Contemporary intellectuals used the linear concept of time in order to articulate and legitimate an opposition between "modernity" (universal west) and "tradition" (self-isolating Chinese). Tradition then became a bulwark to be opposed for the work of building a newer and cosmopolitan China as a decisive breakage from the old. Just as the Chinese moderns produced and translated *modernity*, so too did they produce and translate *tradition*, both of which gained their oppositional character through the thought-forms afforded by western thinking. The model of temporality here is a model of a radical break between past and present, adopted proleptically in order to fulfill its own terms: yet this is a structure that is not so much tautological as it is a product of a discursive approach to constructing and reconstructing time as an organization of historical experience.[41] The argument then partly follows the course of Benedict Anderson's emphasis on linear and calendrical time—drawn from Benjamin's "homogeneous, empty time"—as a shareable nucleus for imagining and defining a modern nation state,[42] though Shih is also careful to point out that the nation is hardly the only operative unit in China's transnational and global aspirations. Further, maintaining throughout her account Lydia Liu's similar observation that the relation between China and western modernity (including its triangulated mediation via Japan) cannot be reduced to a one-way mode of cultural domination, Shih's specific concern lies with how strands of Chinese modernism differ from the non-Chinese

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[41] I put further pressure on this problem in my chapter on Yang Lian.

[42] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York and London: Verso, 2006), 24-26.

modernisms they strategically appropriate in order to serve ends both aesthetic and ideological, tacit and open.

Yet even as this fraught modernity was proffered as the dominant narrative for a new China, the gesture was still troubled by its problematic origination in the western world, requiring significant adjustment to account for China's status in the global and transnational context. As Shih goes on to explain,

> [t]he new ideology allow[ed] May Fourth intellectuals to harbor a fantasy of equality with the West. If time was the only measure of difference between China and the West, China could become an equal partner in a world dominated by the West by simply catching up as fast as it could. Disregarding the reified hierarchy embedded in the Western conception of linear temporality—which measured the West's superiority through its canonization of such dichotomies as "advanced" versus "backward," freezing the Third World in the eternal past—May Fourth intellectuals professed an optimism toward the possibility of becoming "contemporary" or coterminous with the West.[43]

What comes into focus here is the way in which the desire for geopolitical and cultural parity is transformed into a desire for contemporaneity: rather than being situated at different points in history, the fantasy here is markedly one of two entities being in the very same time. Previously a diachronic dichotomy per western terms, the fantasy here is instead for a synchronic dichotomy.

Relatedly, Jing Tsu's perspicuous analysis of Chinese cultural and national

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[43] Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 50-51.

identity-formation renames Shih's readings of a fantasy of parity with the west as yet another symptom of a broader cultural sense of collective failure. Tsu stresses the traumatic forms and functions of failure, humiliation, and melancholia as they impel the desirous work of nation-building and the subjective interiority accompanying it in the Chinese context.[44] Such a failure would thus also be a failure to enter into a full modernity, which then insistently haunts and forestalls the nationalist installation of the modern as such. Noting that the persistent rehearsal of cultural failure has paradoxically (though perhaps unsurprisingly) precluded a critical examination of existing narratives that culminate in Chinese triumphalism or

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[44] This might be obscure to someone unfamiliar with the Chinese context: perhaps the best example of the dynamic that Tsu is describing is the legislation passed in the P.R.C. in 2001 mandating a "national humiliation day" that would serve as a "day of national defense education." Presenting a revealing symptom, legislators have been unable to decide on a single date or event defining their foundational national shame: discussions vacillated between 7 September 1901 (the signing of the Boxer Protocol), 7 July 1937 (the Marco Polo bridge incident, commonly taken as marking the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War), and 18 September 1931 (the Mukden/Manchurian Incident, in which the Japanese invaded Chinese-occupied Manchuria—this known in the P.R.C. simply as the September 18 Incident). As of now, a decision has not been reached. In recent years, the anniversaries of *all* these events have been commemorated in one way or another, sometimes upon the reopening of old geopolitical wounds between the P.R.C., Japan, and/or the United States. In her introduction, Tsu also examines the nationalist rhetoric of the 'century of humiliation' (1839-1949—from the start of the opium war to the takeover of the Communist party) as it was defined by the presence of foreign powers such as the Japanese, British, and Americans. See Tsu, p. 233. In my observation, a similar mode of legitimation-through-failure has been in play in other Asian countries as well: the first example ready at hand is Singapore's national narrative, which is premised on getting ejected from the then-Federation of Malaya, to the point that National Day Parades annually replay an old newsreel of a weeping Prime Minister lamenting the failure of the merger. In the cherished national narrative, this failure and the resilience that emerged therefrom precipitated Singapore's first unready footsteps into independence and (phoenix-like) eventual governmental-capitalist miracle. North Korea's government similarly uses the discourse of cultural failure to legitimate its self-isolation from the aggressions of foreign powers, but evidently other aspects of its governance differ from Singapore's in fundamental ways.

exceptionalism, Tsu observes that amplifying failure as a modality further "shows how the consecrated object to which one professes allegiance—be it the nation, the loved one, or authority—is offered to the threat of destruction in order for that allegiance to be possible."[45] (31). This formulation strikingly rehearses the structure of Benjamin's thinking that has been my refrain, although here destruction can only loom as a constitutive "threat" rather than as a necessary *fait acccompli*. Eschewing the familiar paradigms patterning the work of critics before her—such as the melancholic dialectic of an ideological domination irreducibly grounding a utopian resistance, or critical denunciations of false universalisms—Tsu instead invokes a logic-structure of the parasite, which denounces the emptiness of the host upon which it erects itself and survives. For her, beginning from failure as an analytical point of departure

> takes universalism to its logical conclusion… Taken to its desired extreme, the absolute embodiment of power, as we have seen, is never attainable in its ideal form. In this way, failure builds itself on the impossible commitment to ideality. It considers how this impossible commitment engenders a different order of recognition parasitic to the aspirations of ideality and productive of a contrary sense of sovereignty… This self-reflection is parasitic, for it is unintended by the structure of domination but nonetheless contributes to its felicity.[46]

Tsu's argument lies very close to mine in that it too locates itself precisely at the

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[45] Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 31.

[46] Ibid, 224.

breakdown of "structures of domination": in Tsu's narrative, these structures are the structures of nation and collective cultural identity—of which "history" is a decisive part—whose progressivist and teleological aspirations turn out to (felicitously, chancily) buckle upon arrival at the *telos*. Here then is a vision of history that highlights the Cretan-paradox conditioning the event-status of the historical event: if an obsessional relation to a prior failure turns out to undergird my sense of being modern via history, then *have* I ever been modern?

In my argument, what strains the notion of history is precisely the lapse from modernity that Chang's work affirms. For my purposes, Tsu's interest in the melancholic affect of failure is doubly interesting as something that Chang problematizes and calls into question: though not a reader of Chang, Tsu, with her focus on melancholia as a constitutive parasite for history, then recalls Rey Chow's readings of Chang's "refusal to tame or suppress even the ugliest and bleakest emotions… an externalization of emotions that is at once refined and direct."[47]

Yet where Tsu makes melancholic failure radically constitutive and productive of Chinese cultural identity, Chow would precisely wonder if this assimilation is possible at all, especially in the specific context of Chang's work. And here too is where my work comes closest to Chow's argument. Of the influential critics of the historicist paradigm I engage in detail here, Chow is the only thinker to work through an extensive consideration of Chang's writing as it precipitates her own critical and theoretical interventions. On a general level, Chow sets herself "a double task—that of criticizing both the hegemonic status of Western theoretical

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[47] Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 113.

thinking and the entrenched ways of interpretation in the field of Chinese literature"[48] from within her irreducibly doubled subjectivity as a westernized ethnic subject. In this doubled subjectivity, the forced entry into the oppressive field of ethnicity has always been mediated by the givenness of western thinking, through the historical accident of birth and postcolonial statehood. For Chow, then, it is as much a matter of *what* she reads as much as *how* she reads, choices that emerge from out of her lived experience: her critique resides precisely in staging a dialectical confrontation between "western" theory and "Chinese" texts. Deemed perverse and overly-personalized by those who might seek to keep the "east" free from the encroachments of the west, Chow's gesture then forcefully transgresses institutionalized norms, throwing into relief the inherent instability of the east-west dialectic. In Chow's account, one such entrenched way of interpretation for Chinese literature is history and the historicist-naturalist approach: for her, history is "the pre-dominant discipline—and disciplining instrument—in China studies."[49]

When reading Chang's work, then, Chow focuses particularly on the figure and signifying potential of the feminized and affectively-charged detail as it is isolated within the confines of narrative—especially Chang's literary renditions of lush detail-oriented descriptions and her implicitly meta-textual reflections on the "astonishingly pointless" details in traditional Chinese women's clothing. In Chow's argument, the detail in all its pointlessness and tacit resistance to speculative thought (which I here provisionally align with the historico-realist master narrative)

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[48] Ibid, xii.

[49] Ibid, xvii.

then marks the incomplete, residual, and ultimately unassimilable work of femininity within a masculinist epistemic structure, "a part that is always already broken off from a presumed 'whole'"[50] but which is itself charged with a sensuous and affective immediacy that renders it a whole unto itself. Chow's more subtle sense of narrative—developed through her readings of Chang in contradistinction with three other nationalistically correct male authors—then frames it as "not the means of nation-building but the process of detail production that insistently demolishes such a patriotic project."[51]

As she acknowledges, Chow's argument is influenced by that of the well-known feminist critic Naomi Schor, whose work has laid the ground for conjoining detail with misogyny and the feminine. Yet Chow specifies this insight for her reading of Chang by honing in on Chang's insistent indifference to moralistic policing of affect, manifested in what seems like the provision of utterly gratuitous details of amoral response: examples Chow provides include Chang's accounts of hungrily devouring street food at the end of the war in Hong Kong while a bloated and rotting human corpse lay nearby; and the joyful relief that swept through the war hospital in which she was working after a terminally ill patient eventually died. To these I would also add the somewhat less staggering metaphor of the short nap that opened my chapter, although this was notably offered as a metaphor rather than fact. In these textual moments that are rigidly literal in their observation, and which vigilantly articulate the minutiae of cruelty without alibi, Chang's detail rejects the

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[50] Ibid, 114.

[51] Ibid, 96.

moralistic humanism dominating the rhetoric of Chinese modernity and revolutionary history. The inconsequential affective detail is thus cruel on two fronts: in its subject matter, and in its narrative relation of itself. This is exactly why Chow vigilantly refuses to endow it with consequence, writing instead that

> [the] tension [produced between Chang's writings and the "historical"] offers us an alternative approach to history by resisting the lure of monumental structures of feeling. It forces us to rethink the assumption of modernity-as-revolution in the details of form, which are defined not as the technicalities of aesthetics but as the fragmented symptoms of historically produced but epistemologically unrecognized conflicts.[52]

Where Chow suggests (in a presumedly psychoanalytic register) that these symptoms might give "an alternative approach to history," I would instead ask *if* one should be approaching history at all. A symptom may offer a diagnosis, but one might still ask after the impulse to seek or offer a cure. In the section that follows, I examine one such instance of a historically produced and epistemologically unrecognized conflict: translation as a force in the modernization of Chinese.

Into the modern: translation and the making of "unnecessary distinctions"

It is by now a commonplace to suggest that modernity emerged in China as the product of a more concerted (though still asymmetrical) engagement with western thinking as mediated by western powers. The definable elements of Chinese modernity are thus positioned as in some sense *already translated* or transplanted

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[52] Ibid, 120.

from the west into the Chinese situation: feminism; science; democracy; the vernacular; and to some extent, prose and realist narrative. Yet as Shu-mei Shih observes in my preceding account, modernity is not simply *produced* by such cultural intersections, but furthermore turns the product back onto the process of its formation: modernity provides a temporal ground on which the narrative of historical progress is founded. Tautologically, modernity is thus—at least in the terms of this argument—the mediating *site* of translation, even as it is also the *product* of translation.

This tautology is literalized too in the realm of linguistic translation, in which the modernization of Chinese into a simpler vernacular harbored several pragmatic debts to the western languages with which the Chinese had substantial contact; in some cases, as Chang explains in the passages that follow, neologisms in the new modern Chinese were in fact quite simply constituted through moments of translation. The language of Modern Chinese too is the mediating site *and* product of translation.

As a writer whose resistance to historicity is well-known, Chang's relationship to (literal, linguistic) translation would thus seem to bear considerable weight for her status as one of modern Chinese literature's great moderns. Yet curiously this triangulated relationship—between translation, modernity, and Chang—is seldom discussed in the scholarship.[53] One plausible reason might be that her

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[53] See Shuang Shen, "Betrayal, Impersonation, and Bilingualism: Eileen Chang's Self-Translation," in *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres,* ed. Louie Kam (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012). Shen's account of bilingualism and betrayal as complex modes of performing identity and belonging in Chang's work is an important exception to this rule. However, Shen does not note its complicating potential for the question of modernity.

sparse remarks on translation were mostly made later in her career, as a preface to her English translation of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* as well as some of her other self-translations after moving to the United States. These remarks generally seem conventional, interested largely in the possibility of close equivalence between two languages with an emphasis on "readability," elegance of style, and relevance to the interests of the posited readership. (Whether the translations themselves eventually answer to or fulfill her stated intentions is of course a very different matter altogether; some do betray evidence of an attempt to vex or thwart the English language on the levels of figure, syntax, and so forth.)[54]

Yet in a short and witty essay simply titled "对现代中文的一点小意见" [*Duì xiàndàizhōngwén dè yìdiǎn xiáoyìjiàn* / "A Few Small Observations on Modern Chinese"[55]], Chang's commentary offers an explicit and far more nuanced thinking of translation as an epistemological apparatus that parses difference linguistically. Where her translator-prefaces often take translatability for granted, her observations and proposals in this periodical essay precisely center on translatability as a problematic obstacle, examining in particular some of the

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[54] Chang has also mentioned, in the "Modern Chinese" essay, a gesture similar to Ezra Pound's *Cantos* that lodges the original and foreign words within the translated text: "地名船名索性用原文，我看了总有一种失败的感觉。但是英文字母夹在方块字中间，十分醒目，不懂外文的读者一定反而欢迎。换了音译的名称，没头没尾夹在上下文里，反正也记不得"（113) [When the original text is used for place- or ship-names, I always read it with a sense of failure. But when English alphabets are wedged between angular characters, they provide a visual jolt, so contrarily readers who don't know foreign languages would surely welcome it. If names were translated by sound [into Chinese characters whose sound resembles the English name - ed.] and seamlessly wedged into the flow of the writing, they become unmemorable anyway. (My translation)]

[55] 《重访边城》(北京：北京十月文艺出版社，2012).

ingenious changes and untranslatable difficulties that arise within the language of modern Chinese, especially as it has pragmatically constituted itself throughout modernization. The rather prescriptive tone of the title and essay is suggestive, especially as Chang opens and closes her remarks by noting both the smallness *and* importance of the problems she observes and names:

> 这题目看了吓人一跳，需要赶紧声明，“小意见”并不是自谦的“人微言轻”的话，而实在是极细微不足道的，自己也觉得小题大做，因而一直想写都没写。但也不会是鸡毛蒜皮。小鱼刺与细碎的鸡骨头最容易卡喉咙，深知于可以致命。[56]
>
> In case this title startles, a hasty clarification: these “small observations” are not so named for being a rhetorical exercise in humble self-effacement, but are actually themselves minute and insignificant, I too feel as if I am making a mountain out of a molehill, and so have never written about them despite always wanting to. But it’s not all chicken feathers and garlic peel [inessential scraps - ed.]. It’s easiest for the small burrs of fish bones and splintered

[56] Ibid, 107.

> chicken bones to get lodged in the throat, deep enough and it can be fatal.[57]
>
> 不必要的区别与标点越来越多，必要的没有，是现今中文的一个缺点。[58]
>
> Unnecessary distinctions and punctuation pile on and on, the necessary ones we don't have any of, this is a weakness of the Chinese language today. (My translation)

The fish bones and chicken splinters are not rendered significant as instrumental elements of either a delicious dish (so to speak) or the body in which they accidentally end up; they merely exist in an irritating, distracting, yet possibly fatal relation to the body that attempts to ingest them. Chang's emphasis on the apparently small and still potentially consequential burrs that obstruct the

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[57] A few provisos about my translations are necessary here. First, I follow Chang's habit elsewhere of translating idiomatic Chinese more or less literally and word for word, resulting in what reads like a heavily figural translation in English—this is a vital aspect of the relation between English and Chinese that I examine in greater detail in my chapter on Fenollosa and Pound, and which is visible in Chang's translation of her *The Golden Cangue.* Second, because the deixis of the subject-position 'I' is a fraught matter for translation between Modern Chinese and English —as discussed later in the chapter, in conversation with Lydia Liu—I have refrained from invisibly supplying the subject-position in my translations (a departure from convention in Chinese-English translations). Instead, I have scrupulously used "I" (and "me," "my," "myself") *only* where Chang uses the Chinese 我 [*wǒ*] or 自己 [*zìjí*]. If this reads as informal and fragmented to the average English-speaking ear, then that is also felicitously suited to the conversational and intimate affect that Chang adopts in her essays. Third, and more abstractly, I have sought to maintain the cadences of Chang's sentences—particularly the variations between lengths of clauses—and their alternately agglutinating, sudden, sinuous, elegant, and awkward movements. This aspect of Chang's measured prose style often betrays her debt to and learning in the Classical tradition of poetry and poetics, and is (in my judgment) an important aspect of her thinking and self-performance as rendered in prose writing. The reader may judge that this produces grammatically incorrect, syntactically awkward, or inelegantly punctuated English: this too is broadly consonant with those of Chang's translations that "foreignize" the English language.

[58] Ibid, 115.

communicatory functions of the language certainly seems to be of a piece with Chow's discussion of the detail in Chang, in which the speaker's obsessive and unapologetic regard of the detail is itself a speculum for the broader malaise in which it is only a fragment. Yet in this specific text, the particular details that marshal her attention are the "unnecessary distinctions and punctuation" that crop up as the Chinese language encounters the difference of the other, yet these are held as different from the "necessary" distinctions that aid in clarifying meaning in reading. In a nuance on the Saussurean view of language, then, Chang points towards the modern Chinese language as a system of differences with no positive terms, whose differences have always already intersected with another system of differences, also and similarly with no positive terms. What Chow calls the unassimilable detail is equally atomized within this system: the detail is not just a discrete element, but in its very cutting constitutes an interval of difference that sets it by the wayside.

The argument then recalls and generalizes Haun Saussy's observation that Chinese becomes described as a "language founded on an absence"[59] of grammar only when it was the object of western philologists, interacting with their assumptions and epistemological priorities: the paradigm of loss and lack (rendered most clearly in English-language critical discussions of Chinese "lacking pronouns, grammar" etc., as seen below) is only relative to the presumed positivity invisibly assumed by the western observer. Through this muddied lens, Saussy argues, the

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[59] Haun Saussy, "Always Multiple Translation, Or, How the Chinese Language Lost Its Grammar," in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations,* ed. Lydia Liu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 108.

western translator fails to note the complex idiosyncrasies at work within Chinese because he does not impute the lack to his own language. What begins as a interval of difference between two languages is then epistemologically and descriptively transformed into a unilateral lack. In Chang's account, it seems as if a similar absence is at work when the Chinese translator encounters a western text and *also* reflexively locates the loss within the Chinese language; yet as Chang notices in the inventive and gratuitous proliferations of new words and punctuation, the absences of the Chinese language become quasi-generative (though stopping short of being instrumentally useful) in part through the consciousness of lack—paralleling as well Tsu's argument on the constitutive work of failure for national identity.[60]

To demonstrate: one of the major examples in Chang's essay is a long discussion on pronouns in *both* the Chinese and English languages. This feature of the relationship between English and Chinese has not escaped the attention of critic Lydia Liu, but her work does not discuss Chang's essay explicitly. Liu's discussion centers on modes of constituting and legitimizing the national canons of modern Chinese literature through what she calls "translingual practice": the linguistic changes effected in languages—with Chinese as her particular interest—when they encounter languages radically different from their own and cross boundaries into the other (translation thus comprises a vital subset of this). In a chapter extensively discussing the first-person deictic in modern Chinese, Liu is particularly interested

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[60] One might speculatively note that Chang's subtlety on this point can be attributed to her lifelong bilingualism, though it is of course difficult to prove through evidentiary means. I would also be wary of valorizing or fetishizing bi- or multilingualism from a straightforwardly western-liberal perspective, and this is far from my intent here.

in its status as a literary trope around which deictic relations are drawn, yet these coalesce around something that is properly and absolutely translatable:

> What is the deictic status of the first-person pronoun in modern vernacular Chinese fiction? Without risking too much generalization, let us briefly recall that, in the texts of 郭沫若 [*Guō Mòruò*], 施蛰存 [*Shī Zhécún*], and 郁达夫 [*Yǘ Dáfū*]discussed in the preceding chapter, the first person narrator always finds himself embedded in an interlocking set of symbolic correlatives: I/she (gender), the real/the fantastic (psychological), now/then (temporal), here/there (spatial), the living/the dead (metaphysical), Chinese/foreign (national/linguistic), the modern/the traditional (historical), and the like, each being organized around the desire of the male narrator *wǒ*. It is important to bear in mind that these deictic constructions no longer reflect a purely linguistic reality that Benveniste identifies in inflected languages, but offer themselves up as literary tropes that cut across linguistic boundaries. They are deictic tropes, so to speak, of gender, subjectivity, time, and space that are constructed as such to represent the Chinese experience of the modern while never ceasing to make reference to non-Chinese languages and literatures. *Wǒ* in modern vernacular texts signifies at least two things: it acts as a first-person singular in the language, and it carries the signified of translated deixis. It is, therefore, a perfectly translatable pronoun.[61]

As a pronoun, the modern vernacular "我" [*wǒ* / "I"] is "perfectly translatable" for Liu because it provides the deictic grounding upon which the textual tropological

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[61] Liu, *Translingual Practice,* 155-156.

system will arrange and rearrange itself when the two language-systems quietly encounter and refer to one another. What interests Liu here is the explicit and empirically true crossing of the first person singular from the non-Chinese languages into the modern Chinese language, precisely as a carrier and index of its modernity.

Yet I would ask, with Chang, if the first person "translated deixis" was so translatable in the first place—especially given the structures of signification that are built on its back. In this vein, Chang humorously writes:

> 我一向最欣赏中文的所谓"秃头句子"——旧诗里与口语内一样多，译诗者例必代加"我"字。第三人称的 one 较近原意。——这种轻灵飘逸是中文的一个特色。[62]
>
> I have always most admired the so-called 'bald-headed sentences'[63] in the Chinese language—just as frequently for the old [classical] poetry as in oral vernacular colloquialisms, translators of poetry have routinely had to supply the 'I' [*wo*]. The third person "one" [Chang renders this in English - ed.] is closer to the original meaning. This type of ungrounded drift [in subject-position] is a special feature of the Chinese language. (My translation)

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[62] 《重访边城》, 114.

[63] Chang's little joke is accessible only to someone who reads *both* Chinese and English. It is likely derived from the English idiom: to 'speak baldly' is to speak without restraint and rhetorical ornamentation, in a way that might be excessively blunt. When writing her text in the Chinese, Chang translates the English idiom quite literally, and humorously recalls the image of a bald *head* specifically—and so in translating it back into the English I have maintained her humorously literal image. Tangentially, Chang here seems to edge towards a kind of paradox: the lack of a first-person 'I' becomes read as 'bald' and straight-shooting, even though the origin and intention of this speech is, per her own definition, radically uncertain. Her admiration here of 'bald speech' resonates also with the unguarded approach to love and revolution examined in the next section.

For Chang, the perennial difficulty of translating Chinese lies not simply in supplying the "I" in an invisible and routine way, but further, in even knowing which pronoun to use in the first place. Instead of the "I," she tacitly and non-prescriptively offers another English alternative for translating the subjective deixis of classical Chinese verse and vernacular writing: the third person impersonal pronoun "one." The effect of such a translation might be two-fold: it evades the direct interpolation of a first-person "I," and further defers the stabilizing potential of this gesture, such that "one" cannot find a stable resting ground for the subject of enunciation. In this case, what I with Chang have so far been calling the "third person pronoun" cannot even go by this name in a strict sense: it would no longer be "third" but rather a kind of multiplied enunciation, in which there is more than one possible subject position without any priority of origin.

This argument is rendered even more complex when Chang endeavors to move past the consideration of the "first person" pronoun and into a consideration of the second and third person pronouns, which are deictically premised on the "I" but have had to be inflected with sexual difference when translated from non-Chinese languages. In comparison to these second and third person pronouns, the "I" is not only perfectly translatable, it is also perfectly sexless, neutral, a "one" that is precisely not one because it is universally without difference. This property of the first person pronoun cannot be applied to the second and third persons. As Chang writes, in a passage that is utterly untranslatable into a single equivalent English passage, but might be translatable in a longer exposition:

最初提倡白话的时候，第三人称只有一个"他"。创造"她"字该是为了翻译上

> 实际的需要，否则有时候无法译。西方各国“他”“她”二字不同音，无论载对白或叙事中，一听、一望而知是指谁。都译为“他”，会使人入坠五里雾中。此后更进一步，又造了个“妳”字，只有少数人采用，近二十年来才流行。偶有男女大段对白，而不说明是谁说什么，男方口中的“妳”可以藉此认出发言人是谁，联带的上下几次的人都清楚了。不过难得遇到这种场面，而“你”字又常误植为“妳”，更把人闹糊涂了。——“妳”字倒从来不误作“你”。。。
>
> 美国新女权运动的一个笑话，是把“且门”（主席）改为“且泊森”“赛尔斯门”（推消员或店员）改为“赛尔斯泊森”，因为“门”的意思是“男子”，难道女主席女店员就不算？“泊森”是无性别的人。——其实“门”的另一义也是“人”，两性都在内。——与“妳”刚巧相反，一个是要把女人包括进去，一个是要把女人分出来——男女有别。中国人之间的女权论者也很活跃，倒没有人反对“妳”字。[64]

What frustrates the English translator in this sequence lies in a twofold problem: (1) the graphic radicals that compose Chinese characters on a basic level, and (2) the fact that there are several homophones and what I have elsewhere in this dissertation translated as “harmophones” in the language.[65] Chang is playing on instances of script reform in the modernization of Chinese writing, in which radicals in already-established words might be substituted to form new words with new implications; the resultant two words would be sounded in the same way, but are visually differentiable. The two specific instances offered here are the words “她 / 他” [*tā* / “she,” “he”] and “妳 / 你” [*nǐ* / “you”]: in Chinese, both were initially established as words with the radical for ‘human,’ and thus tacitly understood as universal. The shift first began, Chang explains, when translating western texts into Chinese: as many western texts have two different words for a feminine “she” and a masculine “he,” Chinese translators felt the need to also translate a similar difference

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[64] Ibid, 109.

[65] See p. 101, fn. 92.

by masculinizing the existing term, and swopping out the "human" radical for one meaning "woman, female." The result, then, is an imported nuance where none existed before, premised on a necessity of clarity and precision in translation: the words for a previously universal "他" ["he"] and newly particularized "她" ["she"] would have been visually and graphically differentiated, while sounding the same. This has the virtue, Chang claims, of clear attribution when translating or writing dialogs between a woman and a man (such as when dialogs oscillate between "he said," "she said," and so on.)

Yet what began as a presumed necessity in this translingual contact with western texts became somewhat more enigmatic or even gratuitous[66] when the very same gesture was repeated in the similar Chinese word for "you," which as Chang notes did not take off in popularity until the last twenty years. Here, Chang somewhat sarcastically explains that it might have been helpful to have had a feminine "妳" ["you"] and masculine "你" ["you"] in large swathes of dialog between a man and woman, in much the same way that it was helpful with the "he" and "she": if a man—as previously marked—was speaking to a feminine-you, then that would help to clarify his own subject-position as a man (!). Yet this is a fairly uncommon scenario, as Chang notes; further, the masculinized-you frequently gets mistranscribed as the feminine-you, and not vice versa (though Chang does not name any examples that she might have in mind in making this claim), causing even more confusion in the misattribution of gender.

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[66] To my knowledge, no western languages maintain a feminine-masculine distinction for the second person pronoun.

Such a strikingly exclusionary gesture finds an interesting counterpoint in Chang's reading of the feminist movement in the United States, in which the naming and discursive gestures have instead sought to *include* women within a newly formed gender-neutral category. Her examples are the difference between the English words "chairman/chairperson" and "salesman/salesperson." Here, the analytical movement from "man" to the gender-neutral "person" is charted as beginning with man-qua-male, moving to personhood, before briefly and passingly recalling that Man-qua-human could historically also be a universal concept that includes both sexes and gender. Yet Chang frames her account of this inclusionary gesture in the U.S. context as a little bit of a joke, simply because the English words like "chairman" have been transliterated into Chinese words that sound just like their English pronunciations, with no regard for what those Chinese words might mean. Thus in Chinese "chairman" has been rendered as "且门" [*qiěmén*], where the word for "man/Man" is transcribed as "门" [*mén*] meaning "door" in Chinese. The little visual joke that Chang makes clear for the Chinese reader, then, is that the Chinese character for "door" ends up meaning both "man" and "Man" when run through the circuit of translation: from the sound of the English, into the sound of the Chinese, and then into the semantics of the Chinese.

While it is not my intention to make too much out of this revolving "door," what seems clear in Chang's thinking of these translingual differences is the way in which the modern vernacular "I" may not in fact be so perfectly translatable and neutral, especially insofar as its deixis is compromised by its tropological relations with the second and third persons. If Chang's commentary on the second and third

person pronouns hold, and if the deixis of the "I" is tropologically figured in relation to these pronouns, then by implication the first person pronoun is also riven and shot through with the sexual difference manufactured in part through the mechanisms of translation. Even the "I" that is routinely supplied in both English and Chinese writing might well turn out to be even closer to the "one" (qua pronoun) previously described, in which more than one subjectivity might be at play simultaneously: here, however, the more-than-one structure directly addresses and implicates a you, a him, a she, and yet others.

Translation from western languages into the modernity of Chinese thus brings about a series of unnecessary distinctions. These distinctions fragment and disperse the already unstable structures of address within both Classical and Modern Chinese, cultivating and contouring a space of exception that is unbeholden to sovereign speech and the suspension of law. From *what* are these exceptions excepted? And what might be at stake in these contours of exception? In the section that follows, I stake these structural distinctions and intervals of language within Chang's rewriting of modernity and historicity, with particular attention to the points at which the structural correspondence might falter or collapse.

Duìzhào: opposition, contrast, correspondence, interval

Chang's critical presentation of her own work seems at once to cleave closely to and move away from the dialectical structures discussed thus far. Her very brief essay

"自己的文章" [*Zìjǐ dè wénzhāng* / "Writing of One's Own" (1944)[67]] has become a canonized part of Chinese literary thought: in it, Chang is responding to her politically-minded detractors in general, and in particular to a mixed review of her recently serialized and published book 《连环套》[*Liánhuán tào* / *Chained Links*]. The literary critic and translator Fu Lei admires Chang for the sophistication of her narrative techniques, but reproaches her for the apparently trivial and domestic concerns of her women characters, which to his mind makes a mockery of the politically charged and aesthetically satisfying commitments from earlier realist writing of the May Fourth movement. If Lu Xun and Mao Dun can write with such excellence *and* contribute to political ends by appealing to the sensibilities of the masses, is it not a waste of Chang's talent *not* to do so?

In response to these charges, Chang composes one of very few essays in which she takes her accusers seriously by non-ironically explaining the intentions motivating her wry and mercurial style. On the matter of how a writer should manage the difficult relation between aesthetic craft and ideological ends, she writes:

> 我以为文学理论是出在文学作品之后的。。。在这样衡量之际，需得记住在文学的发展过程中作品与理论乃如马之两骖，或前或后，互相推进。理论并非高高坐在上面，手执鞭子的御者。现在似乎是文学作品贫乏，理论也贫乏。我发现弄文学的人向来是注重人生飞扬的一面，而忽视人生安稳的一面。其

[67] Chang's title is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," which is a likely (though not certain) touchstone given her knowledge of western literature. Chang's insistence on an aesthetic space that is set apart from and conditions the broader sweep of history finds a germane counterpoint in Woolf's similarly feminist interest in the historical and epistemological exclusion of women writers from the patriarchal tradition of English literature, although they certainly valence the terms and implications of this exclusion in strikingly different ways.

> 实，后者正是前者的底子。又如，他们多是注重人生的斗争，而忽略和谐的一面。其实，人是为了要求和谐的一面才斗争的。[68]
>
> I have always thought that literary theory [*wénxüé lǐlùn*] comes after literary works [*wénxüé zuòpín*]… as we go about this process of gauging our creations, we must also remember that, in the process of literary development, work and theory are like two horses sharing the same yoke, jockeying back and forth as they drive each other forward. Theory is not a driver seated on high, brandishing a whip. These days, it seems that literary works are impoverished, and so literary theory is impoverished as well. I have discovered that people who like to write literature usually concentrate on the uplifting and dynamic aspects of life and neglect those that are placid and static, though the latter is the ground of the former. That is, they concentrate for the most part on struggle and neglect the harmonious aspects of life. In reality, people only struggle in order to attain harmony.[69]

Importantly, what Chang calls "literary theory" [*wénxüé lǐlùn*] is semantically and contextually coded as rational, critical, and hermeneutic discourse about literature; her politically- and historically-minded interlocutors would have been a subset of this. Indeed, Chang's argument may also recall New-Critically-trained C.T. Hsia's declaration (examined in this chapter's first section) that literature should not be a "handmaiden" to history, here re-positioned along similarly gendered lines in the driver-horses analogy, providing a trope for anti-masculinist anti-sovereignty. In this

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[68] 《流言》(北京：北京十月文艺出版社，2012), 91.

[69] Eileen Chang, *Written on Water*, trans. Andrew Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 15-16.

moment in Chang's writing, it is thus not difficult to see why critics have sought to recuperate her through the dialectical operation: in this widely cited essay, she evidently gives them much ground on which to stand. Yet unlike the vast majority of them, Chang's dialectical gestures are consistently inconsistent—indeed, like two restless horses paired together—and never content to repose on the side of literary theory or literary work. Theory and work are yoked asymmetrically onto the other pairing of the dynamic or the static, and then onto struggle or harmony: all of these pairings never result in a product either within or without their shifting dichotomies. The "placid and static" are on one hand the "ground" of dynamic struggle while also the barely perceptible and forgotten goal of that struggle. Theory is on one hand derivative of the literary work, while on another hand figured as a fellow horse (presumably not the derived offspring of that partner horse) jockeying alongside its other as a way of spurring progress. Just as one dialectic is sublated/ overcome, its result or product too becomes subject to a new negation, or becomes itself a negating force—and then on and on.

If this can be said to be dialectical, then it is at least a much less brutalized version of the dialectic than is commonly ascribed to Hegel (whose own dialectical thinking is in fact similarly performative in its explication), especially within the Chinese context. Given the somewhat idiosyncratic sequence that leads up to the demanded and longed-for "struggle," one might reasonably wonder if Chang's vision of her "placid and static" writing is indeed the goal of her writing at all. If, in her analysis, "struggle" is grounded by harmony and moreover is nothing but the means to a harmonious end, and if Chang's goal as she claims is to supply the "harmonious"

ghost note neglected by the dominant writers of the day, then it seems to follow that Chang is structurally supplying, or at least pointing towards, both the alpha and the omega of that historical struggle, reminiscent (at least structurally) of the modernity offered by Walter Benjamin.

Given these intriguing ideas about the relationship between literary work and literary theory, how does Chang conceptualize the politico-historical work-without-force of her lauded narrative techniques? Here, critics have focused their discussions on an enigmatically named technique that Chang first formulates in the same essay. Presented as "参差的对照" [*cēncī dè duìzhào*], the phrase has been variously translated as "equivocal contrast" (trans. Andrew Jones) and "uneven oppositions" (trans. Xiaojue Wang).[70] *Cēncī*—a difficult phrase only translatable as a combination of disorder, unevenness, equivocation, asymmetry, ambivalence, error, nuance, shades of differentiation, or a lack of harmony (depending on its context)—is much more widely used within the classical tradition, suggesting not only Chang's fascination with the near-archaic, but also the quasi-contingent ways in which her idea of the aesthetic is differentiated and excepted from the reaches of history.

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[70] Leo Ou-fan Lee picks up on this difficulty as well in his *Shanghai Modern*, noting that *cēncī dè duìzhào* is "hard to render, as it implies both an aesthetic concept and a narrative technique of contrasting two things not in a mutually oppositional way but in a sort of uneven, mismatched fashion. It is a term of [Chang's] own creation which is never fully explained but merely insinuated…. I would like to borrow a term from the Hong Kong critic Ackbar Abbas and call it a contrast in "de-cadence"—an intentional pun on the concept of decadence which, as I shall demonstrate, is also closely related to Eileen Chang's aesthetics." In this moment, Lee evidently *does* offer a translation and definition for the term, derived from Chang's insinuations. However, as my argument centers on connecting this essay to another visual text further afield, I would rather keep its meaning in abeyance for the moment. Leo Ou-fa Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 283.

The problem is compounded by thinking about *duìzhào* and how it might be modified or intensified by *cēncī*. That it has been translated as both "contrast" and "opposition" already points to its potential to calibrate and re-name a relation that is neither straightforwardly a contrast nor fully an opposition. Instead of offering a programmatic definition of this protean keyword, however, I would rather follow its (also tropological) formulation provided in Chang's work, considering how it defines and inflects the idea of *cēncī* too.

The very first invocation of the phrase comes early in the essay, again in a widely cited moment in which Chang contrasts the grim satisfactions of tragedy with another mode of resonant revelation, poignantly described as "desolation":

> 我是喜欢悲壮，更喜欢苍凉。。。悲壮则如大红大绿的配色，是一种强烈的对照。但它的刺激性还是大于启发性。苍凉之所以有更深长的回味，就因为它像葱绿配桃红，是一种参差的对照。[71]
>
> I like tragedy and, even better, desolation… Tragedy resembles the matching of bright red with deep green: an intense and unequivocal contrast [*qiángliè dè duìzhào*]. And yet it is more exciting than truly revelatory. The reason desolation resonates far more profoundly in that it resembles the conjunction of scallion green with peach red, creating an equivocal contrast [*cēncī dè duìzhào*].[72]

In this first formulation, *cēncī dè duìzhào* is defined in contradistinction to *qiángliè dè duìzhào*, both figured and theorized along the lines of a visible color spectrum. On one saturated end, bright red; on the other, deep green; and somewhere in the

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[71] 《流言》, 92.

[72] Chang, *Written on Water,* 16-17.

expanded field of an implied middle ground between the two, a delicately pungent scallion and a sour-sweet peach that take their referentiality from everyday objects rather than abstract color. As Leo Lee observes, this thought-figure is even mobilized literal-figurally throughout Chang's corpus, manifesting as an inordinate and aestheticizing attention to describing the colors of women's clothing, the muted non-colors of Shanghai's buildings and walls amidst aging and the war, the fading of previously vibrant flowers, and the incandescent shades of grey and orange in the burning of charcoal.[73] The difference between tragedy and desolation is framed as the relative difference between the intensities of relational *pairs*, figured as a degree of saturation of colors *and* as the places where those colors might appear. Yet what Lee maintains here as a polarized dichotomy between masculine tragedy (strong color contrast) and feminine desolation (weak color contrast) finds something of a challenge in Chow's reading of the detail—in which attention to color plays a substantial part—that cannot be assimilated into the broader structures from which it is excised. Indeed, I would suggest that Chow's unfinished "detail" may well lie somewhere in the interstices marked by *cēncī*: a detail whose excision from the text is precisely accomplished through the *cēncī* of *duìzhào*, while remaining within the intervals of *duìzhào*.

These delicate problems take on clearer stakes in one of Chang's other formulations of the same term, in which historicity begins to enter the picture in a more explicit way:

Michelangelo 的一个未完工的石像，题名《黎明》的，只是一个粗糙的人

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[73] Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern,* 283.

形，面目都不清楚，却正是大气磅礴的，像征一个将要到的新时代。倘若现在也有那样的作品，自然是使人神往的，可是没有，也不能有，因为人们还不能挣脱时代的梦魇。

我写作的题材便是这么一个时代，我以为用参差的对照的手法是比较适宜的。我用这手法描写人类在一切时代之中生活下来的记忆。而以此给予周围的现实一个启示。我存着这个心，可不知道做得好做不好。一般所说"时代的纪念碑"那样的作品，我是写不出来的，也不打算尝试，因为现在似乎还没有这样集中的客观题材。[74]（93）

There is an unfinished sculpture by Michelangelo, called *Dawn*, in which the human figure is only very roughly hewn and even the facial features are indistinct. But its expansive spirit symbolizes the imminent advent of a new era. If such works were to be produced today, one would be entranced, but none exist, nor indeed can they exist, because we are still unable to struggle free of the nightmare of the era.

And it is this era that constitutes my material for writing [*xiézuò dé tícái*],[75] one for which I believe the technique of equivocal contrast [*cēncī dè duìzhào*] is appropriate. I use this method to portray the kinds of memories left behind by humanity as it has lived through each and every historical epoch. And by these means, I provide to the reality that surrounds me a revelation. This is my intention, although I do not know if I have

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[74] 《流言》, 93.

[75] Andrew Jones translates this phrase as "my artistic material," which suggests that there is a modifier attached to the "material." This then creates a confusingly false grammatical parallel with the following "objective material." Most important for my purposes is that the so-called material is *not* inherently or modified as "artistic," it is simply presented as material that she *uses* for the purposes of her writing. Other plausible translations for what is here translated as "material" might include: "topic"; "subject." However, I would concur with Jones' translation for 题材 [*tícái*], with the caveat that the material Chang is describing here is plainly not *entirely* material.

> accomplished it. I am incapable of writing the kind of work that people usually refer to as a "monument to an era" and I do not plan to try, because it seems that the concentration of objective material [*jízhōng dè kèguān tícái*] needed for such a project has yet to become available.[76]

In this complicated passage, the thought that Chang confronts her readers with at first seems very simple: her narrative technique of equivocal contrast provides a historical awakening of sorts, a "revelation" that she casts as a dawning providence to "the reality that surrounds me." Aesthetically indistinct, her work is implicitly and belatedly analogous to (yet also different from) Michelangelo's similarly indistinct—and temporally progressive and forward-looking—*Dawn*, which exists in a symbolic relation to the singular era of its production. How is this symbolic relation understood? Michelangelo's unfinished work cannot be produced and reproduced under Chang's current conditions of production—her present "nightmare"—because it is entirely and absolutely the product of a concentrated set of material from its era, to whom it promises an "imminent advent of a new era." Irreplaceably produced in one moment and simultaneously promising another radically different one, Michelangelo's unfinished *Dawn*—and its modality of symbolization—is utterly modern in Chang's account. It is the impossible dawn to her present nightmare.

Moreover, in Chang's argument about her own time, such a work would be entrancing and *still impossible*—entrancing *because* it is impossible, perhaps—because she still lives in a time when people have not yet struggled free or achieved the radical break that purports towards modernity. Her own work and response to

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[76] Chang, *Written on Water,* 18, trans. modified.

this problem, then, is related but different: she is interested less in "imminent advent" than in "memories left behind by humanity as it has lived through each and every historical epoch." The reasons provided for this are twofold: the first, as we have seen, is that there simply has not been a radical break accomplished; and the second, which comes later and is stated much more enigmatically, is "that the concentration of objective material needed for such a project has yet to become available." It is difficult to clarify the implied connection between the first instance of "material for writing" (the historical era that Chang claims for her work) and the ungraspable "objective material," which presents an implicit modification on the first. Perhaps it might be helpful to think of the latter in contradistinction to the "memories" Chang prefers: instead of being "concentrated" and "objective," the memories enact a kind of historical diffusion amongst "humanity" at large, but in that *longue durée* they then achieve an absolute totality able to register "each and every historical epoch," all of which is made possible through her narrative technique of *cēncī dè duìzhào*.

Thus it is not so much that Chang willfully refuses the dialectical faces of modernity; rather, she diagnoses its radical non-availability, its not-yet-here-ness especially when it is construed as a futurity of "imminent advent." In its stead, she finds in her own era—her own material—a different structure for "revelation" premised on the residues and ruins of history troped here as non-objective "memories," for which the promised revelation necessarily takes place only in and through the present—"the reality surrounding me"—leaving no allowance for positing the future.

And so, as she goes on to explain directly after the passage I have just examined, pivoting back to address the detractors of her work,

> 。。。现在似乎还没有这样集中的客观题材。我甚至只是写些男女之间的小事情，我的作品里没有战争，也没有革命。我以为人在恋爱的时候，是比在战争或革命的时候更素朴，也更放恣的。。。和恋爱的放恣相比，战争是被驱使的，而革命则有时候多少有点强迫自己。真的革命与革命的战争，在情调上我想应当和恋爱是近亲，和恋爱一样是放恣地渗透于人生的全面，而对于自己是和谐。[77]
>
> …. it seems that the concentration of objective material [*jízhōng dè kèguān tícái*] needed for such a project has yet to become available. And, in fact, all I really write about are some of the trivial things that happen between men and women. There is no war and no revolution in my works. I think that people are more straightforward and unguarded in love than they are in war or revolution... In contrast with the unguarded freedom of love, war is inexorably imposed on us from the outside, whereas revolution often forces the individual to drive forward by dint of will alone. A real revolution or a revolutionary war, I believe, should be as emotionally unguarded and as able to permeate [*fàngzī dè shèntòu yǘ*] every aspect of one's life as romantic love. And it should bring one back into a state of harmony.[78]

At once a charming and somewhat terrifying idea, Chang's analogy between the affective permeations of romantic love and a pervasively intimate political

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[77] 《流言》, 93-94.

[78] Chang, *Written on Water,* 18, trans. modified. What I have translated here as "permeate" Jones has previously translated as "penetrate." The original Chinese does not have the masculinist and aggressive sense that might be attributed to "penetrate" in English—a particularly fraught choice given Chang's general ethos on gender and desire. Another plausible substitute for "permeate" might be "suffuse."

revolution has received substantial attention from critics interested in the genealogical complexities connecting 情 [*qíng* / "feeling"], historico-political revolution, and socio-cultural upheavals in the modern Chinese context.[79] However, lest this is misunderstood, what Chang is claiming here crucially remains in the realm of analogy rather than identity: she is not suggesting that in writing about the (heteronormative) happenings between men and women, she is also writing about revolution—which is to say then that Chang is not making the claim that her writing can in fact performatively constitute an event in the vein of a speech act (at least not in the strong and technical sense of the term given by J.L. Austin). Rather, she is suggesting that in writing about the interior psychic terrains mapped by the happenings between men and women, she is providing an affective model of emotional exposure for political permeation: this would make for a vastly different and as yet non-existent "real" revolution that always takes place within the "present reality" produced by and grounded in the deictic self and its structures of address. In this tenuous way, such a performative speech act does not gain its force through a conscious and sovereign instantiation in a present moment, but rather is compromised by the inability to posit a future in which its effect can materialize. Such a revolution, in contradistinction to the exteriorized and future-oriented demands of war, would then destroy these demands in order to "bring one back into

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[79] Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Jianmei Liu, *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003). The relation between this transcultural discourse of revolution and European (especially British) Romanticism is examined in Leo Lee's comprehensive *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

a state of harmony." Which is to say, then, that Chang does not suggest that the political *is* personal and vice versa; rather, in a slight twist on and de-ontologizing of that old mantra, she suggests that the political *should be like* the personal. All revolutions *should be like* the straightforward, unguarded freedom of a love that can be said and felt right here and right now, "in the reality that surrounds me."

Thus far, I have read Chang's narrative of *cēncī dè duìzhào* (1) first as a kind of muted or desaturated differentiation (notably presented through the visual modality of color); and (2) then as a narrative tool for preserving historical traces —"memories"—within a posited totality of a present, whose structure in its present instantiation radically cannot imagine and posit the advent of a future; and (3) last, as providing a non-decisive and non-agential "historical awakening" taking place in a mode of exposure analogous to falling and being in love—at least in Chang's account of what love is and might be. Concatenating these formulations perhaps provides a fuller picture not just of the complexities that accrue to this untranslatable term, but also of its quietly forceful rethinking of what constitutes historicity and modernity in the Chinese context. If Chang's work quietly turns away from the turned back of Benjamin's angel, it is because her work has no future from which to look away, and no future to which it is inexorably moving on the winds of modern progress. Instead, its own non-temporal "not yet" is constituted through the difference between scallion green and peach red, between and within which the ruins of history are expressed in the non-transcendental "reality" of the now.

Yet this is only one instance of the formulation: an instance that I would further inflect by bringing another text into the picture. Amidst the substantial

critical attention devoted to *cēncī dè duìzhào* as formulated in "Writing of One's Own," there has been little mention of a less-read and untranslated text. Chang's late text 《对照记—看老照相簿》 [*Duìzhào jì—kàn láozhàoxiàngbù / Mutual Reflections: Looking at Old Photograph Albums*[80]] was written from 1993 to 1994, when she was living as a near-recluse in Los Angeles almost fifty years after the 1944 publication of "Writing of One's Own" and very shortly before her death in 1995. The text is collected in a late set of largely untranslated essays titled 《重返边城》[*chóngfǎn biānchéng / Return to the Border Town*]. Historically speaking, the two texts thus bracket the course of a long and uneven career of self-writing, self-presentation, and self-reading: on one end, utterly proximate to the ideological demands for historicity; and on the other, deeply wrapped in the impossible illusion of being utterly removed from it. In this explicitly autobiographical text, Chang presents old photographs collected over the course of her life alongside very short pieces of reminiscences prompted by the photographs; her reflections have varying degrees

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[80] For the sake of convenience and for want of an improved alternative, I have followed Xiaojue Wang's published translation of this title as *Mutual Reflections*, with the caveat that *duìzhào* in Wang's hands undergoes several translations from "reflections" to "opposition" to "correspondence" in a somewhat erratic career that is difficult to inductively explain from their immediate contexts. This may well be read as symptomatic of its deep-set ambiguity. Notably, the mutuality that Wang imputes to the relation here seems a little invasive: *duìzhào jì* might simply and literally mean 'chronicle of facing photographs,' 'when I faced photographs,' 'toward photographs' etc., wherein *duì* has the sense of facing that *may* imply a mutuality but by no means necessarily so. *Zhào* as I discuss later also has a sense of directional light that may or may not be *re*flected or refracted per se. If an equivalent is necessary, a French translation along the lines of *En face des photos* might better capture, in the untranslatably ambiguous French preposition *en face de*, the simultaneous possibilities of one-sidedness, exchange, correspondence, and opposition that I am after here. I cannot think of a corrective English equivalent at this time.

of correspondence and relation to the photographs themselves, which most often contain Chang herself as a subject of the photograph, though her close family and friends also make appearances.

The two texts fifty years apart are further related through what is arguably a triple repetition of the phrase *duìzhào*: previously translated as "opposition" and "contrast," it has additionally been translated as "mutual reflections" for the name of this autobiographical ekphrastic text. This translation cannot reproduce the photographic pun on "照" [*zhào*], which appears in the main title as *duìzhào* ["mutual reflections"] but then again in the subtitle as *zhàoxiàng* ["photograph"]. When taken on its own, "*zhào*" simply refers to an illumination that has a particular concentration and direction: not simply a flash but a vector of light. Chang's pun then centers on how this illumination might be both an illuminating juxtaposition—such as the vector or axis of "*duìzhào*" between photograph and word-text—as well as the light-writing which produces the material photograph, and from which the modern Chinese word "*zhàoxiàng*" is derived.

Without necessarily mobilizing Chang's pun, Xiaojue Wang has noted the tacit connection between the two texts. In her reading of *Mutual Reflections*, inflected (per usual) by Walter Benjamin's angel of history as well as Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Wang argues that Chang's use of the visual photographs alongside her idiosyncratic commentary provides a version of historiography that brings her close to Benjamin's allegorical reading:

> For Eileen Chang, photographs are constitutive parts of memory images, while photographs themselves simultaneously also function at a non-

> representational level as physical artifacts. What she stresses is not only the physical resemblance between the image in a photograph and the object it represents in reality, but also an *uneven correspondence* between images and words. In such correspondences, history is no longer the grand narrative of modernization and progress, instead, it emerges as a petrified face, a desolate landscape…[81]
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> To borrow one of Chang's own trademark critical terms, we might see her creative goal in this work as lying in a kind of "uneven opposition" [*cēncī dè duìzhào*], which is to say, an allegorical way of seeing. In his study of *Trauerspiel*, the German form of tragedy from the Baroque period, Benjamin notes, "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [a face of one with a long illness approaching death, first described by Hippocrates - ed.] of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face —or rather in a death's head… This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing.[82]

Intriguingly, Wang's translations of Chang (which are not explained) in these two moments of her argument provide two very different conceptualizations of *duìzhào*.

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[81] Xiaojue Wang, "Memory, photographic seduction, and allegorical correspondence: Eileen Chang's *Mutual Reflections,*" in *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon,* eds. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 191, emphasis mine.

[82] Ibid, 198-199.

In the first instance, *duìzhào* is the "uneven correspondence between images and words," and in the second, inflected this time by *cēncī*, it is, as we have seen before, "an uneven opposition." Leaving aside the still-operative idea of unevenness, what is at stake in the difference between "correspondence" and "opposition" remains substantial, especially in light of Wang's reading of Benjamin's allegory, in which correspondence is the hidden and non-representational relation that governs and is governed by allegory itself.

Does the photographic text transform and translate opposition into correspondence? Does a similar operation hold in the reverse? One might wonder if the material photographic apparatus—qua visual writing—may have been in Chang's notion of *duìzhào* all along. I am thinking here particularly of its very first instantiation as color and desaturation, which is thematized and further memorialized in the second vignette for *Mutual Reflections*. Here, the speaker is describing and reminiscing in response to a posed photograph of a smiling young girl, perhaps four or five years old, whose identity is no longer clear to her. Upon closer inspection, one might note that the photograph has been painted over in a few small parts. *[Reproduction pending.]* These two aspects of the photograph are merged in her reflection:

> 面团团的，我自己都不认识了。但是不是我又是谁呢？把亲戚间的小女孩都想遍了，全都不像。倒是这张藤几很眼熟，还有这件衣服——不过我记得的那件衣服是淡蓝色薄绸，印着一蓬蓬白雾。T字形白绸领，穿着有点傻头傻脑的，我并不怎么喜欢，只感到亲切。随又记起那天我非常高兴，看见我母亲替这张照片着色。一张小书桌迎亮搁在装着玻璃窗的狭窄的小阳台上，北国的阴天下午，仍旧相当阴暗。我站在旁边看着，杂乱的桌面上有黑铁水彩画颜料盒，细瘦的黑铁管毛笔，一杯水。她把我的嘴唇画成薄薄的红唇，衣服也改填最鲜艳的蓝绿色。那是她的蓝绿色时期。

我第一本书出版，自己设计的封面就是整个一色的孔雀蓝，没有图案，只印上黑字，不留半点空白，浓稠得使人窒息。以后才听见我姑姑说我母亲以前也喜欢这颜色，衣服全是或深或浅的蓝绿色。我记得墙上一直挂着的她的一幅油画习作静物，也是以湖绿色为主。遗传就是这样神秘飘忽——我就是这些不相干的地方像她，她的长处一点都没有，气死人。[83]

Roundy chubby cheeks that even I don't recognize. But if it isn't me, then who is it? Checked off all the little girls amongst my relatives, none of them resemble her. But this wicker stool I've seen before, and this dress—but the dress I remember is of pale blue thin silk, printed with billows of white fog. The T-shaped white silk collar looks a little silly on, I don't really like it, just find it kind of endearing. Oh and[84] I remember too being so happy that day, to watch my mother coloring in this photograph. A small desk inviting the light, stowed away on a cramped little balcony with glass windows installed; a dim northern afternoon, still somewhat dark. I stand beside watching: an iron box of watercolors; slim iron brushes; a cup of water. She painted my mouthlips into thinned-redlips; the dress too was filled in with the most vibrant blue-green. That was her blue-green period.

When my first book was published, the cover I designed for it was entirely a monochromatic peacock-blue, without pictures or patterns, only black print, leaving no white space, dense enough to asphyxiate. It was only afterwards that I heard my aunt say that my mother had also loved this color, her clothes were all either dark or light blue-green. I remember a practice

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[83] 《重访边城》, 178.

[84] The conjunction here is more along the lines of 'following,' 'via,' 'through,' but also with an element of contingency (translatable as 'by the way') that I provisionally translate through this more child-like and colloquial register of spontaneity.

> still life in oil always hanging on the wall, also with lake-green dominant. So mysterious and drifting is inheritance—I only resemble her in these irrelevant ways, without any of her good qualities, it maddens me to death. (My translation)

Faced with a moment like this, it is tempting to reach once again for Walter Benjamin and to note his insistence on transmissibility as it evades the finitude of the auratic experience: the tenuous experience of modernity that can only be anticipated and whose messianic fulfillment cannot be known in advance. Yet this is not quite the case in the little vignette about a vignette: the mysterious inheritance contingently transmitted from mother to daughter seems only an unaccountable fetish for a certain color—a certain set of colors that manifest in different shades and intensities depending on the light. The speaker does not know how or why she fell into a decades-apart correspondence with her mother through the love of a color, and yet she does, and might well recognize that eventually: it is only that she has been misled, for the color of her "pale blue" memoried dress is hardly the same as the "peacock-blue" of her cover, nor the "vibrant blue-green" of the painted-over dress and the "lake-green" of the still-life. Indeed, where the blues associated with the mother are of the decisive and 'strong' contrasts, the blues associated with the speaker become much more attenuated and modified, and unrecognizable from her mother's for those very reasons—more akin to what I have so far been calling Chang's *cēncī dè duìzhào*. Suffused and permeated with the blues of her mother's blue period, the passage can no longer localize the places of the transmissible. *What* is being transmitted here? *Who* is being translated? The transmissibility of these

memories is everywhere even in the blind mis-recognition of the self and the self's differentiation from the mother who came before. Transmission certainly takes place, and it takes place in a mode intricately braided with the colors of the past and yet insistently "mysterious" and exceptional in its workings, poised together "at a small desk inviting the light" from the future of the past that is the now.

The nap of modernity

In the canonized passage from Lu Xun's preface to his collection of short stories 《吶喊》[*nàhǎn / Call to Arms*], Lu offers a nationalist and revolutionary parable of an iron house. The iron house is impenetrable and indestructible. Its inhabitants are isolated from the outside world. They sleep soundly, insulated from the knowledge that they will soon suffocate to death as the air runs out in the house. A conversation between Lu's speaker and an unnamed interlocutor then turns on the question of whether to sound an alarm to wake the lighter sleepers of the group: the speaker argues that this will only awaken their consciousness, causing them to suffer the agony of dying a conscious death rather than in a blissful sleep. The interlocutor, the voice of a naïve utopianism that would invest hope in the future, replies that waking the ones who can be woken allows for the only chance that the indestructible iron house might be destroyed after all: a reply that the speaker eventually affirms, and comes to frame the short stories of *Call to Arms*.

Must the raising of a historical consciousness always be tied to the possibility of futurity and hope? Indeed, must history always be tied to the future? Read in contrast to Lu's canonized insistence on an *active* historical consciousness that

remains recalcitrant in the face of certain defeat, Chang's own recalcitrance may well lead one to wonder if there is a possibility to be gleaned by falling asleep in this iron house of historical tradition, and if, indeed, this might be a modernity that uncomfortably strains the very possibility of the modern by insisting on an elusive escape or release from within the present. I began this chapter with an epigraphic metaphor of a brief and uncomfortable nap, in order to describe Chang's willed indifference to the violences of war as a means of quiet yet circumscribed evasion. The terms of this argument may well find an uneasy parallel in Chang's literary writing and self-translations elsewhere, which frequently dramatize an excepting relation to war and history: this is most pertinent in her short story "封锁" [*fēngsuǒ* / "Sealed Off"], which traces a subtle missed (or unacknowledged) encounter between a young woman and a married male school-teacher during a wartime blockade; and 《金锁记》[*jīnsuǒjì* / *The Golden Cangue*] (translated into English by Chang herself), the acclaimed novella read by C.T. Hsia as exemplary of Chang's interest in the underbelly of grand historical narratives.

As a withdrawal into a cultivated space of exception and historical *un*consciousness, Chang's writing refuses ideological construals of historicity as something in which one can and must either actively or passively participate. Forestalling a modernity predicated on Benjamin's relation between translatability and historical transmissibility, this idea of history encounters a more legible mode of resistance in my next chapter, which traces the non-event of the untranslatable in the work of the contemporary Chinese poet Yang Lian and his reading of Ezra Pound.

Chapter 2

Event:
Yang Lian's History without Time

Mourning without time

This chapter treats the poetics and translation of an experimental Chinese[85] poet 杨炼 [*Yáng Liàn*], whose work is particularly concerned with history, understood as both historical event and the possibility of an epic poetry translated from the west. Where Chapter 1 approached the problem of history via the condition of modernity, Chapter 2 approaches history via the trope of the event: both are united by being historical concepts that are not purely historical. What separates the event from

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[85] But already an appellation that sits uneasily, according to Rey Chow. Notably, Chow articulates much of her thinking in this piece against a critical controversy surrounding Stephen Owen's review of an English translation of Bei Dao, wherein he is critical of Bei Dao's (translated, translatable) work as a commodified poetry cynically profiting from the 'world literature' industry, the latter of which Owen even analogizes to a food court in a North American mall (!). While I would not disagree with Owen on his analysis that the construction of a digestible world literature is undergirded by assumptions of hegemonic monolingualism (and in this regard Emily Apter's recent *Against World Literature* has been particularly helpful in nuancing my thinking), I would disagree with Owen's nostalgia for a lost authenticity of lyric Chineseness that I would venture with Chow is ultimately untenable on the level of the works themselves (not just by Bei Dao but of the other modern writers in the Chinese language who are also implicitly tarred by the same brush in Owen's account), the lived experience of people who variously identify as Chinese or Chinese-speaking, as well as the intellectual climate of "Chinese studies" within the North American academy. Indeed, in my analysis, the current critical investment in the Sinophone as a critical paradigm draws much of its libidinal force from precisely a desire to resist this mode of conservative (even chauvinistic) insistence on a monolithic authenticity. Instead of writing against world literature on the back of lost authenticity, I would prefer to think it through the coupled textual and theoretical problems of translation and untranslatability. See Rey Chow, "On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader,* eds. Shu-mei Shih et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 43-56; Stephen Owen, "Stepping Forward and Back: Issues and Possibilities for 'World Poetry,'" *Modern Philology* 100.4 (May 2003): 532-548. On translation as praxis, cf. fn. 93.

modernity, I argue, is the way in which it is defined not through a rupture from the past but through an uneasy mediation between material reality or reference and the conditions of its realization. Thus, broader critical concerns and conventions[86]

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[86] Convention calls for a historical account of Yang's life and the events surrounding it. Born in 1955 in Bern, Switzerland to a diplomat family and raised in Beijing, capital of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) from the age of 7, Yang's personal roots and political identifications were always mixed from the outset, albeit in a life more perceptibly mixed than most. While indentured in rural 'labor re-education' (劳改, *láo gǎi*, literally 'correction/change through labor') camps performing physical labor during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s (tasks among others included digging graves), Yang also (in his own account) secretly wrote poems in the style of traditional Chinese verse—a potentially radical gesture of defiance and restoration amidst the politically-motivated desiccation of the Chinese aesthetic and historical tradition taking place during the Cultural Revolution. These poems of the late 70s, however, have never been published, and Yang has not publicly revealed what happened to them; his later published work consciously strays from the classical tradition, although the anecdote and some instances of intertextual reference all suggest that he is certainly not forgetful of it. After Mao Zedong's death and the waning of the Cultural Revolution's fanaticism in 1977, Yang worked with a broadcasting service belonging to the state, while co-founding the dissident poetry journal *Today* (今天, *jīn tiān*) agitating for democratic reform of the state. At the same time, he was also an active participant in what was known as the Beijing Spring of 1978: a short-lived loosening of censorship and calls for democratic reform that resulted from protests of mourning occasioned by the death of pragmatist reformer Zhou Enlai. In 1983, a warrant was put out for Yang's arrest in the aftermath of his poem "Norilang" (诺日朗, *nuò rì láng*) which dealt explicitly as well as allegorically with the P.R.C. colonialism of Tibet; this was deemed unsuitable under the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign' whose stated aim was to preserve the P.R.C.'s socialist standing amidst the growing influence of other countries it was opening up to (notably the liberal and democratic progressivism of the Western world). Yang however managed to escape before he was arrested thanks to advance warning from a friend. Later, in the immediate wake of the Tiananmen Massacre/'Incident'[5] of 1989, he was abroad in New Zealand and responded to the event by organizing a mourning ceremony for the dead of Tiananmen as an oblique form of protest. This led to an official revocation of his Chinese citizenship, at which time Yang received the refugee New Zealand citizenship that he has held ever since. In this aftermath of Tiananmen 1989, Yang officially entered political exile—a state poignantly known in his Chinese language as 'drifting' (漂泊, *piāo bó*). He presently lives in London, having settled there after stints in New Zealand and Berlin. Pieces and citations of these exilic homes appear in his poetry with considerable frequency. Writing predominantly in the Chinese language and often described as 'modernist,' 'experimental,' or 'conceptual' and

surrounding the relationship between literature and history at once determine my readings and yet, I suggest, may well also be altered by them.

For a significant element of Yang's extended poetic sequence 同心圆 [*Concentric Circles* / *tóng xīn yüán*, w. 1994-1997][87] is its thematic and performative motif of mourning 'the dead,' which returns with reliable frequency throughout this long poem. In its repetitive and shifting engagements with the theme of survival-as-mourning, the poem presents a tense relation between poetic writing and its putative historical context, refusing to authenticate itself or its abstract and enigmatic objects of mourning by recourse to referentiality, or even any overt claims to representation. As it insistently revisits the dead that is not so past, the poem is not so much anti-historicist, ahistorical, or apolitical as much as unmoored from the teleological and progressivist claims of historicity. At stake in this unmooring is something in excess of the possibility of political allegorization (for more overt political engagement, Yang favors a straighter path to truth and power): the non-referential relation between poetry-as-event and history-as-event. To the historicist question about the poem's historicity, then, perhaps the only possible answer is to

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[87] Yang Lian, *Concentric Circles,* trans. Brian Holton and Agnes Chan (London: Bloodaxe, 2005). For rendering the title, I have followed the existing published translation by Brian Holton and Agnes Chan. Notable however is an untranslatable play on the notion of the 'center': in Chinese, this word for "center" [心, *xīn*] can also literally mean "heart"—the image of concentric circles should therefore be read as also having a figural heart grounding their orbits, so that they are simultaneously "circles/spheres with the same heart." The same character, with similar metaphysical implications, is also used when Yang writes about the "changeless core of existence" below. Yet these should not be taken at face value; if anything, Yang's poetry writes in the wake of the Yeatsian aphorism about a center that cannot hold. Additionally, Yang sometimes writes or speaks of 一个同心圆, rendering the concentric circles in the singular: "one concentric circle/s." The geometric impossibility is the poetic insight. Cf. also fn. 104.

think through Yang's and the poem's claims to specificity, and the way in which it articulates its singular conditions for history. My suggestion in this reading of Yang's work is that the poem as work of mourning is subtended by the non-category of history [史, *shǐ*] and the ways in which it can be told and marked in Chinese poetry [诗, *shī*].

In Yang's narrative, this works in concert with the notion of time [时, *shí*]. Far from being a transcendental and universal condition for the perception of experience (after Enlightenment philosophy in the Western tradition), time in Yang's account turns out to be an intractable and affectively rewarding problem of translation from the diachronic to the synchronic. Indeed, for him, it is precisely the labor of translation (specifically as it exploits the grammatical capacities of the Chinese language in response to English) that would whittle away at the temporal grounds of history. Writing in his author's introduction to the English translation of *Concentric Circles,* Yang implicitly draws the translation of his own work into English closer to Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* when he refers to the *Cantos*' translation into Chinese (a monumental task completed in the 1990s):

> 庞德《比萨诗章》的中译本出版后，我为他写了一篇小文《In the Timeless Air》，其中有个耸人听闻的结论：《诗章》最终完成于它的中译。论据其实并不复杂，对我来说，《诗章》最深刻的诗意，正介于它诗歌意识的"共时性"和写作语言的"历时性"之间。《诗章》中既触目又令人费解的似乎失控的大规模片段拼贴，用庞德 "写一首英语里最长的诗" 这一区区企图，显然解释不通。我认为，庞德真正的注意力，在于突破时间的局限，特别是存在于英语语法之内"时间性"的限制。他的《诗章》，纵横古今，正是要通过囊括迄今为止东西方的所有文化，剥去生活表象种种不同，直触存在"不变"的核心。也就是说，《诗章》不是史诗，它恰恰在用"诗"，把"史"的幻想抹去。那个诗的自足宇宙，无所谓始终，从而根本颠覆了欧洲的史诗传统。我

不知道，庞德的这个创意，是否又得自他对中文古诗得“再发明”？但，中文却给了他最好的回报：借助于中文动词永远的原型——不随人称 `时态变化而变化——《诗章》的中译，弥补了诗人和语言间挣扎的痕迹，最终完成了庞德对英语历时性的突围。中文读者读到的，正是这个被中文的独特性质“发明”的《诗章》，它是一个如次透明 `稳定 `无所不在而天衣无缝的整体。In the Timeless Air，诗本身就是这Air。[88]

When the Chinese translation of Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* was published, I wrote a short essay for it, entitled “In the Timeless Air” [this is a quote from Pound’s *Canto LXXVI* - ed.] in which I come to a sensational conclusion: only with its Chinese translation was the *Cantos* finally completed. The argument is not actually complicated. To me, the most impressive poetic quality of the *Cantos* lies in the contradiction between the synchronic nature of its poetic ideas and the diachronic nature of its language. The startlingly, inexplicably large-scale collage of episodes that seems out of control cannot be obviously explained by Pound’s simple intention to write the longest poem in English. I think Pound’s real focus was to break through the limitations of time, especially those temporal limits which exist in the grammar of English. His *Cantos* ramify through all time — it is by embracing all cultures, past to present, east and west, that he is enabled to peel away the illusion of the differentiation between the different presentations of life, and touch directly on the changeless core of existence. In other words, the *Cantos* is not an epic, i.e. a poem about history, but on the contrary, it aptly uses poetry [*shī*] to efface the fantasies of history [*shǐ*]. That self-sufficient universe of poetry, without beginning or end, completely undermines the European epic

[88] 杨炼, 一座向下修建的塔 (南京: 凤凰出版社, 2009), 153-154.

> tradition. I do not know whether or not Pound got this creative idea from his "reinvention" of ancient Chinese poetry. But the Chinese language does give him the best return of all: by way of the constant form of Chinese verbs – which are unchanged, even if person and tense change - the Chinese translation of the *Cantos* eradicates all trace of the struggle between the poet and his language, and finally, completes Pound's wish to break away from the diachronic grip of the English language. What the Chinese reader sees is the *Cantos* re-invented by means of the unique qualities of the Chinese language, an entirety which is transparent, stable, omnipresent and flawless. In the timeless air, the poem itself is the air.[89] [90]

In Yang's analysis, the translation of the *Cantos* into the Chinese it so famously incorporated-without-assimilation *is* its own form of closure and completion; yet if the *Cantos* have come full circle through translation, then they are also bereft of the temporal wounds and readerly opacities animating Pound's work in the first place. Where previously the disjointedness and disorientations of the *Cantos* were its primary drama, now the Chinese-*Cantos*, accessible only to those who read Chinese, have achieved a totality that is "transparent, stable, omnipresent and flawless" precisely through the effacement of time. Yang's pathos-ridden account locates the

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[89] Yang Lian, "Moved Once Again by an Ancient Betrayal—by way of a Preface to *Concentric Circles*," in *Concentric Circles*, trans. Brian Holton and Agnes Chan (London: Bloodaxe, 2005), 9, trans. modified.

[90] All translations of Yang's prose and spoken commentary are reproduced and occasionally adapted from existing translations where available, and translated by me where no translations exist. Translations of Yang's poetry are my own unless otherwise indicated, with debts to prior translators Brian Holton and Agnes Chan (working in collaboration) acknowledged here.

flawlessness and universality of the translated *Cantos* primarily in their belated fulfillment of what he takes as Pound's central poetic mission: the attempt to linguistically transcend the linguistically imposed limits of time in his poetry. Yet this transcendence of contradiction is a highly qualified one, possible only when translated into a different language—the different language that prompted the initial contradiction—that cannot register and mark the passing of time within a single verb/word, and for which the passage of time can only be read in relation and in context.[91]

More tellingly, perhaps, the "startlingly, inexplicably large-scale collage of episodes that seems out of control" that Yang uses to describe Pound's *Cantos* may well be an implicit meta-commentary on his own work. Just as Pound's work is not an epic, so too is Yang's work not an epic, but rather a work that calls the

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[91] It should go without saying (but perhaps is worth saying still) that I do not endorse on the level of factuality Yang's comments about the static linguistic properties of the Chinese language, nor am I interested in extending the content of his commentary and poetry into a speculative or ethnographic discussion about Chinese epistemology, Chinese people as a group, etc. (Indeed, I would argue that on a close reading, Yang's poetry, if not his public remarks, actively resist such identifying categorizations in the first place. Further, as I will consider in my theoretical coda, factuality and reality are very much implicated in this consideration of historicity.) These are not the objects on which my claims bear, nor are they the subject-positions that I assume or inhabit as a reader. Further, I do not suggest that Chinese literature has no history, or bears no relation to history and cultural conditions on a factual level; indeed, I take this for granted, and wish to nuance the point by considering the epistemological conditions of such claims through a test case of literary reading (Yang's). In all cases, my aim is not to draw generalizing and essentializing conclusions. Instead, my claims center on the multiple modes of signification in Yang's poetry and metatextual commentary, moving carefully from this particular instance to a consideration of its theoretical implications. Such a gesture emerges from the understanding that literary reading, via its engagement with language (and history, perhaps—but this is currently still in question here) as a medium of thought, is itself already theoretical in the sense of being able to engage with the epistemological and material conditions that make it possible to begin with. What is at issue here is the modality of that engagement.

fundamental assumptions of the epic poem into question, for not only does it "efface the fantasies of history" but it also "uses poetry" to do so.

That Yang so insists on the fulfillment of the high-modernist aspiration to "break through the limitations of time" in connection with his own work sits uneasily with his motif of mourning the dead. On one hand, we might understand mourning as unproblematically incorporated into the drive towards timelessness, and perhaps as itself effacing the fantasies of a linear history that would leave its dead behind. On this initial reading, the dead would be changelessly preserved within an unchanging poetic present, as an ultimate act of mournful fidelity and even defiant ventriloquism from beyond the grave.

Yet pursuing the implications of Yang's account turns up further questions without ready answers, particularly when one considers that Yang's work is always written originally in Chinese. Provisionally accepting his apparently essentializing view of the Chinese language, we are left with Yang in a milieu in which marking time is impossible in a single instance and only possible through contextual imbrication and/or translation outside its own linguistic system. If nothing else, this is then an essentialist formulation of language that gestures towards a radically *non*-essentialist conception of temporality. Amidst this contingency, then, how exactly would the finitude of the dead and their deaths then be marked? Is it possible to mourn in a linguistic space in which the temporal "fantasies of history" cannot quite be taken for granted as such? For the point here is then that the work of mourning would be rendered inoperative, because the temporal conditions that enable it—the passing of time—have become contingent rather than necessary.

What is initially at stake in the following reading is thus the possibility and operation of the poem's mourning, and with that, its means of engagement with the historical event, which can only be overdetermined from where we stand. I argue against the grain of Yang's authorial commentary by suggesting that his poetry works to complicate those tropes through ludic associations between "poetry," "time," and "history," articulating not so much timelessness as much as a history not subject to an organizing inscription of time. Indeed, for Yang, another name for a history without time may simply be "poetry"—but such an insight then behooves me to ask *how* such a "poetry" is being construed without recourse to temporality. The task I set myself in this chapter is thus an articulation, via a reading of Yang's work, of what exactly a mournful and poetic "history without time" might *be*—or, if ontology might not quite be the correct philosophical register, then what might it *resemble*? This is already a decisive act of interpretation: to privilege "history" over "time" is in some sense to follow Yang's lead; but because in his more literal and discursive comments Yang often treats the two concepts as somewhat coterminous, my work here also necessitates parsing one from the other through his poetic writing. Yang's implicit suggestion that time is not translatable from the English to the Chinese then also begs the question: is history equally untranslatable, infected by the same comparative problematic as time?

Indeed, the philosophical ramifications that ensue from this axis of translation and untranslatability are substantial. Additionally at stake in Yang's rethinking of time and history, as I will consider in my theoretical coda, is an undecidability of finitude itself. In the first direction, translating the *Cantos* from

English into Chinese de-temporalizes (and also spatializes) it, imbuing it with metaphysical claims to transcendent timelessness and a totalizing suture of signifier and signified. For Yang, Chinese writing transcends time because it does not *have* to *register* and to make decisions about what kind of time it finds itself in. On this reading, Chinese writing *need* not inscribe its own historicity: it gives a provisional and contingent exception from historicity. By implication, translating Chinese verbs into English cannot but involve an act of temporalization (and de-spatialization), but this is irreducibly contextual and relational—that is to say, impossible to reduce or resolve into a transcendental or ontological register.

All this begs the question: what is the mode of time at issue here? In the theoretical coda to this chapter, I sustain a more detailed account of the modes of temporality Yang's poetry might be engaging, situating his literary labors within a broader western philosophical tradition. On a perfunctorily literal level, it may seem as if his comments are directed against what Martin Heidegger might call a "vulgar" and common notion of time: that is, one that presents discrete moments or instants that are joined together by an assumption of continuity. Yet what Yang offers in his specificity, I would argue on a closer reading, does not map directly onto other more nuanced theoretical approaches to time and the event either. What throws a wrench into the works, to speak broadly, is poetry, the material modes of reading it enables, and its resistant cathexis to history. The following readings seek to work out a finer presentation of this argument.

My mode of reading in this chapter follows Yang's linguistic play connecting time and history, calling attention to a fertile poetic crux interspersed throughout

his work. Such a pun is not at all uncommon for him, as well as in the wider context of Chinese-language speakers and especially in the context of attempts to evade political censorship through allusion or allegory. Plays on words are thereby extremely common, and can be alternately light-hearted and sober. To construct this crux, I have traced this phoneme of the Chinese language and its accompanying set of homophones and what I have translated as "harmophones"[92] as they resonate throughout Yang Lian's *Concentric Circles*. Words implicated in this network of signifiers include:

- in the first tone *shī*, poetry/poem (诗), loss (失), wetness (湿), corpse (尸);
- in the second tone *shí*, time (时), reality/factuality (实), rock/stone (石; in classical Chinese, 石 may also be used as a unit of measure for dried goods, in which case it would be pronounced *dàn*), knowledge/cognition (识);
- in the third tone *shǐ*, history/record (史), cause/force/use/compel (使);

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[92] 谐音, *xié yīn*: a term in Chinese linguistics and poetics for a play on words mobilizing homophones or words close in sound, usually differentiated through their tones or other aspects of speech. I have called such close words "harmophones," an invented word for lack of a vocabulary. Mandarin Chinese is a tonal language with four tones that inflect a comparatively small number of phonemes (relative to Western languages). This phonetic structure functions in tandem with a disproportionately large number of written characters in the script; as a result, homophones and "harmophones" are rife in the language and commonly punned on in colloquial speech as well as literary writing. The effect might be more than a pun in that there is often a metaphorical or allegorical connection implied. Yang's writing exploits these linguistic possibilities at every turn. The concept is very broadly similar to that of the English 'slant rhyme' or 'half rhyme' but the English does not describe tonal variations. It also bears comparison to the English 'spoonerism,' named after some fabled slips of the tongue by the Reverend William Archibald Spooner (1844-1930), Warden of New College, Oxford. A spoonerism is a play on words (either intentional or accidental) that swaps sounds between two different words in a phrase, e.g. "Is the bean dizzy?"/"Is the dean busy?" However, this again does not register tonal variations. A similar problem crops up in Chapter 1 surrounding Eileen Chang's thinking of translation; see p. 66.

- in the fourth tone *shì*, is/being (是), event/incident in the most minimal sense—something that happens (事), a compounded structure who has a force derived from its particular configuration (势), showing (示), form (式).

As the sheer semantic scope and untranslatable density of this list suggests, the theoretical and philosophical work undertaken in Yang's poetic writing is far-reaching. For although he is concerned far less with meaning-as-a-goal than with its linguistic milieu and material processes of significations (as I will soon show in a closer study), Yang's work is nevertheless acutely reflective of just how impossible it can be to avoid the chance production of meaning, and, conversely too, how powerful that chance can also be.

Additionally, as I hope this chapter will eventually make clear, translating Yang's work is a task fraught with decision and intervention—perhaps even a little more so than is usual for translations, given that signification takes place in constellating the material elements of his language. As much of my argumentation hinges on the idiomatic or untranslatable aspects of his work, I have instead conceived of my acts of translation as functioning like a kind of analytic prism, refracting and parsing the object of translation into more than one possible English translations (an approach partly inspired by Yang's own conceptualization of the synchronic versus diachronic as discussed above). This approach abandons as impossible the quest for cross-linguistic equivalence that tacitly drives most works of translation to produce only *one* formal translated text. This approach also has the advantage of ameliorating the need for extreme inventiveness within the English language, as Yang's existing translators are at such pains to perform; their works are,

in the strongest possible sense of the term, *new* texts, but despite my admiration, I have found that my own modes of reading demand neither free invention within the 'target language' nor overtly 'faithful' translations with no particular sense of how this faithfulness might be construed. Instead, I consider my argument staked in the material and poetic features of the Chinese texts. My efforts of translation therefore simply substantiate and compel the argument that I am making here. Translation here becomes indistinguishable from reading.[93]

Mourning in the structure of *Concentric Circles*

The intricately plotted (and incessantly diffusive) structure of *Concentric Circles* belies its relatively simple title, and relies equally on repetition and pattern in all

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[93] Elissa Marder, "Force and Translation; Or, the Polymorphous Body of Language," *philoSOPHIA* 3.1 (Winter 2013): 10. Marder's lucid account of translation insists on the corporeal polymorphousness of the untranslatable, and reminded me of Jacques Derrida's elegant reflections on translation in "Freud and the Scene of Writing." Both writers have guided my reflections on translation. Marder writes: "The body of language manifests as those language events (comprised of idioms, inflections, intonalities, rhythms, erotic intensities, homophones, homonyms, diversity of genders and noun classes, and multiple divisions and arrangements of persons) that resist translation and which, once subjected to translation, leave no palpable trace of their once embodied singularities in the translated text. Because there is neither purity nor plentitude in language, every language is infinitely finite. Made of textured layers of differences and singularities, each language produces its own irreducible, untranslatable idioms. In their very untranslatability, idioms are language bodies that call out for translation and that resist translation." In Marder's epigraph, Derrida speaks: "The materiality [*le corps*] of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry." For Derrida, it is specifically *le corps* ("materiality" in Alan Bass's translations, but conceivably also "the body" as Marder points out) of the word that is relinquished in translation. "Poetry" here should not be taken in the generic sense, but rather in the sense of an aesthetic event. On translation and its relation to world literature, cf. fn. 85. On the relation between translation and "reading" on a general level, cf. fn. 4.

aspects of the language (writing, sound) to constitute that structure, in addition to the standard principles of poetic form that Yang invokes and quietly dismantles. The whole is composed of five sections with no titles, each only marked at the beginning by a printed image of one circle, then two and then three (etc.) concentric circles. These visual cues seem to suggest a series of poems that accrue onto one another in a mode of non-linear progress, but such a cumulative process is arguably ironized as the poem's narrative develops, focused as it is on the work of disappearance and transformation (as I will soon show). Each section has its somewhat distinct style, but ranges in terms of subject matter. Already here the structure of mourning begins to take shape, especially in the recourse to repetition and recursiveness.

The first section has three further subsections of inconsistent length and meter, each simply titled "Chapter One," "Chapter Two," and "Chapter Three." Its references do not offer any clues about situations in space and time, and range from 'natural' to 'urban' to domestic settings. Within Chapter Two three separate poems are titled with a short conjunctive phrase that becomes an incantatory refrain for the poem it names; the three conjunctive phrases then also resound at the end of Chapter Three, which also closes the first section.

The second section contains eleven separate poems, each averaging around 12-16 lines long but for one notable exception: the middle (sixth) poem of the section, titled "活 这个字" ["To Live/Living This Word"/ *huó zhè gè zì*] is particularly long, formally diffuse, and further divided into five untitled sections that are each treated very differently. I will return to this poem and its narrative context in a more extensive analysis later. For now, the exceptional status of this poem is

confirmed by the fact that the five poems situated before and after it have titles that mirror and distort one another: they pair up as “曾在/正在” [“It Was” / “It Is” / *céng zài / zhèng zài*], “死者的一月 / 生者的一月” [“The Dead’s January” / “The Survivor’s January” / *sǐ zhě dè yī yuè / shēng zhě dè yī yuè*], “Mulinen街7号 / Schloss Solitude” [“7 Mulinen Strasse” / “Schloss Solitude”] (Yang Lian spent some time in Berlin when initially exiled), “午夜书” [“Midnight Book/Letter” / *wǔ yè shū*] (this title is repeated for two different poems), and “轮回的花园 /花园的轮回” [“Recurring Garden” or “Recursion’s Garden” / “Garden’s Recursion” / *lún huǐ dè huā yuán / huā yuán dè lún huǐ*] (the latter pair is a chiasmus in the original as well).[94]

The third section notably plays with line length and stanza structure, oscillating with irregular intervals between something recognizable as verse and prose-poetry. Its three separate poems vary in length although it is again the middle poem, “对位与回旋” [“Counterpoint and Return” / *duì weì yǘ huí xuán*] (the latter term including also the somewhat more hidden sense of “revolving”, “spinning”) that is the longest and most diffuse, filled with prosaic meditations on the German language, Chinese and Western poetics, a mention of Borges, and the nature of memory. Unlike in the previous section, however, the relationship between the three

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[94] 轮回, *lún huí*: sometimes also used to mean ‘reincarnation’ in Chinese-language discussions of Buddhist philosophy, but I have avoided this because it is not evident that this meaning is in play, and furthermore because ‘reincarnation’ brings with it implications of bodily flesh (and the eternal abandonment and transcendence of physical iterations) that the poem explicitly works against. The same word is translated as “transmigration” in Holton & Chan.

poems in this section is not obvious: each poem presents a long and varied meditation on place, and moves between verse and prose.

The fourth section returns to a tight structure of recursion and symmetry. Its eight poems are marked in the middle by four poems with the same title "递进的迷宫" ["Encroaching Labyrinth" / *dì jìn dé mì gōng*], with each of the four poems referencing and implicitly rewriting one line from a four-line poem by the canonical ancient Tang poet Du Fu. The first two and last two poems in the section are chiasmically titled: "构成的地点" ["Constituted Location / Constitution's Location" / *gòu chéng dè dì diǎn*], "重复的喜剧" ["Repeated Comedy / Repetition's Comedy" / *chóng fù dè xǐ jǜ*], "重复的地点" ["Repeated Location / Repetition's Location" / *chóng fù dè dì diǎn*], "构成的喜剧" ["Constituted Comedy / Constitution's Comedy" / *gòu chéng dè xǐ jǜ*], but their relations to each other are otherwise enigmatic as usual.

The fifth and final section is perhaps an even greater challenge than the first four, while also being the most tightly plotted. Divided into three subsections, each subsection has a radical that appears in all the poem titles in its section. The three radicals compose the Chinese character for 'poetry.' As Yang explains in the same preface to the English translation of *Concentric Circles*,

> 《同心圆》的第五章，如果你愿意，不妨称之为中文的"观念艺术"。我把组成"诗"这个汉字的三个部分（言、土、寸——每部分也是一个单独的字），各自与七个包含同样偏旁部首的字发展成一个序列，三个序列又都以"诗"这个字结束。这三七二十一首诗，组成了"一个字之内的世界".[95]

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[95] 杨炼, 一座向下修建的塔, 156-157.

> You may say that chapter five of *Concentric Circles* is 'conceptual art' using the Chinese language: I divided the Chinese character 詩 (*shī*, "poetry") into its three constituent parts (言, 土, 寸 — each of which is a character by itself), and used each of them to develop a set of seven poems with a single-character title containing the same radical; the three sets are all ended with a poem entitled "詩". These twenty-one poems together compose a "world [*shì jiè*] inside a character."[96]

It is in and through this closing world, then, that I begin my reconstruction of the enigmatic poetic cosmology that gives Yang his history without time.

Poetry: forms of disappearance

One reasonable way to begin might be at the end: in the final poem of *Concentric Circles*, which is also the final poem of three poems simply titled "诗" ["Poem/ Poetry" / *shī*], the notion of the poem and its poetic constitution come under immense pressure, opening up into a final incomplete fragment, whose incompletion arguably invites a reading of it as an unanswerable question. The poem is here reproduced in full for the sake of its two-dimensionality—the poem does not break where the page breaks.

> 零
> 　消失成三
> 字
> 　三个秋天越过国界
> 远

[96] Yang, "Moved Once Again," 12.

三次　鸟向光辐射药味的影子
离
但丁就是被钥匙拒绝的
自
消失就是思想
己
挽回不了的　偷渡成下一行
的
合唱的土黄色虚无
过
停着　故乡死了的路被铁轨指着
去
三章　三块最远的云
肯
分泌
定
落叶　成百万涂得猩红的指甲
此
挠破乐谱　存在没有下限
刻
消失进亲爱的
诗
死后　美丽的情节
是[97]

Meticulously laid out as a poem whose layout already interferes with any conventional reading protocols, the ending of the poem may be read in two ways, depending on whether one reads it vertically (here, the first column—traditional Chinese has text laid out vertically, and from right to left) or horizontally (left to right and top to bottom, as is conventional with western languages and modern Chinese. This is Yang's usual mode of presentation, excepting the occasional implied

[97] 杨炼, 大海停止之处: 杨炼作品1982-1997诗歌卷 (上海: 上海文艺出版社,1998), 642-643.

transgression as we see here.) Indeed, it would not be unhelpful to imagine Yang's poetry as plotted out on a grid that would be difficult to accurately reproduce on presently available word processing technology: Chinese writing paper is often lined in a grid, in keeping with the spatial forms of its script. The one vertical line reads, semantically: "The word zero leaves its past confirms this moment poetry-or-poem is." Yang's characteristic absence of punctuation—likely an influence from traditional Chinese verse, which uses its internal tonal patterns, meter, and line breaks to lend structure, with pauses implied at the end of each line—compounds the ambiguities suggested in the English translation, although the line could well be rendered more meaningful by a reader interpolating some interpretive pauses (in a way reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's poetic prose). Certainly, when read in both vertical and horizontal directions, the final word of the line is "是" ["is/being" / *shì*]: an open and lingering question, then, asking what exactly "诗" ["poetry"/ *shī*] *is*.

Yet in the same poem, some tacit answers are quietly sounded: when read horizontally, the first word is "零" ["zero" / *líng*], whose status as 字 ["word" / *zì*: also a homonym for "自" "self" that comes later in the poem] is revealed by way of an

intervening “消失成三” [“disappearance becoming three” / *xiāo shī chéng sān*][98] such that the first three lines might alternatively be understood as “Zero/disappears becoming three/words.” This disappearance, containing within it a homonym for ‘poem,’ is picked up again in the tenth and twenty-sixth lines, where it is revealed first that “消失就是思想” [“disappearance just is thought” / *xiāo shī jiù shì sī xiǎng*] and then, as the poem draws to a close, that some unknown object “disappears in beloved/poetry-or-poem” or, on a different reading of the ambiguous genitive “的” [*dé*], “disappears in beloved’s/poetry-or-poem” [“消失进亲爱的/诗” / *xiāo shī jìn qīn ài dè shī*]. The former, then, connects the transformative disappearance of “zero” into words(/selfhood) to the operations of thought; the latter might then extend those operations into the final instance of “poetry-or-poem” that is under question. However, it also *may* not: it is not clear if the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh lines *should* be enjambed—although Yang’s work elsewhere does contain instances of clear enjambement, which is a modern innovation in Chinese verse, this particular linebreak and this poem in general all require more circumspect treatment considering their insistence on fragmentation and the unfinished. Indeed,

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[98] Holton & Chan translate this as “vanishing.” This has the virtue of being unobtrusive and working particularly well with the notion of ‘zero.’ Yet in the interest of communicating a bifurcating sense of active loss and negativity that I will locate in this and further instances of the same word elsewhere, I have opted for a somewhat more philosophically freighted formulation that attaches a negative prefix to an active verb: hence “dis-appearance.” Additionally, as Yang’s earlier comments note, translating all verb forms in Chinese necessitates something of an active decision, in the sense that one has to interpretively identify a tense every time one translates a verb. My decisions have been to choose grammatical accuracy within the context of his work, while striving to retain any ambiguity that I have identified, and that my argument dwells on.

the fact that this disappearance does not take an obvious object might be a signal to read the disappearance as already having happened, already performed by the poem's surreptitious operations: a zero disappears into words, first enumerated and then beloved.

The enigma of the poem's end is compounded by another intervention that comes between the words for "poem/poetry" and "is": the penultimate line reads semantically "死后　美丽的情节" ["after death　beautiful plot" / *sǐ hòu měi lì dè qíng jié*] (where 'plot' here refers to the narratological term) such that the last three lines may also read, on another semantic level and preserving the syntax that is crucial to its ambiguity, "诗/死后　美丽的情节/是" ["poem/after death, beautiful plot/is" / *shī/sǐ hòu　měi lì dè qíng jié/shì*]. That such a reading is even possible is already against the grain of Yang's analysis, which insists on the ontology of poetry as a rhetorical and open question. Here, it seems as if the two-directional reading that the poem invites also presents something of a intersecting dialogic or bi-systemic structure wherein the questions on one hand find the possibility of a somewhat quarrelsome and antagonistic answer on the other—an answer that, *if* we read the poem on the level of meaning as well as sound, *spatially* intervenes *between* the poem and the possibility of its being. Is poetry, then, a beautiful plot after death?

The question being set up here, of course, is then why and how death is being presented as the condition for beauty in this poetic cosmology. Indeed, why is there a plot, or perhaps even more peculiarly—why would such a plot be *beautiful*? Elsewhere in the fifth section, in a poem titled "墟" ["Ruins" / *xǜ*], there seems to be

a relatively straightforward or even banal answer: “唯一没背叛这首诗的是死者” [“the only ones who do not betray this poem are the dead” / *wéi yī méi bèi pàn zhè shǒu shī dè shì sǐ zhě*].[99] The postmortem beautiful plot might then be the absolute fidelity (or non-betrayal at any rate) that comes with being dead. Such a pronouncement then begins to implicate everything and everyone into the implicit betrayal of the poem as ruin: the poet, readers, and more broadly yet, those who are often opposed to “the dead” in Yang’s work—the survivors.

Indeed, I would suggest that these emphases on mourning, survival, and death may be productively read alongside the other modalities of loss proliferating throughout this fifth and final section. What Yang calls in another poem “消失的形式” [“the form/s of disappearance” / *xiāo shī dè xíng shì*][100] is further suggestive of the close-knit textual intimacy between poetry, disappearance, form, and mourning or death or survival as coterminous textual operations. Such an argument may be further augmented and developed through an accompanying poem to the one above, this one also titled “诗” [“Poem/poetry” / *shī*], coming at the end of the first subsection of the fifth section. The poem is one of seven in the subsection titled “言” [“Speech” / *yán*].

零
　　日期停在危险的一刻
译成
　　小小心脏失血的艺术

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[99] Ibid, 631.

[100] Ibid, 605.

水滴与水滴的界限
　　比喻历史
鸟鸣边缘
　　但丁躺在拉文纳
云起源之处
　　地下挖出的手表戴到萨拉热窝街头
复数的黑暗
　　孩子们作曲
风和风的间隙
　　红色大理石切成薄片
疼握住手
　　黄昏　撤离窗户
叶子　蚕食自己的绿
　　从背后射击秋天的建筑
语言学
　　容纳现实
火舌
　　舔中爱情的要害
一次内分泌　我们摇摇欲坠
　　但丁　背上遍布童声的弹孔
躺在海底
　　作为行刑乐队的读者
被零变成
　　像零的　一根晦涩的食指指着中文
此刻　什么不是诗[101]

As in the previous poem, the first word of this poem is again the word for "零" ["zero" / *líng*], but here it seems as if much of the poem's labor consists not in making the zero disappear, but to transform its status. At first standing alone and seemingly unrelated to any of the words or lines that follow it (either vertically or horizontally), this "zero" is crucially placed a word's distance away from the poem's next line: "日期停在危险的一刻" ["date stops at a dangerous moment" / *rì qī tíng zài*

[101] Ibid, 619-620.

wēi xiǎn dè yí kè]. Begging the question of what such a dangerous moment might be, this conjunction of ideas gets picked up again at the poem's end, where in the final three lines of the poem we learn that an implied *something* has been "被零变成/像零的　一根晦涩的食指指着中文/此刻　什么不是诗" ["by zero changed into / image of zero　an obscure index finger [*shí zhǐ*] points at Chinese-writing / at this moment what isn't poetry [*shī*]" / *bèi líng biàn chéng/xiàng líng dè　yì gēn huì sè dè shí zhǐ zhí zhè zhōng wén/cǐ kè　shěn mè bú shì shī*]. In these lines, 'zero' has become an agent that changes something into an image of itself. What that thing is is open to question: if the two lines before are enjambed, then it is possible that the object of change is "躺在海底 / 作为行刑乐队的读者" ["lying at the ocean's bottom / as reader of an execution band" / *tǎng zài hái dǐ/zuò wéi háng xíng yuè duì dè dú zhě*]. The possible ambiguity in the translation's "of" is at work in the original as well: it is unclear if the reader reads the "execution band" (literally, the composite image here is of an organized musical assemblage that performs capital punishment) or if the reader is somehow already a part of the "execution band." If this ambiguously implicated reader is being transformed into an "像零的" ["image of zero" / *xiàng líng dè*] or something that resembles that zero, then it might also be implicated in the poem's final and somewhat counterintuitive question that reprises the same word meaning "moment": "此刻　什么不是诗" ["[in] this moment　what isn't poetry" / *cǐ kè　shěn mè bú shì shī*]. Given the characteristic disjointedness of Yang's poetry, one might be forgiven for wondering if the deictic for "this" moment is being preemptively explained or prematurely strained by the line that came before it. With

the well-worn image of an "obscure" finger literally pointing at its own language and performance, it seems then that "this" moment might simply, banally enough, be *this moment*: a moment of plenitude wherein self-referentiality can turn its very instant of reference into the poetry and the poem it names. Yet this moment is of course also a moment that has previously been labelled "dangerous": a moment of danger in which a date stops. The oddity of the formulation—dates do not often stop in any literal sense—betrays already something of the temporal difficulty and thickness accrued to this "this moment" over the course of the poem. If at this moment nothing is not poetry—nothing is to be excepted from the claims and reaches made by "this moment"—then we might wonder if, under the terms of the poem's rhetoric, writing about *another* moment is even possible at all.

These two "moments" of poetic temporality frame the meandering and diffuse work of a long poem that at times overtly thematizes and privileges the possibility of reality, and at others extensively distorts images of nature and matter precisely through the material aspects of language, perhaps in order to turn both forms of the material in on themselves. Indeed, nowhere else in the poem is the question of time raised at all: moving from one time to another in the poem necessitates traversing an unstable territory of fissures only implicitly beholden to the structures put in place by time. Two examples of such fissures perhaps require a reading together, providing a demonstration of the inseparability between history and matter as Yang works them over in his poetic sounds: the first, in lines 5-6, reads as "水滴与水滴的界限 / 比喻历史" ["boundary between water-drop and water-drop

/ history [*lì shǐ*] of parable" or alternately "comparable to history"[102] / *shuǐ dī yǘ shuǐ dī dè jiè xiàn/bí yǜ lì shǐ*]; the second example, in lines 13-14, only half-reprises the early syntax but the second line recalls also the sound of "history"—"风和风的间隙 / 红色大理石切成薄片" ["interfissure between wind and wind / red marble [*dà lǐ shí*] cut to slivers" / *fēng hé fēng dè jiān xī/hóng sè dà lǐ shí qiē chéng báo piàn*].[103]

Imagining and positing interstices and boundaries within the fluids of nature, the first lines in each example eventually give way to two different activities and forces of history. It is unclear what kind of relation is being drawn between "history" and "parable" and/or "comparable," and whether the possible parable for history might indeed be the impossible and imaginary boundary that slices water into drops. The later example deepens and complicates matters further, for it remains unclear if it is the wind's "interfissure" that is cutting the marble into its slivers, or if it is the marble that is slicing the wind into slivers (assuming that the two lines are even to be read enjambed). Yet the tension that exists between these two pairs then seems to animate a diffusive parsing of history into components that cannot quite be named as natural, nor material, nor poetic nor auditory.

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[102] Holton & Chan translate 比喻历史 as "likened to history" but I have elected to use "parable" and "comparable" for the opportunity to register the related possibilities in this line.

[103] Holton & Chan translate 风和风的间隙 as "gap between the winds." I have modified this in order to note the structural symmetry in the original, which draws the two moments very close together. I also wished to register the compoundedness in the compound phrase "间隙", wherein "隙" (a 'fissure') to which Yang adds "间" ('between', 'inter') then suggests further fissuring an existing fissure. In this way, Yang allows his compound phrase to quietly resonate with the doubled syntax and images here.

For if one further pursues the harmophonic traces given in the poem, then one is also led to lines 19-20, where Yang writes "linguistics / accommodates reality [*xiàn shí*]" or perhaps even "accommodate reality" (where the verb may well be an imperative) [语言学 / 容纳现实, / *yǔ yán/róng nà xiàn shí*]. The notion that linguistics (the academic discipline) and reality might exist in some relationship of uneasy or demanded accommodation is perhaps not a particularly new one, but given the implicit play suggested between reality [*xiàn shí*] and history [*lì shǐ*], it then seems clear that both concepts are certainly being put under pressure through linguistic means, and within the same mesh of signifiers. However, this is not to suggest that they emerge on the other end affected in the same way: although Yang is by no means the first person to suggest a correspondence or relationship between reality and history, he substantially recalibrates their relations by drawing them into relation with yet other philosophemes further afield.

Most notable is the final harmophone to be read in this poem: lines 3-4 read "译成 / 小小心脏失血的艺术" ["translated into / little heart-organ's art of losing blood / *yì chéng/xiáo xiáo xīn zàng shī xuě dè yì shù*].[104] Perhaps it is the stopped date in the previous line that is being translated—or will be translated—as a waning

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[104] Holton & Chan translate "译成" as "translates as." I have chosen a more suggestive "translated into" in the past tense because "成" might also suggest a completed action, as well as a transforming translation into or as something else. My choice of "little heart-organ" in lieu of "tiny heart" (Holton & Chan) is likewise aimed at conveying the dissonance in Yang's original: it is part term of conventional endearment and infantilization (hence "little") and part surprisingly corporeal and technical image (hence "heart-organ" instead of just "heart," which may have more metaphysical implications when used alone.) Notably, the character for "heart" is also used in the title *Concentric Circles* [心]; cf. fn. 87.)

aesthetic wound whose loss sounds just like poetry [*shī*] in its saying. For this is also a moment that will be recalled later on in the sequence, in which as we have seen "disappearance" and "poetry" become almost interchangeable as textual processes: the character that invokes "loss" [失 / *shī*] here and the "disappearance" [消失 / *xiāo shī*] of thought and poetry elsewhere then gathers those disappearances together with this corporeal work of translation in loss.

Yet elsewhere in *Concentric Circles* Yang writes also of a different and more idiomatic kind of loss: "which hand writes—or wrote—the nursery set on fire in the air."[105] Translating literally as "loss/losing fire," the idiomatic Chinese phrase for an accidental fire presumably comes from the loss of control or consciousness that leads to the fire itself. Yet it also encodes within its idiom a mode of loss that precipitates a conflagration, and so even a mode of loss that murmurously aligns poetry, history, reality, and matter too with the image and uncontrolled modality of conflagration—a loss that somehow manages to be both active and vulnerable at the same time. At this point, then, it almost comes as no surprise that 火 ["fire" / *huǒ*] is also a harmophone for 活 ["to live, to survive" / *huó*]. A conflagration that might also be survival and life, and a lively survival that might also be a devastating conflagration: the allegorical connection takes me to a closer look at the forms of survival wicked throughout this text.

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[105] Ibid, 613.

Survival: "To Live This Word"

The poem titled "活 这个字" ["To-Live This Word" / *huó zhè gè zì*][106] functions as a kind of (relatively self-contained) formal catastrophe for the second section of *Concentric Circles*: the sixth poem in a sequence of eleven poems, it is also the longest and most formally innovative in that section. The poem is itself also further divided into five further subsections that each have a relatively stable, if unusual, form. With sections consisting mostly of disjointed lines and indefinite stanzas punctuated with spaces and meeting one another at unexpected and potentially meaningful junctures for most of the subsections, the poem's third and fourth subsections stand in contrast to the others in being structured not as stanzas but as rectangular blocks of text in precise alignments, with the occasional word or phrase breaking out from the rectangles in seemingly meaningful fashion.

Both modes of poetic strategy thus seem to work together in order to perform the trials of language posed by living and survival. For the title, in maintaining a larger-than-usual space between its main parts—"to live" or "life" (活, *huó*) and "this word" (这个字, *zhè gè zì*)—therefore seems to also call into question the relationship between the two. On one reading, it may simply be announcing its focus on this word "life" or "to live" or "to survive": the poem that follows, it seems to be saying, will be about and will be tarrying with this difficult word and all the related concepts that attend it. Yet on another reading, and perhaps relatedly, one

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[106] Holton & Chan translate this as "Life This Word." I have modified their translation in order to mark the ambiguity I discuss later: in short it is unclear if the first word functions as a noun or a verb; my reading affirms and interrogates the transitivity of the verb.

might also wonder: if it is the case that the act of living is here coming under scrutiny (and the poem certainly confirms this reading, as I will soon discuss), then it seems also important to wonder if the poem is also interested in thematizing living as a verb—and so perhaps even interested in thematizing and performing the impossible and transgressive task of living a word, and particularly "living this word," whatever this word may be. The ambiguity legible in the English translation here is also possible in the Chinese original, but perhaps what is most illegible is the space between the two, which marks also the illegible and withheld transitivity of the verb (if it is one). Somewhere in the space between living and "this word" is a simultaneous promise *and* denial that one might actually be able to live, even to survive, a word, "this" word.

All these questions hover and frame the rest of the poem, which seems to be somewhat more obviously autobiographical than many of the other poems here. The earlier sections of *Concentric Circles* contain occasional cues like specific place names and date markers that act unambiguously as callbacks to places where Yang has spent some time, but "To Live" in particular contains several references to someone and some things that are forty years old (Yang was born in 1955 and would have turned forty during the writing of *Concentric Circles* from 1994-1997).[107] Yet these moments are far from self-aggrandizing and celebratory, as an example might indicate:

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[107] The Constitution of the P.R.C. was officially adopted in 1954. This means that the P.R.C. also 'turned forty' sometime during the initial conceptualization or writing of *Concentric Circles*. It is difficult to determine if this historical detail is at play in the poem.

> 你脱下这张四十岁的脸　而
> 我的　在一口狂笑四十年的锅中沸腾[108]
>
> You strip this forty-year-old face　yet
> mine　in a pot maniacally laughing for forty years boils

The fact of being forty, then, is first attributed to a 你 [“you” / *nǐ*], but this person is already eagerly denouncing their persona and shedding the skin of that attribution. More tellingly however, a diegetic “我” [“I” / *wǒ*] then overtly enters the picture in the next line, only to reveal that *his* forty-year-old face is already boiling in a pot that also gets attributed the same forty years. In short, “you” and the implicit “I” (who are both also conflated with a boiling pot) are all forty years old, or at least have shed those forty years and treated them in the described way. After this, the poem’s deep and ironizing ambivalences about the stable diegetic and forty-year-old “I” get even further processed and run through the mill in the next two lines, which directly follow the ones above:

> 说着就是写着　写着就是煮着
> 而煮着就是生活[109]
>
> Speaking just is writing　Writing just is cooking
> And cooking just is life

What may seem like humorously gnomic pronouncements on their own then take on a more ambivalent cast in light of the previous lines. All the verbs in those lines (except “life”) are cast with 着 [*zhè*] which gives a sense of sustaining, as if they were still ongoing—thus the translation in continuous tense. The same sense continues

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[108] Ibid, 533.

[109] Ibid, 533.

through the parallelism in the first line, where the repeated syntax draws the reading along until the odd turn and stanza break into the second line, where it is revealed that life is somehow identifiable with, presumably, the kind of cooking that is taking place in the previous lines. This is then a cooking in which the "I" is not only systematically parsed into the structures of its diegetical self-address (hence the necessary interrelations of "I" and "you") but is also itself further identified with its own mad and material crucible, in which its own cooking/writing/speaking takes place. Further, the idiomatic Chinese for '"life" [生活 / *shēng huó*] contains a word that might also simply mean "raw" or "natal" [生 / *shēng*], allowing the cooking to then take on a particularly paradoxical burden of cooking while also being itself literally a raw form of life.

If nothing else, then, it is clear that many difficulties have already accrued to "living" and its quantifications of life relatively early on in the poem. Yet it is perhaps in the closing moment of this difficult and dispersive poem that the vertiginous problems of a living self, and the possibilities of living a word, are gathered together and recapitulated in a dense passage:

> 四季　孤独更明亮的形式
> 　　四十岁的一千年
> 你脱下这口钉牢的棺材而我在其中醒来
> 聆听　你紧贴白骨时静静聆听的
> 厌恨　被水泥花朵唯一等到了
> 我　还是一个字里无力发生的事故
> 　　还活着　还
> 　　没被说出[110]

[110] Ibid, 558.

Four seasons a form more luminous when lonely
Forty-year-old millennium
You strip off this nailed coffin yet I wake amidst it
Listen you cleave to white bone while quietly listening to
Hate only awaited by concrete flower/s
I still am an accident powerless to happen in a word
Still living Still
Not yet spoken out

Here the precise alignments of Yang's words also work to showcase moments of unevenness and transgression, as if to echo the somewhat metatextual commentary provided in the luminous and lonely form. The word for "form" [形式 / *xíng shì*] is the same as the previous word for poetry as a "form of disappearance," providing in this way an implicit commentary on the present poetic situation as well. For although what is taking place in this moment may well be read as a form or moment of disappearance, it is also one in which what disappearance takes place also leaves room for something else to happen, powerless though it may be. The potential of survival that is being coded into the poetic "I" takes place not only at the end of a long poetic sequence in which death is incessantly challenged as a matter of the flesh, but the "I" also comes under tremendous pressure to the point of being equated with the extensive trials of writing that are taking place here. Indeed, it is vital that the accident waiting to happen here draws its powerlessness from the fact of being *in* a word, perhaps providing one answer to what it is like to *live* a word. Being an accident waiting to happen, then, might also be analogized to waking up in a coffin that another version of oneself seems to have thrown off; and perhaps also to listening to white bone amidst the quiet: for the point of the final two lines seems to be that the accident that is powerless to happen is also caught somewhere

"still" [还 / *hái*], somewhere *in time*, and yet what is impossible to translate here too is that word "还", which—in other contexts and with other words and spoken in another way—may also mean "return" [*huán*], a return still in a word.

Elsewhere in *Concentric Circles*, in yet another poem titled "诗" ["Poem/ Poetry"] Yang writes, as if declaratively, "不可能了　才是诗" ["after the impossible only then poetry is" / *bù kě néng lè　cái shì shī*].[111] Importantly, what I have here translated as "after" is not a simple temporal afterwardness, although that is certainly one meaning at play: the Chinese "了" [*lè/liǎo*] most particularly marks the completion and closure of an event or a happening, such that the "afterness" of the impossible is predicated on the possibility and accomplishment of it. There thus seems to be much at stake in the difference between, on the one hand, a poetry *as* the impossible, and on the other hand, a poetry that is exclusively limited to being *after* the impossible, following *only* from the impossible (as is the suggestion being put forth here). Moreover, there is perhaps yet more at stake in making such a declaration, if it is one, within the ambit of poetry that is itself being poetically posited as the aftermath of the impossible—an ambit whose limits Yang has himself rendered evanescent and abyssal precisely through the work of utterances like this one. In this vein, it is perhaps no accident that the words for "is" [是 / *shì*] and "poem/poetry" [诗 / *shī*] are also harmophones for one another: almost alike but nuanced by the material of poetry too.

Further, one might wonder how such a conceptualization of poetry might

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[111] Ibid, 634.

chime with the previously discussed comments on poetry and the word: whereas previously there was at least *one moment* in which nothing was exempt from the claims of poetry (hence the proclamation "(in) this moment what isn't poetry"), here it seems as if there is a far more intractable condition being placed on the ontology of poetry: the completed event of the impossible. Poetry, then, might seem to be at once everything and strictly impossible. But perhaps the enigma of poetry might be better unravelled by pursuing the germane pun of the word-and-self as Yang invokes here (as previously mentioned, the Chinese words for "word" "字" and "self"/"subject" "自" are homonyms—*zi*). For if it is the case that poetry may be defined as that which produces the event of which it speaks, then the "word" here, given as something that is powerlessly withheld in reserve and awaiting a speech that is "not yet" here—but which is thereby paradoxically still living—might be, in some nontemporal sense, *pre-poetic,* lying in wait as a vital condition of the event. To further develop the implications of this poetic word for a materialist conception of history, then, I turn to some not-quite-alike theoretical antecedents.

<u>History without movement, being without time</u>

> And thus Zeus, who set limits on the depradations of time and suspended its constant flux, had no sooner established something inherently enduring than he was himself devoured along with his whole empire. He was devoured by the principle of thought itself…
>
> - Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*

My reading of Yang's *Concentric Circles* has concentrated on two important aspects of this long poetic sequence: poetry and survival. These readings were in response

to a question I had formulated, via Yang's reading of Pound, about mourning and poetry's possibility of engagement (or apparent disengagement, as the case may be —but then this too is its own modality of engagement) with the historical event. The question centered on how finitude/death can be registered without a language and thought of time: that is, how is it possible to mourn (which is to say, write "about" *and* "after" the historical event) without a predetermined notion of time? Moving through Yang's poetry yielded some tentative responses to this question. First, the spatialized and phonetic pressures on "poetry" that came at the end of Yang's poetic sequence situated poetry along a continuum of disappearance as a transformative textual operation: without time, it was then space and the matter of "zero" that undertook the displaced burden of poetic signification and fragmentation. Second, this reading was then further tested via an enigmatic notion of survival, the limit for poetic language in Yang's poetic sequence. Here, the horizon of finitude is not time but the word and the impossibilities encoded into it: I ended my reading on an accident or event that still *cannot* happen, bound as it was within the horizon of a word, but whose "living" or survival was assured as a simultaneous effect of that non-happening (which would importantly not be named as *potential* or *reserve* insofar as those would suggest the possibility of a future). There can only be living/surviving, or poetry: never the twain shall meet. Like poetry, then, the event becomes strictly impossible in that its impossible advent is tied not to the future but to the powerlessness of language. Underlying all this is a necessarily incipient discussion on the problem of translation as a theoretical decision of de/temporalization that, in pulling away from the claims of "timelessness," itself

constituted a surreptitious deconstruction of the modes of finitude I have just described: a force then in the event that does not happen.

It is difficult to know if Yang's structure of poetic finitude was overtly or consciously informed by the philosophical approaches that I will consider in this theoretical coda, in part because, like Yang's poetry, these philosophical approaches also derive some of their thinking from strong and idiosyncratic (which is not to say *correct*) mis/readings of Chinese writing. Indeed, the quarrel I will examine centers around a nebulous concept that provisionally takes the name "history/historicity" and its connections to "time" as an epistemological or ontological category, but in this quarrel, "history" is simultaneously also the prize in an almost-coterminous quarrel over defining the peculiarities of Chinese writing qua impossibility of philosophical conceptuality. Rather than situating the literary and philosophical within a hierarchy of influence, then, I would rather place them on level ground, with competing claims to be examined at once in all their resulting tensions.

Perhaps the first and most pressing question to emerge from making this move is the concept of time and temporalization, whose status vis-à-vis history remains to be ascertained. Up until this point in the chapter, its complexities have been largely corralled into a unitary concept and word. In my reading, I have considered a "time" that has variously made itself felt through (1) Yang's invocations of Western concepts of linguistics in the vital distinction and contradiction between the synchronic and diachronic in the reading of Pound, (2) insistent references to an all-encompassing present and "this moment," as well as, subtler still, (3) a broader structural concern with return, repetition, and recursiveness as a way of signaling an

underlying thematic concern with change and difference, which I have additionally framed as the poem's question of mourning and survival.

These conceptions of time call to mind Hegel's comments on China and Chinese writing, which have for a long time now been a difficult shadow for readers of the Chinese tradition (who consider themselves answerable to the western one). Further, they may be helpfully constellated with other parts of the Hegelian system: nature; time; and a dogmatic if not systematic expulsion from "world history." My considerations in this chapter center on the last two.

First, time: as it turns out, Hegel's passing comment on Zeus in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (cited in the epigraph of this section) is only one moment in several that deal with the historical consequences of infanticide and parricide in Greek mythology. Earlier on in the *Lectures*, Hegel notes that unhistorical nations (that is, nations that do not possess the reason of *Geist*[112] as origin and end of their statehood) are doomed to lose all traces of their history, or leave only ruin in their historical wake, because of their immature political and ethical organizations. As an example of a ruined historical trace, Hegel adduces the Greek myth of "the rule of Chronos or Time, who devours his own children (i.e. the deeds he has himself produced)" and in the same moment approvingly anoints Zeus (son of Chronos) as the rightful political sovereign and Hegelian subject who "was able to check the power of time… by creating a conscious ethical institution, i.e. by

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[112] *Geist* in Hegel's German is most often translated into English as "spirit," but it is also translatable as "mind" or "ghost" depending on the context in which it appears. Since much of my argument is interested in the possible continuity between these alternatives and how they complicate notions of history and materiality, I have elected to leave *Geist* untranslated here. This also avoids tiresomely listing "spirit/ mind/ghost" throughout.

producing the state."[113] [114]

While it is hardly surprising that the founding of this ethical state takes place through an act of violent parricide, what compounds the complexity of this allegorical myth is something that Hegel does not quite mention: the fact that Zeus was the only child Chronos *failed* to devour, having been substituted at birth with a rock and hidden from his father by a cunning mother. To extrapolate Hegel's analogy between child and deed: after time has devoured the history that it spawned, Zeus is then the only remaining historical deed that issues from time, inevitably turning out to be its sovereign master. What is mythologized and allegorized as parricide turns out to be a check on the tyranny of time, "suspend[ing] its constant flux." Yet when

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[113] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 145.

[114] Hegel's reading mobilizes what seems to be a common pun on "Chronos" ("time") and Zeus' father "Kronos"/"Cronus" ("cut," also known as Saturn in Roman myth). Despite the fact that the two are in fact distinct, I have followed Hegel's version in his pun because it is his reading that is at issue here. In Greek mythology, Cronus overthrew his father (one version of the myth claims castration), and in turn ate his own children for fear that they too would one day overthrow him. Zeus survived because his mother Rhea gave Cronus a rock wrapped up in a blanket to serve as a decoy. The rock was in fact devoured. Just as Cronus feared, and as Hegel writes, Zeus did eventually grow up to overthrow Cronus. Much more could be said about this mythic scapegoat-rock, particularly in light of Hegel's and Heidegger's readings of the anthropocentric relations between human, animal, and stone in 'nature,' which are currently being challenged by theories of 'new materialism' and Derrida's thinking of the animal's place in philosophy. Already lifeless, this rock is a prosthetic simulation of a humanoid god whose simulation's only purpose is another death. Although anthropocentrism is an irreducible limit within epistemological and speculative registers, such an exceptionalism could be critiqued as relying on a mode of substitution and sacrifice, particularly when set within a restricted economy. Further triangulations might be possible with Bataille's anthropological examinations of sacrifice as a practice and Derrida's reading of the Abraham-Isaac relation in *Donner la mort* as well as Baudelaire's "La fausse monnaie" in *Donner le temps* (with a notable resonance between the original French titles). For present purposes, I do not pursue this line of thinking.

this allegorically historical remnant of time (Zeus) does fall, he falls not to an ambitious son but to something yet more inevitable and anterior: "the principle of thought itself." Zeus is only a piece of history after all: escaping the mastery of time is one thing, but escaping the course of world history (qua *Geist*) as it moves onto its real home in the Christian world is quite another.

Broadly speaking, this is familiar Hegelian territory. There are two modes of history that the myth moves between: first, a more quasi-empirical history of fact and actuality; and second, the world history of *Geist* that manages to overcome/ sublate/elevate (*aufheben*) the former into its totalizing and universalizing sweep. Yet in this family drama that Hegel only passingly mobilizes for his exposition of the dialectical movement of history, it is telling that *Geist* devours Zeus and not Chronos —in other words, *Geist* devours the empirical deed who grows up to be sovereign, rather than its progenitor, time. Further, Hegel's Chronos was undone not by the "principle of thought" that subtends it as a concept as both beginning and ultimate end, but rather by its own child: empirical history, "the deeds he has himself produced."

Such a figural reading of time as a problem of genealogical succession then presents a rather striking inflection on the following passage from Hegel's *Lectures*:

> In our language, the word "history" [*Geschichte*, from the verb *geschehen*] combines both objective and subjective meanings, for it denotes the *historia rerum gestarum* as well as the *res gestae* themselves, the historical narrative and the actual happenings, deeds, and events—which, in the stricter sense, are quite distinct from one another. But this conjunction of the two meanings

> should be recognized as belonging to a higher order than that of mere external contingency: *we must in fact suppose that the writing of history and the actual deeds and events of history make their appearance simultaneously, and that they emerge together from a common source*.[115]

From a reflection on the word "history" in the German language (which, in Hegel's construal, is inherently speculative and thus the consummate medium for his philosophical labor), Hegel concludes with what seems like a counter-intuitive prescription in the form of a necessary positing with two prongs: first, that the common distinction between narrative-history and its events is nevertheless bridged by something more originary and necessary such that they *must* "make their appearance together"; and second, that in addition to having narrative-history and events appearing in the same instance, they must also "emerge together from a common source." In other words, what Hegel needs to posit here is that narrative-history and event must have the same time of appearance as well as genetic source.[116]

It is not difficult to surmise what this common origin/end might be per Hegel —the necessary movement of *Geist* for itself, towards itself—but what is somewhat surprising in the context of Hegel's investment in the continuity of historical

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[115] Ibid, 135, emphasis mine.

[116] In this regard, Derrida offers a helpful observation: "justement le trait commun à toutes les conceptions vulgaires du *Geschehen* c'est la présupposition d'un *sujet* auquel arrivent (*geschehen*) les événements" ["precisely the common feature of all the vulgar conceptions of *Geschehen* is the presupposition of a subject to whom events happen (*geschehen*)"]. Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: la question de l'Être et l'Histoire* (Paris: Galilée, 2013), 251. I consider Derrida's reading in greater detail later on in the chapter.

progress is that narrative and deed appear/happen at one and the same time, and further that this structure of instantaneous appearance/advent must be *posited*, a positing whose necessity is itself derived from the word "history." Where this moment differs from the previous figural account of Zeus/Chronos, then, is that whereas in the previous myth it is the remaining historical deed that ultimately usurps time itself, here the historical deed has a Siamese-twin brother necessarily born *with* him and who can never be severed from him on pain of non-existence: the writing and record of historical deed.

Of course, the family (and notably fraternal) analogy has its limits: what Hegel's story of Zeus and Chronos elaborates is more a parable about the necessary negativity of time, which in Hegel's telling of world history has not yet quite reached the ultimate end in the Christian world—this is why Zeus and his deed of slaying time is also consumed dialectically. For Hegel, time is a locus in which contradictions can meet and be held together *in succession*: this is why it is the negativity of the senses. What is vital in Hegel's construal of time as dialectical negativity is precisely the possibility of sequentiality, the contiguity from one instant to the next: with this condition, things that contradict one another can thereby co-exist. That is to say, in our more figural register, it would be vital for Hegel that sons should be able to kill their fathers, and that fathers not devour their children (!), and further, that father and son should be able to be in the same place and time. We may further recall too that Yang's comment about Pound's traffic between the diachronic and synchronic presented the mediation between the two as a contradiction. For Hegel, time is a means towards the end of historicity: although it remains tied to the realm of the

sensible and is thus not yet universal, it is nevertheless the negative movement of time that presents an essential condition for the full arrival at history.

By this point, it should not come as a surprise that the Chinese empire in Hegel's account is consistently figured as "the childhood of history":[117] a figure through which we may now recognize that China is not so much "outside" history or ahistorical as Hegel might have it, as much as another figure for the figure of a surviving child-deed-contingency that Chronos had unknowingly failed to devour. (Not a rock, however.) Indeed, we are also informed that one decisive problem with the Chinese state, which ostensibly short-circuits its admission into Hegelian history, is its over-reliance on the paternalism of a despotic sovereign, who rules lawlessly through coercion and punishment. Instead, writes Hegel, the proper Hegelian state should be governed through a subjective freedom that rules with reference to a universal end that it has arrived at by itself through reason and self-understanding —this is the purpose he has in mind when he writes that the Oriental state does not have "a purpose of the kind that we would describe as political."[118]

But the more damning criticism lies further on in the long relevant passage from the *Lectures*, wherein Hegel tells us precisely why the Far East can never be historical:

> At this stage, the state is already present, but the subject has not yet come into its rights. Ethical life has an immediate and lawless character, for this is the childhood of history. This early phase has two distinct aspects. The first is

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[117] Hegel, *Lectures*, 198.

[118] Ibid, 202.

> the state, which is based on the family relationship: it is a state of paternal guardianship, for the whole is held together by admonitions and punishments, and its character is prosaic, for it is still devoid of opposition and ideality. But it is also an enduring state, for it cannot change itself by its own efforts. Such is the character of the *Far East*, and of the Chinese empire in particular. As to the second aspect, this spatial continuity is matched by continuity in time. The states in question, without any change in themselves or in their underlying principle, are constantly changing in relation to one another, for they are engaged in an interminable conflict which rapidly leads to their downfall. Since the state is outwards-orientated, an awareness of the principle of individuality begins to dawn, for struggle and conflict require self-collectedness and self-comprehension. But this dawning awareness is still relatively weak, unconscious, and rooted in nature; it is a light, but not yet the light of self-conscious personality. History is still predominantly unhistorical, for it is merely a repetition of the same majestic process of decline. The innovations with which courage, strength, and magnanimity replace the splendours of the past go through the same cycle of decline and fall. But it is not a true downfall, for no progress results from all this restless change. Whatever innovation replaces what has been destroyed must sink and be destroyed in turn; no progress is made: and all this restless movement results in an ahistorical history.[119]

Hegel is willing to concede to China a number of properties and activities that might

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[119] Ibid, 198-199.

pass for a majestic reason and progress if one was not being careful: a "dawning awareness," "a light," "restless change," a "cycle of decline and fall" which, to an untrained eye, might almost pass for the same kinds of cycles that lead to a higher world order. Yet these are all not sufficient. Hegel's dogmatic exclusions are founded on a double problem: (1) change via a problematic and externally-oriented relativity instead of a self-motivated one; and (2) "mere" repetition, from which no progress can ensue. To Hegel, these are the chief signifiers of a lack of self-comprehension. The enduring state we find here is different from the enduring state founded by Zeus, because this one is marked by a *failure* of auto-affection (where Zeus's was marked by a proper Hegelian ethics as well as, it should be noted, the mythical murder of his father Chronos). This is the "spatial continuity" that is, we are told, "matched by continuity in time." Yet a closer look at the elaboration of this complementary temporal continuity is not rewarding. Where we had previously been led to believe that continuity in time was precisely the condition for a negativity that would further historical progress through contradiction, the continuity here is a repetitious and noncontradictory one that nevertheless passes under the same name. The pseudo-signs of progress are derived from the struggle of enmeshment in war between the states. One might think that this should certainly suffice as contradiction—after all, what could be more contradictory and oppositional than war between states?—but here too "[w]hatever innovation replaces what has been destroyed *must* sink and be destroyed in turn" (emphasis mine). The necessity implied here is difficult to parse, even given the highly arbitrary parameters Hegel has established: why *must* the new be destroyed? The distinction

he draws between change and progress in this history (that is still not historical) is perhaps due to the warring Chinese states' purported lack of individuality: the change cannot stick simply because it has nothing to stick to. There is no opposition because there is no individuality. For Hegel, war between Chinese states is a war between the very same, same because they are all non-subjects.

Geoffrey Bennington extends the idea of the non-subjective and merely repetitious into a generalized and material condition of Hegel's history:

> History then becomes not the process of spiritualisation described by Hegel, but the repetitive rhythm of the Great Wall of China's failure to be completed, its perpetual breaching by the nomads, which makes history both possible and impossible. The not-yet historical, not-yet result-producing (therefore not yet dialectical) reduction to dust of wall and nomads repeats in principle at every moment there is a frontier as violence and contingency, and any world-tribunal sits and judges in the non-totalisable dispersion of that dust.[120]

The dust-up that a Chinese sovereign faces in his attempt to consolidate the empire —figured in the form of the stateless nomads who incessantly challenge his monumental attempt to shore up his frontiers—is quite simply the problem that conditions the process of Hegelian history any and everywhere. Instead of progress and movement, there is only repetition and violence at the borders. This is then not a model of historical *production*, neither is it a model of history that requires the individuality of a subject. The only effect or affect it produces is a "reduction to dust"

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[120] Geoffrey Bennington, "Inter," in *Other Analyses: Reading Philosophy* (Electronic publication), 399.

that evades determination through a "not yet." Bennington finds in Hegel's privations of subjectivity *viz.* the Chinese state an accidental deconstruction of world history, one in which non-subjectivity turns out to be the condition of possibility for history itself precisely because it leaves room for a historical "not yet."

In a reading that additionally splices the recalcitrant place of China in the margins of Hegel's (written) world history with Hegel's aesthetic critique of Chinese writing, Haun Saussy writes:

> Whatever linguistic traffic connects East and West (including the writing of histories) is in principle one-way. That the West is supposed to come as the *Aufheben* ("sublation," "overcoming") of the East is no surprise at all; that it has to be, at the same time, the *Aufheben* of the difference between the East and the West is a little stranger, and a conclusion that the telling of the *Philosophy of History* only imperfectly vindicates. The first thing that must be overcome in the writing of universal history is history's tendency to turn into Chinese, a language that according to Hegel "has no way of indicating grammatical case [*Kasus*]. Rather, it simply leaves its words standing one next to the other [*nebeneinander*]." The moment of transition from East to West—the break—can therefore be seen as the central event in the story, the one that provides the interpretative formula for history before and after it. And its abruptness reflects the very nature of a break… The point of view that becomes possible after the break interprets the East as the inability to come to a break. But the break is its own interpretative law. Built into the formula for interpreting the East (as failure to come to a break) is a provision for the

> East's unreadability. By not making sense, the East makes sense as an object for interpretation. The East cannot be translated into history, only transcribed.[121]

What is at stake in Chinese writing is precisely the possibility of writing China into Hegel's history. Perhaps most striking for present purposes is the argument that Saussy draws out and sustains *alongside* Hegel's little linguistic observation about the Chinese language's supposed inability to indicate grammatical case. By noting the apparent impossibility of relational inflection in the Chinese language on a general level, Hegel's observation finds a particular case (so to speak) in Yang's more specific interest in the synchronic tenselessness of the Chinese language (whose striking ability to mend the wounds it inflicted on Pound's *Cantos* may perhaps be recalled here in the Hegelian idiom as a reverse-*aufheben* of the diachronic demands of the English—a reversal that does not remove Yang from the dialectic but keeps him squarely and irreducibly within it).[122]

The argument is this: the Asia-Europe transit cannot be made through any mechanisms internally available to Hegel's conception of world history, thus requiring the imposition of what Saussy calls an "interpretative law" in the form of Hegel's instituting such a break through contingent measures. Language, I will here interpolate more or less also interpretatively, stands in uneasy relation to the

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[121] Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 164-165.

[122] In this regard, see also Saussy's "Always Multiple Translation" for a long and layered lineage of Western thought that persistently insists on the Chinese language not having any grammar; I consider this argument in greater depth in Chapter 1 on Eileen Chang and the modernization of the Chinese language.

oscillation between a prior-posited necessity and an imposed contingency: history tends to turn into Chinese not entirely because spirit gets bogged down in the muck of China, but also because history tends to run up against a problem in the telling of itself. Thus, inasmuch as the teleological progression of world history rests on the break that the Asia-Europe transit demands as Saussy explains here, so then does the writing and the story of world history also depend on a China that is "transcribed"—a history whose transitional breaks are registered in words that can only "stand one next to the other" in a non-relation of withdrawal and opacity. This is, in a way, only an educated guess at what Hegel had in mind with his complaint: after all, at least on a material and descriptive level, *all* words stand one next to the other, so the question is rather if they *can* change in a self-motivated way, or even through the relation of difference (although not, as we have seen, through the relation of the same). Perhaps this then is precisely the point: both Yang and Hegel, we can recall, derived their theoretical observations—the one about time, the other about world history—amidst a "linguistic traffic" of reading (or unreading) that is nevertheless more than linguistic in that it, per the structures of Western thought, implicates a philosophy of history and time that are conditioned by the morphological possibilities (or lack thereof) of language.

Yet where Hegel might complain about words that stand next to one another in no obvious mode of relation, Yang's work evidently cannot do without the possibilities generated by that impossible relation. Where Hegel is bothered by the impossibility of inscribing change through the Chinese language, Yang—in my reading at least—tarries with and even mourns that impossibility precisely through

attention to the modes of material inscription in his work. (Indeed, I can imagine a more entertaining version of this chapter that takes the form of a long and spirited conversation between Yang Lian and Hegel on the matter of Chinese writing.)

Such an impossibility takes me from Hegel to one of his strongest and most critical readers, Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's critical relation to Hegel comes through most overtly in his 1940 *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Thesis XVII offers the most forthright critical reading, albeit through a difficult analysis:

> Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest [*Stillstellung*] as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled [*Aufheben*]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of

> history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.[123]

The central intervention that Benjamin makes for the post-Hegelian tradition is the "arrest" [*Stillstellung*; elsewhere also translated "zero-hour"] of the dialectic. The term *Stillstellung*, which is Benjamin's own coinage in the German, also further suggests a kind of position or positioning that has come to a halt. This arrest takes place through a "shock" of experience that Benjamin will often connect to the "Messianic," an eschatological and implicitly non-teleological reference to something divine that functions as a provisional end of Benjamin's history, but whose divinity is already under question precisely because of Benjamin's idiosyncratic conception of materialist history. Benjamin's materialist history implicitly aligns the Messianic with a singularity and event that resides in the future, in an uneasy relation to the present that Benjamin would retain as "divine." He draws an explicit contrast to Hegel's universal history here: where universal history is "additive" and relies on a "homogeneous empty time" to maintain its illusions, Benjamin's notion of materialist historiography is instead "based on a constructive principle" that is nevertheless not exactly "constructive" in the conventional sense of the term, being one that requires a "Messianic cessation of happening" to "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history." Benjamin's interest thus lies not so much in history per se as in that singular and specific blasting out of history, which for him is simultaneously the *Aufheben* because it still yet preserves the history out of which it blasts. Moreover, implicit within this critique of universal history is also a critique of

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[123] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1967), 262-263.

time as a "flow of thoughts," which only begets a homogeneous emptiness. Indeed, Benjamin echoes the previous discussion of history and time as son and father, except that here time is ambivalently rendered as a "precious but tasteless seed" that will be the futurity of the fruit qua historical event. Instead, the dialectical singularity of "shock" seems to bear a close resemblance to the "accident" of poetry previously elicited from Yang's work; and furthermore, the non-divine "history" I have tried to think through as a failure of temporal inscription would certainly not directly align with the "history" Benjamin presents here, but could instead find a provocative interlocutor in what Benjamin called the "Messianic cessation of happening."

Despite all this, we are here still within the dialectic, certainly, even if it is a highly challenged and qualified version of it. Yet what Benjamin here calls "materialist historiography" and which he here presents as a project of dialectics perhaps finds a different performance in his long and unfinished final work *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-werk*). Consisting of loosely-gathered fascicles

[*Konvoluts*][124] of citations and quotes from poets, novelists, philosophers, as well as historical ephemera collected alongside Benjamin's own iterative and recursive formulations of his own thinking, *The Arcades Project* presents perhaps the most compelling example of what exactly "materialist historiography" might be, or stand for. Every so often in *The Arcades Project*, however, Benjamin also directly reflects on the question of his own method, critique, or analysis, sometimes by citing or dramatizing another source. One such moment comes in Konvolut K, on dreams; it is a citation of Proust, with only a little commentary from Benjamin himself:

> A small piece of materialist analysis, more valuable than most of what exists in this field: "We love these hard, solid blocks of material which Flaubert raises and lets fall with the intermittent thud of a steam shovel. For if, as I found recounted in some book or other, sailors at night used to catch the glow

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[124] The definitive English translation of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* translates *Konvolut* as "convolute," accepting the dissonance between the German word's common meaning/use and the meaning of its English pseudo-cognate as an extended effect of Benjamin's odd text. Editors and translators Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin note: "[i]n Germany, the term *Konvolut* has a common philological application: it refers to a larger or smaller—literally, a bundle—of manuscripts or printed materials that belong together. The noun "convolute" in English means 'something of a convoluted form'" (xiv). The editors further note that other candidates—folder, file, sheaf, bundle—all have additional connotations deemed inappropriate to Benjamin's project. I here suggest "fascicle" as a further alternative; "convolute," especially in its most common use in English as "convoluted," inadvertently suggests too strong a qualitative pronouncement on the text's piecemeal form, while adding a structure of intricate folding-together that could be overly interpretative. "Fascicle" I take from the name conventionally used by critics for Emily Dickinson's small books of hand-assembled poetry, where the organizing logic for each fascicle and her levels of intentional deliberation remain a matter of uncertainty. In addition to the philological meaning, it also originally referred to bundled structures in anatomy as well as botany (eg. nerve fibers). This would also gesture towards Benjamin's manifest fascination for physiological discourses and the resulting tendency to figure Paris and other phenomena of collectivity as nerve systems, blood flowing through veins, etc. (a fascination that he seems to inherit from Baudelaire): a figuration at an intimate distance from the form of his corpus.

> of Flaubert's lamp as he worked through the night, and take their bearings from it, as if from a lighthouse beam, so too it might be said that when he 'unloaded' a good round phrase, it had the regular rhythm of one of those machines used in excavating. Happy [*heureux*] are they who can feel the beat of this obsessive rhythm." Marcel Proust, *Chroniques* (Paris, 1927), p.204 ("A Propos du 'style' de Flaubert"). [K3, 4][125]

It should certainly go without saying that this presumptive example of "valuable" materialist analysis is not necessarily something that Benjamin himself was intending to or striving to achieve in his own work. Yet Benjamin's reading of Proust's "happy"[126] reading of Flaubert perhaps already begins to confuse the broad philosophical contours of Benjamin's presentation of materialist historiography. For if we follow the terms of the somewhat unstable analogy being presented here, it seems as if Flaubert's work lamp is being analogized to "the regular rhythm of one of those machines used in excavating," which only shortly later is reread again as an "obsessive rhythm." With the regularity of repetition there is also obsession, which are furthermore also transplanted into the orienting glow of a writer's late-night lamp. In other words, even as Benjamin lambasts Hegel for universal history's lack of

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[125] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

[126] As is usual with the French texts he reads, Benjamin quotes Proust in the original French. However, it would not be unreasonable to hear also the German *Glück* (happiness, luck, felicity) in this happiness: see Elissa Marder's "Walter Benjamin's Dream of 'Happiness'" for a reading conjoining happiness with the promise of survival in the form of a freighted correspondence with Gretel Adorno; as well as Giorgio Agamben's related reading on happiness as historical redemption. Elissa Marder, "Walter Benjamin's Dream of 'Happiness'," in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project,* ed. Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006).

"theoretical armature" and instead locates his own dialectical gesture within the immobilized *Stillstellung* of materialist historiography, this cited example of what such a materialist analysis might entail seems difficult to assimilate into either of those dialectical structures, and further, even imprecisely takes on the form of Hegel's China, doomed to a repetition of decline that only plays itself out on the wayside of historical progress.

Yet the formal similarity belies a forceful difference: Benjamin's Proust presents this rhythmic repetition with an affective charge and aesthetic possibility that Hegel would never allow to Chinese history, or even to Chinese writing. Further, what Benjamin has called "homogeneous, empty time" that awaits filling by universal history seems to find, if not overt callbacks to the concept of time, then at least *homogeneity* here in this textual instance. If in Benjamin's *Theses* the dialectic was a "Messianic cessation of happening" that took the form of a monadological structure, then here there is perhaps another structure of not-happening, another way in which the cessation of happening may not be unitary and divine, but indeed a negativity that takes place through a repetition of the same: mechanical thuds; falling blocks; excavating.

What then are the implications for thinking through a history without recourse to time? What Yang, Hegel, and Benjamin all have in common is an interest in the complications that arise for history and historicity when one begins to toy with its insecure links to time as it is variously understood. This interest is shared and vigorously questioned by Jacques Derrida in his early 1964-65 seminar sequence on Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, titled *Heidegger: The Question of*

Being and History, additionally significant for being his debut seminar series at the École normale supérieure (l'ÉNS).[127] In session 4, Derrida remarks:

> Le problème de l'historicité est *greffé* sur celui de la la temporalité… cette greffe signifie surtout que l'historicité ne peut être pensée dans sa racine qu'à partir du mouvement de la temporalité, d'une interrogation ontologique de ce que signifie la temporalité du *Da-sein*.[128]
>
> [The problem of historicity is *grafted* onto that of temporality… this graft signifies above all that historicity can be thought in its root only on the basis of the movement of temporality, of an ontological interrogation of what the temporality of *Da-sein* signifies.]

Derrida highlights the restriction underlying the connection: in the context of Heidegger's ontology as constituted by *Dasein*'s orientation towards its own temporal finitude or death, it is "only" by thinking the movement of temporality that it will be possible to think the historicity that is architectonically grafted onto it. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, this grafting is a necessary gesture because temporality is the exclusive grounds for ontological thinking, and thus to think historicity through any other concept would be to ground historicity in something other than ontology and the necessary structural conditions for existence (as

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[127] I thank Geoffrey Bennington for making available to me his unpublished working draft of the English translation (forthcoming 2015), as well as his proposed list of errata for the published French edition. All page citations here are from the French edition, and I include the original French when quoting. Due to the circumstances, English quotations do not have corresponding page numbers. My quotations of the published French text also take into account Bennington's errata; where I have modified the published text, I note this using "GB mod." and also underline the relevant word.

[128] Derrida, *Heidegger*, 145.

distinct from "mere experience," the "merely" contingent and factical, the ontic perhaps?). Thus, Derrida's pedagogical thought is that by looking at Heidegger's reading of how being comes to be *in time*, we are also making our way towards working out Heidegger's notion of how being comes to be *historical, of history*—how it (to provisionally sustain a Hegelian spatial language that is far more problematic here) *enters* history.[129] Indeed, for Derrida, thinking time alongside Heidegger is a matter fraught with difficulty and significance, for

> On ne peut avoir accès à la temporalisation authentique que dans l'horizon de la finitude et on n'accède à l'historicité authentique qu'à partir d'une temporalité finie. Il n'y a pas d'histoire si la temporalité n'est pas finie.[130]
>
> [One can gain access to authentic temporalization only in the horizon of finitude and one gains access to authentic historicity only on the basis of a finite temporality. There is no history if temporality is not finite.]

In Derrida's reading (which in this case turns out to be a fairly uncontroversial summary of Heidegger's thesis), authenticity in Heidegger is conferred "only" through a thinking of finitude; vulgarity is confirmed in the absence of a thinking of finitude and death. It is not simply that history is impossible without the determinations of time; it is that history is impossible without *finite* time in the

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[129] Indeed, this seminar can be read as a very early instantiation of the argument presented in "Ousia and Grammé," but whereas "Ousia and Grammé" focused on the overlapping movements of temporalization and spatialization in large part via the reading of Aristotle's *Physics*, this seminar focuses more on the temporalization of history (without necessarily making the connection between Hegel's history and spatiality). I have chosen to focus my discussion on the seminar because of the overt interest in the distinction between historicity and temporality, and thereby a more direct relevance to my reading of Yang Lian.

[130] Ibid, 215.

strong sense of finitude, without the certainty of death or something like it at the end. The "vulgar" and irresolutely infinite time that haunts this discussion is a structure of time to which Heidegger and Derrida assimilate Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl: a successive movement of discrete moments/instants that occur in perpetuity. (Where Heidegger and Derrida differ is on *how* that occurrence takes place—what drives it, what frames it, what if anything ends it, and how that ending still persistently fails to think authentic finitude.)

In his fidelity to Heidegger *and* putting the accent on Heidegger's thinking of finitude, Derrida's pedagogical labor has already taken on the affirmative distance of a reading, however imperceptible as affirming or distant. For Derrida, thinking historicity through temporality is still too self-limiting, staying too close to the categories of metaphysics:

> C'est parce que l'on part du temps, comme horizon transcendantal de l'être pour parler de l'histoire et pour parler de l'être que les catégories manquent, que manquent les catégories non métaphysiques. Ce qui revient à dire très massivement que déterminer le temps comme horizon transcendantal de la question de l'être, titre qui résume toute l'entreprise de cette deuxième partie de *Sein und Zeit*, reste un geste métaphysique. Et le renversement, comme dit Heidegger lui-même, le renversement qui devenait à la fois nécessaire et d'une certaine façon impraticable, ce renversement se produit très curieusement au moment où la question de l'histoire est posée et où la question de l'être va enfin être reposée au-delà de l'analytique de *Dasein*. Et donc aussi la question de l'histoire de l'être posée autrement qu'à la

> condition de ce renversement qui interrompra la continuité de l'analytique du *Dasein*.[131]
>
> It is because one sets off from time as the transcendental horizon of being in order to talk about history that the categories are lacking, that non-metaphysical categories are lacking. Which comes down to saying very broadly that determining time as the transcendental horizon of the question of being, a title that summarizes the whole enterprise of this first part of *Sein und Zeit*, remains a metaphysical gesture. And the overturning, as Heidegger himself says, the overturning that became both necessary and in a way impracticable, this overturning happens very curiously at the moment when the question of history is posed and when the question of being will finally be posed beyond the analytic of *Dasein*. And thus also the question of the history of being that one comes to wonder if it can be posed otherwise than on condition of this overturning that will interrupt the continuity of the analytic of *Dasein.*

The issue as Derrida sees it lies with the matter of horizonality; his concern is with a necessary displacement of the horizon of finitude away from even Heidegger's notion of time (which would be distinct from vulgar time, something that Heidegger too is moving away from). This is the displacement that he would later go on to call the trace, or *différance*, which has in turn been variously figured over the long course of his career—these other figures are further displacements. By making the horizon of temporality the point of departure—in both senses of this term—as well as

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[131] Ibid, 240, GB mod.

fulcrum on which he will attempt the overturning of metaphysics, Heidegger remains indebted to those inherited categories, instituting the horizon of finitude that Derrida's deconstructive reading seeks to displace and interrupt.

Yet what is at stake in the Derridean reading of Heidegger here is arguably the specificity of the question of history qua temporalization-of-being; what is at stake is thus more than Derrida's implied work of articulating the minimal conditions for the structure of the trace (which will be formalized after this seminar through a reading of Levinas), nor the inscription of an infinite repeatability within finitude. Specifically, then, what Derrida puts his finger on here is a "very curious" co-incidence in Heidegger's argument: a simultaneity of "when the question of history is posed" and "when the question of being will finally be posed beyond the analytic of *Dasein*." The implied suggestion is that posing the question of history itself will thereby take Heidegger beyond the analytic of *Dasein*, which is to say, take him and us a step beyond his metaphysical debt.

Which brings us to Heidegger's reading of historicity: one that takes flight from a reading of *Weltgeschichte* as well. The above-mentioned promise of a way to think history "otherwise" than as temporality turns out to be a bit of a wild goose chase: by the start of the final session 9, Derrida notes that "[c]herchant—avec peine —quelque concept nouveau et original, permettant dans *Sein und Zeit* de distinguer l'historicité de la temporalité dans laquelle l'historicité est enracinée, nous n'en avons trouvé *presque* aucun" ["[s]eeking – with difficulty – some new and original concept allowing us in *Sein und Zeit* to distinguish historicity from the temporality in

which historicity is rooted, we found *almost* none"][132] The "almost" however lends a clue to what he does find.

Two factors are at issue here: (1) Heidegger's reading of Hegel that makes a distinction between *Bewegtheit* ("historical motility") and *Bewegung* (movement as change of place); and (2) what Derrida calls "répétition historique" ["historical repetition"].[133] Heidegger associates *Bewegung* with Aristotle's physics insofar as he assimilates Hegel to Aristotle's vulgar notion of temporal and spatial change. Against this Aristotelian and Hegelian *Bewegung*, then, he situates a *Bewegtheit* that is somewhat more enigmatic: a means by which all determinate entities in the world (who do not however attain the ek-sistence of *Dasein*) have their own singular motility, rhythms of historical production, development, etc., as the basis on which something happens. A given example is the tool and its work of production. Entities are importantly not held to any common measure of development or goal (*entelechy*): indeed, their historicities quite simply have nothing in common other than that they are rendered thinkable by a pre-comprehension of historicity. Derrida is intrigued on one hand by the importance Heidegger seems to accord to *Bewegtheit* as it negatively works against the vulgar notion of the movement of time, and on the other hand by its seeming lack of elaboration on the proper ontological—that is to say, authentic, non-vulgar—level, particularly its consequences for the Hegelian event. As he notes, "Je crois que le problème de la *Bewegtheit* comme non-*Bewegung* était le problème le plus important aux yeux de Heidegger lui-même…

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[132] Ibid, 299.

[133] Ibid, 310.

Mais il ne nous dit pas ici quelle est la *Bewegtheit* propre au *Geschehen*" ["I believe that the problem of *Bewegtheit* as non-*Bewegung* was the most important problem in the eyes of Heidegger himself… But he does not tell us here what the *Bewegtheit* proper to *Geschehen* is"].[134]

However, there might be a tacit answer in the second factor under consideration. The concept of *Wiederholung* [historical repetition], Derrida informs us, is "sans doute le seul concept vraiment original et propre à une thématique de l'historicité dans *Sein und Zeit*" ["doubtless the only concept that is truly original and proper to a thematic of historicity in *Sein und Zeit*"],[135] and further provides Heidegger with a modality of "épaississant l'énigme de la temporalité et de l'historicité" ["thickening the enigma of temporality and historicity"].[136] Understood as an opening of the past from the future, historical repetition should nevertheless not be understood as an interval or relation between two presents/instants of time; it is rather a more originary belatedness that emerges out of Heidegger's analytic of Dasein as conditioned by a present that is derived from futurity, and which for this reason can only be a dissimulation of presence. Yet Derrida puts a different accent on it, and in his hands, historical repetition turns out to have a very strong theoretical claim indeed:

> La seule ouverture de cette *répétition*, la possibilité même de la répétition, crée un élément primordial de généralité ou d'universalité. La répétition

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[134] Ibid, 307, GB mod.

[135] Ibid, 301.

[136] Ibid.

> historique ne peut s'ouvrir que dans le langage et elle est donc d'entrée de jeu générale en un certain sens. Et au regard de cette généralité fondamentale qui apparaît dès qu'une répétition est possible, et lors même que la répétition historique a affaire comme toujours à de l'origine, au regard de cette généralité primordiale, les problèmes classiques de la généralité et de la singularité, de la loi et de l'événement, signes du modèle ou de la structure et de l'enchaînement des faits singuliers, etc., tous ces problèmes, si importants et inévitables soient-ils, sont dérivés et au fond superficiels.[137]
>
> [Only the opening of this *repetition*, the very possibility of repetition, creates a primordial element of generality or universality. Historical repetition can only open in language and it is therefore from the outset general in a certain sense. And with regard to this fundamental generality that appears as soon as a repetition is possible, and even when historical repetition is dealing, as always, with something of the origin, the classical problems of generality and singularity, of law and [singular] event, of the model or the structure and concatenation of singular facts, etc., all these problems, however important and inevitable they be, are derivative and at bottom superficial.]

It is not difficult to recognize a nascent formulation of *différance* in this discussion (if *différance* can be said to have origin and history), which itself belatedly reinstates Heidegger's missing generality of *Bewegtheit*. Drawing together the entities that have nothing in common in their historical motilities, the repetition Derrida elicits from Heidegger's history is more primordial than even the temporality of *Dasein*,

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[137] Ibid, 310-311.

rendering all the classical difficulties of metaphysical philosophy "derivative." Furthermore, it crucially acquires its generality and theoretical reach by the fact that it "can only open in language."

What emerges from Derrida's account of Heidegger's reading of Hegel, then, is a repetition anterior to any thought of temporality or historicity, and which therefore necessarily conditions both. This repetition particularly unsettles the horizon of finitude that Heidegger too hastily pins to time, suggesting that it is much more a *borrowed* and modified discourse of time and futurity that will itself open that horizon to repeatability. (All available terms, borrowed from metaphysics, necessarily remain metaphors on this deconstructive construal of language and imbrication with the tradition.) Further, what falls away in Derrida's reading of Heidegger is also ontology itself, or at least any traditional or Heideggerian sense of being, which is also subject to this repetition-via-language.

It will perhaps be helpful to look towards an only slightly later essay by Derrida in order to fill out the question of repetition in language, as well as its implications for time and historicity. In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida sustains a long working-over of temporality and temporalization through the Freudian motif of *Nachträglichkeit* [deferred action, afterwardsness]: a psychic phenomenon in which a repressed memory is belatedly understood only upon a repetition, and upon that belated recognition becomes recognizable as a trauma. For Derrida, reading Freud "is not a question of a negation of time, of a cessation of time in a present or a simultaneity, but of a different structure, a different stratification of

time."[138] The "stratification" here comes from a reading of Freud's mystic writing pad: a novel writing implement that materially preserves the traces of writing's imprint even while erasing them for more writing. Derrida draws from this the thought of writing as conditioned by a double and repetitious gesture of inscription and erasure: together, these strata give a structure of the trace. As Derrida's helpful negations clarify, then, the structure of the trace is of a radically different order in comparison to the theoretical structures of temporality I have considered thus far: neither a Hegelian dialectical negativity; nor a cessation in the vein of Benjamin (although Benjamin is much more interested in a vacant Messianic event attached to that cessation); nor beholden to motifs of presence and simultaneity.

Of particular interest for present purposes is Derrida's engagement with the Freudian idea of a timeless unconscious, which is dismissed by Derrida in light of the structure of *Nachträglichkeit*. Such a timelessness, Derrida suggests, is true only insofar as Freud is operating on a vulgar and common conception of time (of the sort that we have already encountered thus far). The suggestion then is that Freud's writing, particularly on *Nachträglichkeit*, offers a radical restructuring of time that would depart from this vulgar conception, even if he himself does not quite see it as such. This temporalization is figured in Freud through the spatial aspects of writing:

> Ne soyons donc pas surpris lorsque Freud, pour suggérer l'étrangeté des relations logico-temporelles dans le rêve, en appelle constamment à l'écriture, à la synopsis spatiale du pictogramme, du rébus, du hiéroglyphe, de l'écriture non phonétique en général. Synopsis et non stasis : scène et non

[138] Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 219.

> tableau. Le laconisme, le lapidaire du rêve n'est pas la présence impassible de signes pétrifiés.[139]
>
> We should not be surprised, then, if Freud, in order to suggest the strangeness of the logico-temporal relations in dreams, constantly adduces writing, and the spatial synopses of pictograms, rebuses, hieroglyphics and nonphonetic writing in general. Synopsis and not stasis: scene and not tableau. The laconic, lapidary quality of dreams is not the impassive presence of petrified signs.[140]

We should additionally not be surprised that Derrida elsewhere also notes Freud's adducing of Chinese writing to explain the idiomatic uncodifiability and untranslatability of the dreamwork in the work of analysis, in which symbols can only and must only be understood in their contexts.[141] Even the final sentence here reads like a rebuke to Hegel's critique of Chinese writing as materially impenetrable and essentially self-sufficient symbols (or Barthes?). These oddities of the dreamwork-Chinese, then, can only be understood 'in context': that is, with reference to a structure of delay that underlies its spatial, non-phonetic, and static character, recapitulating perhaps some repetitious words that we have seen before:

I still am an accident powerless to happen in a word
Still living Still
Not yet spoken out

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[139] Jacques Derrida, "Freud et la scène de l'écriture," in *L'écriture et la différance* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 321-322.

[140] Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," 217.

[141] Ibid, 209.

Yang Lian's work, then, is manifestly of this philosophical tradition, and yet it is not. What is the effect (if not the goal) of inscribing it within this formidable lineage of Western thinking about time and history? For my intentions are not to authorize the questions posed by his literary work via a theoretical firmament (that would be additionally complicit in a hierarchization of an east-west difference); rather the opposite. The provocations of his work on time, history, and mourning have motivated my theoretical inquiry; and my implied suggestion throughout all this has been that the specificities that arise from reading Yang's work against the grain of his essentializing commentary alter not simply the parameters of time and history but also the operativity of *any* finitude constituting the historical event. It is easy enough to note that the notion of time Yang claims to transcend, like the Freudian unconscious, might be derived from what has been called the "vulgar" one, insistent on transcending the diachronic through the presentism of synchronicity. Yet this discourse of time is also connected to the English language as well as the crucial transition from the always-already temporalized English to the "timeless" and spatialized Chinese, each language-system a figure for relations to time that unavoidably implicate one another in translation. This is then neither a transcendental nor immanent and/or ontic thinking of time. Additionally, through the repetitive and even banal work of mourning and insistent separation between the irrecoverable dead and living, Yang also presents a mode of historical narrative whose cathexis to its event is necessary and yet radically in question. In other words, much of this chapter's inquiry circles around a dim yet persistent thought that Yang's work suggests a theory of writing that has only finitude, but no futurity.

Unlike the stillborn and abandoned transitions in Hegel's world history, the temporal labor undergirding Yang's work produce a history of mourning that is powerless to be born, and yet still borne out through a reconstituted and qualified structure of writing. This reconstituted structure splices—within the poetic word—event and non-event: it is an occasion for thinking an even more minimal non-movement of the trace that operates through its cessation.

And yet Yang (in my resistant reading) accesses this intractable thinking of the event through a material Chinese language that he insists is properly and exclusively Chinese. In the chapter that follows, however, I turn to Yang's influential western antecedents Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound for a similar reading of Chinese writing that becomes generalized into a matter of universal and translatable language. There, I find the English and Chinese languages conjoined and disjointed, where the agent of translation is not only language, but its matter as matter, and its matter as metaphor.

Chapter 3

Matter:
The Petals of Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound

An "exceptionally easy" translation

There is an elliptical moment in Ernest Fenollosa's landmark essay for Anglo-American modernist poetics *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (*CWC* henceforth; w. 1906; Ezra Pound's interventions dated around 1914-1916) that would likely be surprising to anyone familiar with both the English and Chinese languages.[142] There, Fenollosa remarks that "the likeness of form between Chinese and English sentences render [sic.] translation from one to the other exceptionally easy. The genius of the two is much the same."[143] Tellingly, this is one of very few moments in Fenollosa's essay that remains completely untouched by Ezra Pound's editorial hand, which tends to be heavily in evidence both conceptually and stylistically throughout the rest of the essay.

One might wonder, however, if Fenollosa's dismissal of the labour of translation ought to be taken quite so seriously. Even leaving aside the sheer volume of his translations, cribs, and notes, his posited "likeness of form" lies between English and Chinese *sentences*. The point Fenollosa makes here is thus a structural

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[142] Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, edited by Haun Saussy et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). This critical edition makes widely available for the first time both the text of Fenollosa's own manuscript (with annotations by Pound) alongside Pound's prepared version familiar to most readers over the years. Unless otherwise indicated, my references are to the text of Fenollosa's manuscript. My quotes throughout this chapter have retained all idiosyncrasies of grammar, spelling, punctuation etc. as given in the critical edition.

[143] Ibid, 89.

and apparently syntactic one. For, as he quickly goes on to note in his very next sentence, "[f]requently it is possible, by omitting English particles, to make a literal word-for-word translation, that shall not only be intelligible in English, but even be the strongest and most poetical English. (Here, however, one must follow closely what is *said*, not merely what is abstractly *meant*)."[144] Buried within the parenthetical afterthought is what seems like a familiar principle of literary theory, which begins by parsing the difference between the exactitude of poetic saying (the signifier) and the routes it takes (signification) towards the abstracted meaning (signified). Here, however, the mysterious locution "what is *said*" is not simply to be followed closely; it is also presented as differing from the abstract, and further, implicitly possesses a "likeness of form" to English sentences that are "the strongest and most poetical English"—as long as one removes consideration of the particles of English, considered to be weak and functionless for these purposes. For Fenollosa, "what is *said*" in Chinese poetry, then, is literally and "word-for-word" alike in form to the most poetic English there can be. Yet the concomitant failure to account for the English particles that he conveniently excises in his easy translation suggests already that the claim of a literal "word-to-word" translation of sentences, by way of a cross-linguistic "likeness of form," is a deeply troubled one, even within the artificial parameters of his account.

Such an unusual claim about linguistics and grammar is inflected by the sociopolitical situation in which Fenollosa studies the Chinese language and its poetry. Writing in 1906 as something of a cultural ambassador of the United States

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[144] Ibid, 89-90.

to Japan (where there was historically a great deal of intercultural influence and even rivalry with nearby China), and in his official capacity as an expatriate academic lecturer of art history, sociology, and philosophy in Tokyo, Fenollosa uncannily opens his essay with the stirring declaration that "the future of Anglo Saxon supremacy in the world is probably bound up with the future of that East,"[145] going on further to note that "[t]his Chinese problem, alone, is so vast that … [n]o nation can afford to ignore it; we in America least of all. We must face it across the Pacific, and master it—or it will master us."[146] Such egregious demands for poetry to be wrenched into a dubious political service belie the claim that insistently follows this problem of geopolitical diplomacy: that is, the claim that if the (conflated) American and Anglo-Saxon worlds are to retain their dominance, they must first go "beyond a sentimental sympathy" in summoning a "patient sympathy,"[147] which is part of developing an "aesthetic sympathy"[148] with the Chinese—modes of sympathy that are all momentarily lacking, but which are ostensibly achievable through an education in Fenollosa's version of the Chinese character in Chinese poetry.[149] If

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[145] Ibid, 75.

[146] Ibid, 75-76.

[147] Ibid, 75.

[148] Ibid, 77.

[149] With a similar prolepsis, and in the same passage, Fenollosa also calls on "American Education" (76) to do its part in developing Chinese Studies, and singles out the University of California "appropriately on the Pacific Coast" (76) as well as a professor of comparative literature at Columbia, a "Professor Woodberry" (77), for his work and attentiveness to contemporary historical and geopolitical realities. Ibid 76-77. The reference is to George Edward Woodberry (1855-1930), who also complemented his work as a literary critic by writing poetry. Woodberry specialized in American literature (Edgar Allan Poe and the American Transcendentalists) and notably edited *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1892). Cf. fn 21.

Fenollosa is to be believed (along with Pound, who also takes this up wholeheartedly), Chinese poetry and its exceptional legibility for the attuned Anglophone Anglo-Saxon can indeed heal and transcend the linguistic, epistemological, and political divides of the Orientalized Pacific by provoking this enchainment of sympathies.[150] He, the embattled Anglo-Saxon in threat of losing his

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[150] The overall drift of Fenollosa's argument enters into elliptical conversation with the story of Balzac's mandarin that provides the anecdotal germ of Eric Hayot's *The Hypothetical Mandarin*: entering the parlance as *tuer le mandarin* ('to kill the mandarin,' an evil that can be done without detection), Balzac's hypothetical question, attributed in his text to Rousseau, forces the question of responsibility and sympathy with others who may be faraway or invisible, mediated by a space of hypothesis and imagination. As an opening gambit, Hayot draws from this moment in order to show "how the example-effect of 'China' (as race, as nation, as culture) reproduces the problem of exemplarity and idea that surrounds China's historical relation to the invention of the modern human: it matters that the mandarin is Chinese, because his being Chinese means that his being Chinese doesn't matter. The function of Chineseness is thus, paradoxically, to force the ecliptic transformation of the instance into a universal *that retains the instance in fossil form*. It appears by disappearing; it disappears by appearing. Grasping this ghostly, shifting figure in all its holomorphic complexity is the task of the pages to follow." While Hayot does not explicitly link his ghostly critical trope to either Pound's or Derrida's "apparitions," it is not surprising in light of the fact that his book takes many of its cues from Marx. See Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35. I further engage Hayot's argument on sympathy in Chapter 4 on Gertrude Stein. About Balzac's mandarin, see also Samuel Weber's provocative discussion of Freud's iteration of this phrase (*tuer son mandarin*, 'to kill his mandarin'): there, the mandarin's narrative is predicated on and "transformed through its circulation," encompassing the globe before winding up in the end as a self-estrangement closest to home, a murderous affront to the sovereignty and historicity of the subject. "The proverbial expression *Tuer son Mandarin* is not just directed at a distant other; it is also directed at the self. Reminiscent of the conflicted mechanism of autoimmunization identified by Derrida as constituting a driving force of 'religion,' it reveals that the 'secret readiness' of the self to kill the other also turns out to be a threat to its own property. *Tuer son Mandarin* can be read as designating not just the fantasy of enriching oneself by doing away with the other, but also that of doing away with one's own property and provenance. To kill *one's* Mandarin would then be to do away with everything required for the one to be a proper and property-owning subject." See Samuel Weber, "Wartime," in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 104-105.

mastery of the Pacific, must move beyond the sentimental, towards a suffering patience learned from an aesthetic education in the roots of Chinese poetry—a transcendental signified *par excellence*.[151]

The "exceptionally easy" translation that Fenollosa refers to, then, may have some roots in a cynical and superficial unsettling of American exceptionalism; but its fictional ease further gestures towards a persistent difficulty that subtends my thinking in this first chapter. For the claim of a like form in Fenollosa's translating movement between the English and Chinese is grounded in an even more prior articulation of an always-potentially universalizable "nature," variously constituted by his own reading in (depending in part on which critic is reading) the American Transcendentalist and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel,[152] and the classical Chinese writing he studied in Japan. I suggest however that Fenollosa's universalizing enterprise, as well as the long tradition of the Poundian modernist ideograph that continues and develops from his essay, also founders precisely on its articulation of "nature," which then yields further implications for his syntactical calque between English and Chinese. Deeply indebted to and yet pulling away from Hegel and Emerson, Fenollosa saw *his* "nature" as manifested *specifically* in the unique mode of textuality offered by the Chinese character. In this ideographic account, the Chinese character offers a perfect visual mimetic representation of the natural world and its active relations, to the

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[151] Later in this chapter, I provide a more substantive discussion of Kern's argument about Emerson's nature as a transcendental signifier.

[152] Critics working on American Transcendentalism have identified some pathways of influence of Hegelian philosophy on the transcendentalists, primarily filtered through Goethe. See: Pochmann; van Croumphout.

extent that it offers a visible etymology, thus laying bare the modalities of its significations. Because it is first a photographic picture and also metaphorically cinematic, its visual and visible character renders it legible to anyone who can perceive nature's forces.[153] Turning the Hegelian critique on its head, Fenollosa's ideograph is not so much impossible to remember (per Hegel) as impossible to forget, because it —i.e., its attendant natural relations— can always be apprehended and understood anew.

Further, as Steven Yao writes with reference to Pound's later *Cantos*, Pound eventually departs from an initial premise that any given Chinese writing can and should be translated for an English-reading reader, and that the work of translation is itself powerfully generative for the poet's originality—a position that he still held roughly around the time of editing Fenollosa's essay. Instead, he comes to emphasize the effect of an exclusionary and encoded *differentiation* of readers, wherein the Chinese characters, cryptically studded with little explanation throughout the *Cantos*,

> remained opaque symbols [only] to those who had not been initiated into the Fenollosan rites of reading Chinese characters, and who therefore had not developed the right perceptual capabilities … And yet, because they were based on the concrete particulars of Nature, "ideograms" remain potentially legible to anyone who could swiftly perceive the relationships between the

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[153] In this regard, Christopher Bush notes, with tongue somewhat in cheek, that "the ideograph-stricken 'Oriental' prefigures the benighted victim of media" that Benjamin writes about in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Following this observation, Bush considers the ideograph as a problem of proto-technological media and mediation. See Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 22.

> depicted elements. Thus they automatically excluded the "lazy" or the "unworthy," while remaining open to anyone possessing the right "sensibility" … In this respect, they underwrite a politics based on a hierarchy of abilities, which has its connection to Pound's attraction to Fascism.[154]

By connecting this deliberate opacity to Pound's fascist sympathies, Yao implicitly also considers not an ethics of translation, nor an ethics of untranslatability, but indeed an ambivalent politics and ethics of a *withheld* translation quietly awaiting the messianic reader who possesses a Fenollosan "aesthetic sympathy." Deliberately left as symbols to be decoded within the given textual fabric, the Chinese characters of the *Cantos* are ideogrammatic in the most proper and problematic sense of the term because they denote, not just foreignness or secrecy, but a *legible* foreign and a *knowable* secret, wherein the ability of the reader, and not the alterity of the script, is what is in question. The opacity, then, is not for the linguistically-unlearned; it is for the poetically-insensible and visually-inept. For if we are to take seriously Pound's assumption as outlined here in Yao's presentation, then we would also have to consider the possibility that translation is no longer necessary for a specific segment of the population, granting the following set of conditions: (1) as long as they have eyes to see and minds to read, and (2) as long as the ideograph is isomorphically rooted in the potentially legible —which is to say, potentially universalizable— givenness of concrete nature. These conditions are tendentious to say the least. "Nature" as it is mimetically represented in the Chinese character is thus the basis for Fenollosa's deeply ideological claim of a ready translatability

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[154] Steven G. Yao, *Translation and the Languages of Modernism: Gender, Politics, Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 185.

between English and Chinese sentences—and it is also what I seek to disrupt over the course of this chapter. The reading of nature informing Pound's conceptualization of the ideograph thus poses the second ideological crux on which Fenollosa rests his poetic questions of form, likeness, line, sentence, and literality: it is a problem of aesthetically representing nature.

Yao's presentation of the ideographic *Cantos* here also takes us closer to a more literal moment in which Pound's fascist sympathies led him to aesthetic hubris. Not so much concerned with the limits of sensible experience as increasingly convinced of its power and efficacy, Pound's ambition was always to elevate the poet's function from the Shelleyan trope of "unacknowledged legislator" to absolutely acknowledged legislator, i.e. sovereign actor. This aestheticization of politics is tellingly captured in the opening of Pound's deeply troubled Canto LXXII (1944), which explicitly writes itself as an apostrophe to and a poetic vessel for the dead Marinetti to inhabit and speak, but not before an attempt at rewriting the biblical origin: "In the beginning God/the great aesthete having created heaven and earth…" (ll. 3-4, 432). The metatextual conflation of the poetic speaker with "God/ the great aesthete" eventually becomes clearer when the speaker stages a conversation between himself and "Filippo Tomaso" (Marinetti's familiar names), at once promising and fulfilling the claim that "I will give you a place in a Canto/giving you voice" (ll. 15-16), thereby undertaking to continue the dead Marinetti's struggle into perpetuity by gifting the eternal aesthetic work at hand. Written first in Italian at the height of Pound's resentment at the unsatisfactory dénouement of World War II, *Canto LXXII* and its companion *Canto LXXIII* (1944; no extant translation into

English; unknown if Pound ever attempted one) stand alone in the *Cantos* as most deeply and manifestly marked by fascism and anti-Semitic hatred; they are also where the performative power of poetry becomes most markedly asserted and forced into the realm of politics. Whether or not this succeeds is of course besides the point; much like Fenollosa, whose work he found so much reason to admire and affirm, Pound's desire for a socially and politically efficacious poetry —one of aesthetic education perhaps— is consistently connected to the affirmation of a total and sensible link between culture and politics, which for him can only be guaranteed by stabilizing poetry as a subservient agent of politics, whose role just is the aesthetic creation of "heaven and earth" even when all is already lost.[155]

Metaphor: the ideograph's relational nature

As the argument up to this point may already suggest, there are several complicities invoked in any deployment of the term "nature," thus calling for disambiguation. Even more than a false possibility of universalizability, "nature" also occupies a fraught place within the western philosophical tradition: the problems may be understood in two ways. First, the advent of nature[156] as a category historically coincides with the invention of the Enlightenment subject, turning nature into an epistemological object posited as exterior and distant, a locus of melancholic

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[155] Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Both Redman and Morrison offer nuanced readings of Pound's connection to fascism.

[156] For the moment, I (somewhat irresponsibly) bracket the Greek notion of φύσις (*physis*).

nostalgia that is ultimately irrecuperable for the thinking and remembering subject. While such a historicized account of a radical break at the time of the Enlightenment perhaps does justice to neither pre- nor post-Enlightenment thought (nor indeed even the variegated Enlightenment itself), nevertheless, the ensuing deconstruction of such a subject thereby also unsettles the category of nature. It is in this deconstructive vein that recent Romantic eco-critic Timothy Morton has formulated (notably first in the negative and then in a positive language still somewhat on loan from the Enlightenment tradition) an "ecology without nature" and an "ecological thought." In these interventions, he calls instead for alternative philosophical accounts of ecological enmeshments and withdrawals that sidestep the dialectical divisions of subject and object structuring the concept of nature. Second, and relatedly, "nature" also names an intractable givenness that is always predetermined —the problems here are perhaps most obvious when one considers ideological and essentializing appeals to 'nature' as a biological category, or 'human nature' and its supposed essences as pretexts for normalizing (pathologizing) behaviour. Yet the aspect of givenness might also be taken as mobilizing a promising point of departure for materialist philosophy: the Deleuzian plane of immanence, as derived from Spinoza's elaboration of nature as the substance of God, suggests the ideal possibility of a politics and ethics of immanence where, if we are all embedded in the same material, we might begin to think and act in ways that materially affect one another, through ways that may or may not be knowable to each agent (distinct from the subject of knowledge and reason). We may, in other words, *sympathize* with one another in the most literal sense of the term.

Indeed, the philosophical and historical debate over "nature" parallels in many ways Fenollosa's articulation of the ideograph as the material and aesthetic representation of nature. For example, one crucial difference between Fenollosa and Pound resonates with the Deleuzian approach to materialism: their conceptualization of the conditionality of 'the thing.' As Jonathan Stalling explains, Pound's reading of the "verbal precision" of Chinese characters as shorthand pictures of things leaves him in significant disagreement with Fenollosa's emphasis on "their clearly aggregative character in order to dismantle 'thingness' itself by showing the dependency of contextual causes and conditions."[157] Refusing the independence of the thing, and insisting on its positioning within a broader framework that he insists on writing in the theoretical register of poetics and the ideograph, Fenollosa's seemingly odd slippages between what he calls "nature," "Chinese writing," "sentence," and the "universal" become legible precisely within the idiosyncrasies of his own framework, adding up into a legible articulation of the relationships between them. While Fenollosa might primarily attribute "the dependency of contextual causes and conditions" to nature, all his other terms become also simultaneously governed by the causality and conditions to be found only in nature and mimed only in Chinese sentences. Fenollosa's essay thus presents itself not just as a theory of language or an imagination of the Chinese ideograph; it is also simultaneously a materialist theory of nature wherein referentiality is insistently claimed but yet to be achieved, and the materiality of language is necessarily affirmed through its relation to that nature.

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[157] Jonathan Stalling, *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 55.

Yet the materiality of language that Fenollosa affirms can only be a qualified one, bound as he is to metaphysical presuppositions of what language can do. As Robert Kern observes, the "nature" that Fenollosa employs bears a considerable resemblance to the nature deployed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this regard, Kern argues that nature in Emerson's writing functions as a transcendental signifier in the Derridean sense: that is, it is posited as a master term that dominates and unites difference from an impossible pre-linguistic state, but which thereby becomes endlessly referred and never referential.[158] The resemblance is perhaps most stark if one considers the Fenollosan appeal to the natural "likeness of form" between English and Chinese sentences with which I opened this chapter; yet Fenollosa also further develops this universalism through recourse to a further mode of poetic language also indebted to Emerson: metaphor.

Aptly enough in a discussion of metaphor, the means by which Chinese and English sentences may yet become united for Fenollosa are precisely what presently set them apart: coded as nature, the project of East-West reconciliation hinges on what the primitivity of the Chinese language has always had in abundance, which is also what Western thinking has too woefully abandoned and must now seek to recover in order to regain parity with their transpacific counterparts:

> [Now] **you will ask** how could the Chinese [ever] have build up [this] **a** great intellectual fabric [out of] **from** mere picture writing?[159] To the ordinary

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[158] Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38.

[159] Here and throughout the chapter, I have preserved the editorial markers used in the critical edition of Fenollosa's original manuscript established by Saussy et al.: Pound's deletions are [in square brackets], and his additions are in **bold type**.

Western mind, which believes **that** thought [to be] **is** concerned with logical categories, and which rather contemns the faculty of direct imagination, th[e]**is** feat seems quite impossible. [And] yet [it is quite clear that] the Chinese language, with its peculiar materials, has passed over from the seen to the unseen, by exactly the same process which all ancient races [and tongues have] employed. This process is metaphor; the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations.

The whole delicate substance of [human] speech is built [upon] substrata of metaphor. [Our most] abstract terms, [when] pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in [this soil of] direct action. But the[se] primitive metaphors, which created our vocabularies, spring not [as some may suppose, out] of arbitrary, subjective fancies. They are possible only because they follow objective lines of relation in nature itself. Relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate. The forces which produce the branch-angles of an oak, lay, potent, in the acorn. Similar lines of resistance, half curbing outward-pressing vitalities, govern the

> branching of rivers, and the branching of nations.*[160] Nature thus furnishes her own clues. Had the world not already been full of homologies, sympathies, and identities, thought would have been starved, and language chained to the obvious. For there would have been no bridge to cross over from the minor truth of the seen to the major truth of the unseen.[161] [162]

An important interlocutor who goes unnamed here is likely Hegel, whose skepticism of the possibility of Chinese progress and disparagement of the matter of Chinese writing becomes (perhaps aptly universalized, and then) displaced here onto the

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[160] The text of the manuscript links the asterisk to Fenollosa's marginalia: "So a nerve, a wire, a roadway and a clearing house are only varying channels which communication forces for itself. This is more than analogy: it is identity of structure. Laws of structure are the same in the spiritual and the material world. Human character grows with the same stresses and knots as mountain pines."
Moving from analogy to structure suggests also a move from an epistemological register to one of universal immanence, which parallels the later claim of moving from subjectivity to "objective lines of relation." Tangentially, the analogy and/or structural identity between the knots of human character and the mountain pines echo also the imagery of Immanuel Kant's well-known observation, where the project is not at all dissimilar from Fenollosa's: "Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of. Nature only requires of us that we should approximate to this idea." See Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writings,* trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46-47.

[161] Fenollosa, *Chinese Written Character*, 94-95.

[162] To my ear, it is difficult not to hear a slight agitation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry* here: "Their [poets' - ed.] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts…" It is unknown if Fenollosa read Shelley directly, but it is possible that he received a diluted understanding of Shelley via the American Transcendentalists, primarily Emerson, as well as literary criticism of his day, cf. fn 8.

haplessly Hegelian "ordinary Western mind."[163] Fenollosa's departure from Hegel here lies in his conviction, however, that the Chinese language, *contra* Hegel, has palpably (in Fenollosa's judgement) "passed over from the seen to the unseen"—that is, per his host of accompanying binaries, from concretion to abstraction, from matter to spirit, and from "minor truth" to "major truth"— through what he calls a process of metaphor. Remaining still within an implicit hierarchical binary, Fenollosa's ostensible recuperation of Chinese writing comes via the commingling of material with immaterial in the structural coupling of metaphor. The unseen here is asserted as the dominant necessity for progress, such that, as the gloss on metaphor momentarily suggests, material images are only the furnisher or mediator of clues to the more originary immaterial relations that they conceal.

Yet when Fenollosa offers a closer look at these immaterial relations, they turn out to be not only "follow[ing] objective lines of relation in nature itself," but furthermore the lines of relation are "more real and more important than the things which they relate."[164] The appeal to reality here is difficult to parse: while it makes explicit that it is not treating a *material* notion of reality, it also invokes a quantifiable sense of that reality ("more real," "more important") that appears again to edge the relations over the thing. Why then would relations be "more real" than

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[163] It is debatable if Hegel indeed condemned the faculty of imagination, although it seems fair to suggest that the imagination does not seem to occupy much of his thought. See Jennifer Ann Bates, *Hegel's Theory of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004) for a reading against this grain—developing Hegel's underwritten thoughts on the imagination in a way that is far more nuanced and extensive than Fenollosa's quick dismissal.

[164] Notably, Cubist painter Georges Braque has spoken in 1950 of painting the relations between things as a specifically "poetic" endeavor. See John Golding, *Braque: The Late Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 23.

things themselves? The claim may partly be attributed to Stalling's observation of Fenollosa's interest in aggregation over Pound's interest in precision and directness, but another clue may lie in the passage's flagrant metaphors of potentiality and immanent force: an acorn is nothing if not the repository for "the forces which produce the branch-angle of an oak." The reality of these relations thus lies in their vitalist resistances, which "half curb" and "govern" homologous things like rivers and nations, which would themselves be impotent without the immaterial forces lying dormant in them, revealed only through the metaphoricity of Chinese writing.

As Robert Kern observes, it is precisely at this moment that Fenollosa most radically departs from his alliance with Emerson: his interest in the ideograph as a snapshot of forces/actions/processes (perhaps in a more linguistic register, it would be a synchronic representation of diachrony, calling back to Yang's ideographic translation from Chapter 2) fundamentally rejects the Emersonian understanding of words as static facts of nature; nevertheless, Kern points out that Fenollosa's reliance on Emerson "coheres around the assumption that language, in a way still visibly exemplified by Chinese, was originally a direct reflection of the world."[165] [166] Further, Fenollosa also differs from Emerson in that the reality of *his* world is constituted specifically through transference and agency on the part of the things of nature themselves; more than "homologies, sympathies, and identities," we also have "resistances," governances, even forces of production that are dormant in the acorns

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[165] Kern, *Orientalism*, 126.

[166] See also Donald M. Murray, "Emerson's 'Language as Fossil Poetry': An Analogy from Chinese," *The New England Quarterly* 29.1 (1956): 204-215. For Emerson, language is fossilized not *in medias res* as it might have been for Fenollosa, but in such a way that words are static representations of natural "facts."

at rest.

I would suggest that it is precisely these resistant forces and transferences that are at work and at stake in the strange and unstable status of "[human] speech," marked by Pound's editorial hand in Fenollosa's long discussion on the processes of metaphor. Pound's removal of "human" from Fenollosa's original text (as denoted by the square brackets in the critical edition, quoted in the passage above) coincides with a previous removal just lines before, where we learn that the Chinese language only deploys "the same process which all ancient races [and tongues have] employed." Both excisions are difficult to parse in light of their semantic possibilities. The excision of "tongues" may be understood in a fairly literal way — metaphors do not require actual fleshy *tongues*, one might suppose, as long as there is *writing*— but "tongues" may indeed also be read as a heavily corporeal metonym for a general language partly composed by speech, as is suggested by the original formulation "ancient races and tongues." Might invoking the tongues of ancient races be too offensive, or too redundant to Pound's editorial ear? The heavy ambiguity here renders the reading impossible; the only possible conclusions are a redundancy of matter, or, if not, then a redundancy of language to the consideration of primitivism.

Further, removing "human" as it modifies "speech" unavoidably raises and implicitly answers a whole swathe of philosophical questions. Broadly, it seems like this editorial move can be read in two mutually exclusive ways. In the context of the passage, the formulation is that this "speech," human or otherwise, is a "whole delicate substance" that is "built [upon] substrata of metaphor." The analogy is then

as follows: as the wholeness of substance is to the substrata on which it rests, so is "[human] speech" to the process of metaphor. Yet given Fenollosa's consistent collapsing of nature and substance with language (and Pound's implicit acquiescence to that), what seems to be at stake here is a differential admission into the "whole delicate substance" of speech, and then, implicitly, the relegation to the substrata of metaphor on which it rests. On one hand, Pound's implication may quite simply be that "human" is redundant because "speech" is, by its very definition, exclusive to humans; this would then suggest that the by-definition-human speech rests on and emerges out of the substrata of metaphor, which is identified with nature. On the other hand, however, the other possible implication might be that Pound's editorial hand may well be divesting Fenollosa of the anthropocentric bias that keeps speech exclusive to humans, making room thereby for "a whole delicate substance of [any - ed.] speech" that may indeed be "whole" expressions of nature-as-substrata.

The organizing and crucial question, then, is who or what has speech, why, and how they are related to nature *qua* nature, but also, if one allows oneself to follow Fenollosa for a while, nature *qua* the totality and "whole"ness of language. Fenollosa's polyvalent reflections on the sentence are most germane and provocative in this regard, not just because it is where the Chinese and English languages/ epistemologies ostensibly most readily translate into each other, but also because this is a point at which the unquestioned identification of nature with language begins to suffer a crisis when it has to consider the very different "forms" and modalities of the English and Chinese sentences, which nevertheless possess a

"likeness" riven by historicity. Where the English sentence is presently prescriptive, linear, and freighted with Western thought, the ideographic sentence presents the proleptic future of English in its very primitivity, unencumbered as it gives visible nature homologically in a single line—and the English sentence can only achieve this likeness if it pays attention to the lessons of the ideograph. Perhaps this may partially account for the attention to the problem of incompletion throughout the discussion of the sentence:

> On the one hand, practical completeness may be expressed by a mere interjection, as, "Hi, there!" "Scat!"; or even by shaking ones fist. No sentence is needed to make ones meaning more clear. on the other hand, no full sentence really completes a thought. The man who sees, and the horse which is seen, will not stand still. The man was planning [for] a ride before he looked, and the horse kicked [up] when the man tried to catch him. The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes, or passes into another. And though we may string never so many clauses into a simple compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire. All processes in nature are interrelated; and thus there could be no complete sentence but one which it would require all time to pronounce.[167]

On a literal level, Fenollosa is here criticizing the conventional grammarian's criterion of the sentence as being the expression of a complete thought; he has previously arrived at the topic of the sentence by wondering why the sentence

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[167] Fenollosa, *Chinese Written Character*, 84-85.

"seems so universally necessary *in all languages,*" wondering if it might not therefore "ought to correspond to some primary Law in Nature."[168] The question might then be, what is this natural law that the sentence aspires towards? Yet at the same time, the passage, in ostensibly providing the answer, seems rather to be concerning itself with what exactly a sentence might be. Beginning with some examples of "practical completeness," wherein completeness seems to reside in a successful communication of meaning wherein "no sentence is needed to make ones meaning more clear," Fenollosa however closes the passage with the suggestion that completion on the level of the sentence would be ultimately impossible—because the sentence mirrors nature, and because nature is made up of interrelations that cannot be set apart, therefore, the sentence can only be complete if —and this is the real fantasy— there were "all time to pronounce."

The unfulfillable promise of a full sentence thus partly accounts for the two strange and difficult examples Fenollosa gives to illustrate the causal interrelations and transferences of nature. The first example of the restless man and similarly restless horse, perhaps an allegorical rebellion of the seen in response to the seeing, appears at first glance to be a meditation on the succession of "acts" as well as what he later calls "motion": to put it as baldly as possible, the man cannot be still, therefore the horse also cannot be still. Framed in a relationship of seen and seeing, the man and horse are subject and object caught in an apparently linear relation of act and response—in other words, they seem to be functioning as figural stand-ins for a conventional sentence. Yet the second example throws one for a loop, as we

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[168] Ibid, 84.

learn that motion does not just leak from the polarities of man to horse, seeing to seen, subject to object, but furthermore it "leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire," such that the man-horse process of causality is only one of "all processes in nature" and their interrelations. Yet as we broaden our views from man, to horse, to electricity, this series of displacing examples all remain incomplete precisely because where there is interrelation, there is also interruption (as figured in the exposed wire) and thereby the unassimilable and uncontrollable residues of causality that "leak" into nature and constitute it. The sentence, then, also "leaks everywhere": because of this, it is *and* is not like nature, and because of this, it too escapes exemplarity, conceptuality, and the conventionally hierarchical relations of seeing, being seen, and being unseen but nevertheless felt (as in the case of electricity).

It is in this light that Fenollosa presents the form that ostensibly unites the Chinese and English sentences:

> The sentence form was forced upon primitive man by Nature herself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences, because all truth is the transference of power. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No unit or natural process can be less than this. All natural processes whatever, are, in their units, as much as this. light, heat, gravity, chemical affinity, human will, have this in common, that they redistribute force and their unit of process can be represented by the following diagram;—

> [*Reproduction pending. - ed. Approximation in type:* O >>>>>———————> O]
>
> … [Now] it seems to me that the normal typical sentence, in English, as well as in Chinese, [just] expresses **just** this unit of natural process. It consists of three necessary words;—the first denoting the agent, or subject, from which the act starts; the second embodying the very stroke of the act; the third pointing to an object, the receiver of the impact.
>
> For example
>
> Farmer pounds rice
>
> [It thus appears that] the form of the Chinese transitive sentence, and of the English ([barring] **omitting** the particles **a, the, etc.**) exactly corresponds to the universal form of action in nature. This brings language [very] close to things; and in its strong reliance upon verbs erects all speech into a kind of dramatic Poetry.[169]

This passage cuts to the heart of Fenollosa's claim of a likeness of form between the sentences of the two languages, as mediated by the universal natural law of causality. The claim is that there is an exact correspondence between the Chinese transitive sentence, the English transitive sentence, and the "universal form of action in nature." Here, Fenollosa seemingly rehearses the previous example: indeed, we may well replace "Farmer pounds rice" with "Man rides horse." However, the focus here is not simply on causality and forms of action, but how they might "redistribute force" and constitute a "transference of power" through processes such as (and this is a rather stunning list) "light, heat, gravity, chemical affinity, human will." The form

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[169] Ibid, 85-86.

of action Fenollosa supposes here is rather obscure; departing from the form in his diagram, things like light or chemical affinity do not generally take an object in any obvious way, nor do they act in the same way as "human will" (one can hope). Moreover, unlike a horse that can kick a man, rice probably cannot pound a farmer (!), although it might perhaps affect him in other ways that do not necessarily take cues from his own actions (such as making him less hungry). All of which is to say that the present (implicitly dialectical) model of a redistribution of force or transference of power (which is that crucial point of convergence in nature for the English and Chinese sentences) remains unable to account for the leakages and interruptions invoked in the previous example; or perhaps, the sheer proliferation of absent objects here might be a hint to read these natural processes as *in*transitive verbs, positing sentences that are themselves always incomplete, exposing a wire that can only leak "everywhere" and nowhere at once. Fenollosa's claim of absolute translatability is thus posed through a textual moment of radical intransitivity; even if there is a redistribution of force, its directionality remains unclear.

The language of petals

Indeed, the claim that the intimacy between language and nature relies heavily on the function of verbs that can transform "all speech into a kind of dramatic Poetry" paves the way for the even more radical claim that Fenollosa (and Pound) will make later on in the essay: that all words, regardless of their parts of speech, can be thought of as verbs. Thus Fenollosa writes: "[t]he development of the normal transitive sentence rests upon the fact that one action in nature promotes another;

thus the agent and the object are virtually verbs."[170] In the similar moment, Pound's edited version of the essay keeps this sentence exactly the same, but replaces "virtually" with "secretly"[171]— this is the version Derrida reads and cites in his *Grammatology*.

"[T]he agent and the object are virtually verbs"; "the agent and the object are secretly verbs." Parsing these two statements involves also parsing two mutually contradictory modalities of action available to language: where Fenollosa's virtuality is almost wistful in its approximation or simulation of actually being-a-verb (where the simulation is secondarily derived from the actions of nature, just as the development of the sentence "rests upon th[at] fact"), Pound's more interventionist notion of simply being "secretly" a verb ends up encrypting the actions of nature (that firmament of support) *within* the heart of the linguistic agent and object, such that the working of the verb just *is* also the working of nature. In order to observe this oscillation (between poem-reflecting-nature and poem-as-nature) in action, I look to a canonical poem in which the inability to decide between the secrecy, virtuality, and even visibility of the verb becomes a poetic point of resistance, and the unexpected drama of the entire poem itself.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd ;

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[170] Ibid, 100.

[171] Ibid, 58.

Petals on a wet, black bough .[172]

First published as an opening instantiation in what was to be the definitive anthology for imagism in 1913, Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" has come to be known as the imagist poem par excellence, and even the performative inauguration of a modern poetry made new—a poetry that, as the cliché goes, makes nothing happen. Indeed, the status of the poem has rendered it almost cliché; one would be hard-pressed to find a book or article about Fenollosa or Pound that does not treat this poem at least in passing.

Yet the poem's performative thrust and persistence as canonical event of modernism belie the fact that there are no obvious verbs in it—"apparition" is the closest we get (virtually a verb, perhaps—I will return to this later). While this is perhaps a stylistic element unfortunately common to many Anglo-American attempts at the 'Eastern' aesthetic at the time, the specific verb-noun that does make an appearance here is surely a particularly fraught one, given the claims to visibility made by the ideograph, the tension between the transitive and intransitive, and this

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[172] Randolph Chilton, and Carol Gilbertson, "Pound's 'Metro Hokku': The Evolution of an Image," *Twentieth Century Literature* 36.2 (Summer 1990): 225-236. Chilton and Gilbertson provide an extensive history of the many iterations of Pound's poem as it was either personally circulated through letters or published in later collections of his work. I am here quoting the widely-cited version published in *Poetry* magazine in 1913, which pays particular attention to the typographical spaces that Pound used to denote his intended rhythms for the poem; Pound draws attention to this typographical idiosyncrasy in an undated letter to Harriet Monroe, founder and then editor of *Poetry*. In the same letter, the poem is reproduced with its first line rendered with a typewriter, and the second line appended in Pound's handwriting in ink. I return to this suggestive oddity later in my reading of this poem.

chapter's ongoing interest in what constitutes a natural or sentence's object at all.[173] In this reading of the poem, then, I am interested in explicating and complicating the interrelations and transferences within its poetic lines and image. For one important difference —conventionally speaking, at least— between the sentence (in English)[174] and the poem is the way in which the latter allows for fragmentation through its formal dislocations and material presentations. In turning to this poem, then, I am responding to the way in which the ideographic claim of the relationship between 'nature,' materiality, and the phenomenality of materialism still persistently defers the question of how exactly the actions of nature make themselves apparent in language, conveniently displacing this vital question of *poetics* onto the magical properties of Chinese writing. Instead of simply looking to the actuality of the Chinese tradition for a corrective, I would rather, for the moment at least, take a closer look at Pound's foundational poem and the plot of its genesis, in order to find, so to speak, the magician's secrets revealed.

The same edition of *Poetry* magazine in which the poem first appeared also housed Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (1913), which at first glance offers some helpful recommendations for approaching this enigmatic poem and producing others like it. For one, the poem might appear to be an apt illustration of the very

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[173] Cai, Zong-qi, "Poundian and Chinese Aesthetics of Dynamic Force: A Re-Discovery of Fenollosa and Pound's Theory of the Chinese Written Character," *Comparative Literature Studies* 30.2 (1993): 170-189. Cai's reading of Pound's Fenollosa insists on the centrality of "dynamic force" in the Pound essay as it draws strength from Chinese aesthetics (particularly calligraphy). Through his comparative reading, Cai brings Pound remarkably close to the Fenollosa that Pound has himself excised.

[174] In French (Derrida, Lyotard): 'la phrase.' Such cross-linguistic considerations would substantially complicate matters, and would probably be more adequately treated in the theoretical introduction to be written after my chapters are drafted.

first tenet given in the essay: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[175] Furthermore, Pound adds elsewhere, as he gets into the substance of his negative prescriptions, "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol."[176] Pursuing the logic provided in this formulation, one might presume that the "dim lands" are the "concrete" and "natural object," and "peace" the abstraction that "dulls the image" by excessively (beyond adequation) contaminating "the *adequate* symbol" with the idea it is meant to symbolize. Such an intolerable union of the adequate symbol with the excess of the symbolized perhaps hints at what happens when a foolish writer quixotically compromises the purity of the "natural object" rendered through the image-as-complex.

But where then is this "natural object" or "adequate symbol" in the Metro poem? Or perhaps, especially on the back of our previous readings of Fenollosa, it might be more pertinent to ask if the object in question is locatable and circumscribable in the usual ways. For Pound's accounts of his writing of the poem tend to insist on its form as a kind of pattern, although not, as he insists one year later in the 1914 essay "Vorticism" (which marks a distinct shift from the imagist

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[175] Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1918), 4. Pound then goes on to add: "I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application." The reference here is most likely to Bernard Hart, a post-WWI Freudian psycho-pathologist known for his *The Psychology of Insanity* and also, as Pound implies here, for popularizing and loosening the use of the term 'complex' so that it may refer to any repressed or unrepressed system of ideas that has emotional resonance or content.

[176] Ibid, 5.

phase in moving away from the rhetoric of concretion, towards something beyond even an "accelerated impressionism" that emphasizes form and force—undoubtedly much closer to the account given in *CWC*), a pattern that implies repetition. In Pound's later account, the form of the poem is

> an equation… not in speech, but in little splotches of color. It was just that—a 'pattern,' or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in color… That evening, in the Rue Raynouard [near Paris' Concorde station, where he was supposed to have seen the faces that inspired the Metro poem - ed.], I realized quite vividly that if I were a painter, or if I had, often, *that kind* of emotion, or even if I had the energy to get paints and brushes and keep at it, I might found a new school of painting, of 'non-representative painting,' a painting that would speak only by arrangements in colour.

Not simply an "equation" or an "adequate symbol," then; Pound here presents the ambitions of his Metro poem as an "arrangement in colour" that is vividly informed by contemporaneous avant-garde and certainly non-abiding-by-nature artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Pablo Picasso (who are explicitly mentioned with great interest elsewhere in the essay). Developing from the fundamental tenets of imagism, which demands a direct approach to "the thing," the movement of Pound's thinking here in this passage renders it almost impossible to know just what "the thing" of imagism might be: defying both its definite article as well as formulation in the singular, the "natural object" of the Metro poem can perhaps only be the unnamed and unnamable object of the "non-representative painting" that would

seek to paint the unpaintable, the ineffable "*that kind* of emotion" (Pound's italics), an emotion only achievable by a deictic pointing somewhere other than itself. The ambition to write a non-representative arrangement of adequate and natural symbols cannot but speak of and be driven by something else, such that whatever treatment Pound's "thing" is receiving here, it is far from direct, and hence perhaps a little closer to Fenollosa's discursive context of the object.

Yet the poem does hold out some promises of fulfillment: in fact, it may even implicitly give some "splotches of color" and perhaps even a "natural object" severed and scattered into its parts. In a poem that has been infinitely critically dissected for its material underpinnings, poetic and allegorical self-referentiality, and performative fulfillments or failures, I find perhaps another poetic opening from which I might trace an alternative logic of imagist poetics.

In this regard, my thinking is greatly indebted to Christopher Bush, who argues for understanding imagism as "ultimately about the limits of language as a medium of seeing and showing, of registering appearances and of making things appear."[177] Noting the ambiguity of "apparition" in the Metro poem, Bush mobilizes a possible play on its verbal and nominal potentials within its context, hovering in meaning between the act of appearing and the appearance of ghostlike faces, such that the very apparition in *and* of the poem would be "both an event and a thing."[178] For Bush, the materiality of the poem thus also constitutes its poetic allegory of itself; a materiality that is locatable precisely in the duplicity of Pound's apparition-

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[177] Bush, *Ideographic Modernism*, 31.

[178] Ibid.

through-poetic-juxtaposition, such that, as Bush renders it in his own beautiful turn-of-phrase, "those petals on the bough have become faces in the crowd."[179]

Part of the power of this move resides in its economy and elegance: undecidably between the verbal and nominal functions of Pound's apparition, the theoretical weight of the poem's allegory thereby falls on its first line—indeed, the poem's philosophical work is announced in its second word and second syllable, even if its work is not complete until we read to the end. Yet if we take seriously the argument that the poem also invites an erasure of all its copulas —between the first and second lines, between appearance and appearing, between metaphor and a posited reality that is something other than metaphor— then we must also, at least partly, predicate the possibility of this erasure on the assumption that both lines of the poem operate in some kind of mutual symmetry or equivalence, or at least are readable and comparable in their metaphorical juxtaposition, such that faces *can* become petals and petals *can* become faces.

Such an assumption is particularly pressing in light of the fact that readings of this image-poem are often bound to the precise situation given in the first line, whose definite articles ("[t]he," and more deictically, "these") work with the title of the poem in order to generate the effect of an observing and transcribing poetic intelligence transparent to itself and to its own moment. To put it in a rather banal-sounding way, then, it is important for the poem and the terms of its own imagist rhetoric that the first line *comes first*, and that it is distinctly the poet's fleeting observation in a here-and-now that is being poetically captured-through-

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[179] Ibid, 30.

transfiguration into the petals in some other non-space and non-time. (A quick way to further test this point might be to imagine if the poem read, instead: "The apparition of these petals on the bough; / Faces in a ____, _____ crowd." The very inversion of the objects, to say nothing of the changes in articles and deictics, present quite a different kind of situation and effect—perhaps closer to Baudelaire and Poe—even if one scrupulously retains the original meter.) Yet despite its rhetoric, the poem also seems to invite a critical recourse to inexplicability, or even a defiance of its own logic or sequentiality (perhaps another point of convergence with Fenollosa), such that, as Bush observes, its own logic comes into question when one pushes hard enough on its first line as material and revelatory premise for the poem itself. Indeed, it remains difficult to tell if it is the faces that are being compared to the petals, or if it is the very apparition itself that is somehow comparable to the petals on the bough. Perhaps the petals themselves have already opened and unfolded into something like a revelation.

I wonder, then, if unfolding the logic of this inversion might require a closer examination of the formal properties of the poem itself, as well as a wider unfolding of a material detail of its initial presentation and genesis. What I am suggesting is to read the two distinct moments or situations in the poem not simply as an elegant and spare poetic juxtaposition or metaphor, nor solely an inter-cultural melding between 'eastern' and 'western' poetics, but additionally, with stronger pressure and clearer political stakes on the radically asymmetrical statuses of the two lines' operation within the poem, the transferences that are taking place through those interrelations, and the centrifugal forces that may nevertheless be holding them

together.

There are several reasons that lend credence to this reading. The first reason is, oddly enough, a thoroughly materialist one: in the same undated letter to Harriet Monroe previously cited, Pound not only provides instructions for the typesetting of the poem for publication in *Poetry*, but also reproduces, as illustration of his instructions, the full text of this short poem in two different technologies of writing. The first line is faintly typed with a typewriter; the second line is appended in inky handwriting, carefully squeezed in the double-spacing between the first line and what looks like the next typewritten line of automated error or frustrated gibberish. *(Reproduction pending.)* While Pound's motivations for this unusual presentation of course remain unknown (and may well be utterly quotidian), the peculiar effect is nevertheless to make the second line of the poem far more irregulated and boldly visible for an archive-visitor today, while also appearing like an afterthought or annotation on the first line. Indeed, the typography for the second line remains to this day a matter of scholarly contention.

Interrupted by Pound's hand, then, the movement between the first and second lines of the poem is not only epistemologically discordant (as is often observed by commentators in tones varying from flummoxed to resigned), but also materially —that is to say, technologically, visibly, perhaps even sensually— abrupt. This may be less surprising if we consider also the prosodic differences between the poem's two lines: the first line is far longer than the second, housing twelve syllables to the other's seven. Much of this difference in line length can be attributed to the difference in conceptual formulation between the two images: there is an

"apparition" of faces in the first line that is not matched by the second line's seemingly-concrete presentation of its objects; the second line lacks the specifying deictics of the first as we move from the particular instant of urban recognition to something coded as natural, thoroughly impersonal, and, indeed, inhuman. This aesthetic of incorporating an element from "nature" is critically accepted as Pound's acknowledged loan from the cultural other of the east, whose formal minimalism is considered to have helped him articulate an experience that he was unable to do so by himself (at least by his account)—perhaps already symptomatic of a certain transmissible universalism that is enabled by invoking nature in a rhetoric of reduction.[180] Indeed, the reduction is one that the poem makes very clear through its own narrative: unlike the spectral faces in the crowd, the petals on the bough do not have to be *described or named* as apparition or appearing; by the time we read about them, they simply *are*, but it is a mode of existence that is already heavily qualified by the apparitions that have come before—even the natural thing itself is irreducibly subject to the specter of metaphor that haunts all poetic language. Between the two lines, images, and fragments of speech, then, the material and formal interruptions of these lines exert themselves differently upon the things and events given in each line.

Indeed, if the apparition of the first line is readable as event and thing (as is the poem itself, via the force of allegory), then might the same logic be extended to

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[180] Pound's thinking on imagism is easily traceable to the formal criterion for Japanese haiku poetry, requiring, amongst other things: brevity; rhythmic prosody; (a rhetoric of) inspiration and instantaneity; juxtaposition of two ideas through subjective shifts within the poem; and images drawn from spontaneous natural observation. Critics have indeed attributed these qualities to Pound's interest in Japanese poetry at the time.

the petals on the wet, black bough? Can these petals also constitute their own kind of eventful apparition? Pound's 1914 "Vorticism" essay gives yet another version of the poem, opening up a suggestive possibility:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
>
> Petals, on a wet, black bough.[181]

Much has been made of the inconsistencies with regard to the colon and semi-colon at the end of the first line (published variants oscillate between the two, making it further unclear if these inconsistencies are Pound's deliberate doing or the work of careless copyeditors common at the time), which have been read as articulating different modes of relation or collocation between the two images at the poem's turn. Yet there is another typographical detail that has been little-discussed: the second line here pauses with a comma after its first word "Petals," before moving on to describe where the petals are located. On one hand, one may think that this only makes more obvious (graphic) the pause that Pound had previously denoted as an unusually wide space, thereby merely persisting with an old insistence. On the other hand, however, the pause here is decidedly more enforced —and enforce*able*, through the laws of graphematic language— than the previous; there is little doubt that the petals are first to be read as somehow set apart and in isolation in a non-space, and only afterwards incorporated into a slightly more specified spatial arrangement—lying on the bough.

Yet at odds with this momentary seclusion is the *sound* of the petals and their poetic apparitions: the hard "p" plosive occurs in these two words at the opening of

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[181] As cited in Chilton and Gilbertson, "Pound's 'Metro Hokku'," 228.

their respective lines, thereby implicitly linking them together through sound. Softly less-stressed but also doubled and amplified in the moment of "apparition," it returns more forcefully, and with undeniable stress, when we are to hear the sounds of that apparition in the first syllable of the trochaic "Petals." The reduction then continues still on the level on sound when the poem goes on to refigure its plosives again, this time muted and again doubled on a "black bough." By implication of poetic sound, then, the phenomenality of the apparition reaches across the abyss of metaphor, making the apparition not *only* one of faces in the crowd,[182] nor of the poem itself, but *also* of an apparition of some tropes of "nature"— a nature that is aestheticized and covertly racialized when the "crowd" is also transfigured into "a

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[182] Moreover, the word 'crowd' also has a varied history aside from its dominant meaning. From the Oxford English Dictionary: "crowd, *v.1*: to press, push, thrust, shove, etc. Etymology: Old English *crúdan*, 3rd singular *crýdeþ*, past tense *créad*, plural **crudon*, past participle **croden*, an original strong verb (ablaut-series *kreud-*, *kraud-*, *krud-*), not known in the early stages of the other languages, but represented by Middle Dutch *crúden* to press, push, later *kruyden*, *kruyen* (Kilian), Dutch kruien to push in a wheel-barrow, to drive, West Frisian kroadjen, East Frisian *krôden*, *krüden* (*kröien*, *krüijen*) to push, press, North Frisian *krode*, *krojen*, Middle Low German *krúden*, *kroden*, Low German *krüden*, *krüen*, Middle High German *kroten*, *kröten* to oppress, etc.: see *Kroten* in Grimm. As in some other verbs of the same ablaut series, the present had in Old English *ú*, Middle English *ū*, *ou*, instead of *éo*. The strong past tense *crud* (from plural), plural *crodyn* (from past participle) were used in Middle English; in the past participle, *crod* occurs in 1477, and *crowden* in 17th cent.; but the weak forms in -ed prevail from 16th cent. The word was comparatively rare down to 1600; it does not occur in the Bible of 1611. The primary sense of 'press' (Branch I), has in later English passed into that of the mutual or combined action of multitudes compressed or gathered closely together (II)." "crowd, n.2: obs. An underground vault, a crypt. (Also commonly in pl.) Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *crudde*, apparently corresponding to Old French *crute*, *crote*, later *croute* = Provençal *crota*, Italian *grotta* < late Latin *crupta*, *grupta*, for Latin *crypta*: see crypt n. Of the d in the Anglo-Norman and English word no explanation has been found." Intriguingly, the latter movement between the 'd' and 't' sounds in the second sense is also at work in my reading of this poem. There might be room for a further reading wherein the 'd' sounds of the first sense fortuitously supply the inexplicable 'd' in the second sense: I am still thinking through the stakes and implications of such a reading in the context of the poem.

wet, black bough" and vice versa.

This transfiguration from crowd to bough takes on added weight through the complex of sounds invoked between the two lines: both words set at the end of the line, "crowd" and "bough" (which is typically pronounced to rhyme with "how"), are explicitly related through a half-rhyme, and particularly in such a way that the movement from crow*d* to b*ough* opens up the ending of the final line, displacing the dulled "d" closure in "crowd" with the relative openness of "bough." Furthermore, even as the vowel sounds in "crowd" are picked up in "bough," its consonants also resonate elsewhere—"*wet*,"[183] "bla*ck*"—where "we*t*" in particular seems to provide a more weighted and enunciated version of the ending in "crowd." The sounds of Pound's crowd find themselves phenomenally dispersed and yet more specified across the line, in that faraway locus of nature, open not just to faces but also to the petals that may appear and migrate into the crowd.

These traveling petals also invoke a further complex of ambiguities, this time only partly symptomatized in sound: the word "petal" is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as both noun and verb, where the latter denotes a particularly literary or poetic usage of the term. Remarkably, the only poet listed as having used "petal" as a verb in the OED (the two other entries are from periodicals) is the Ezra Pound of the later *Cantos*, mobilizing his petals as late as 1930 and 1955, decades after the writing of the Metro poem. This etymological detail perhaps opens up the

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[183] I thank Geoffrey Bennington for his small kvetches about the wetness of the bough in the earliest draft of this work. Attempting to account for that eventually led me to this difficult articulation between Pound's petals, bough, and crowd, which I am still trying to parse. It is further interesting/symptomatic that I account for much of the poem through a reading of its sounds rather than its semantic values; something to note for future consideration.

possibility that the Metro poem's "Petals" may well be read as a verb, although the comma that follows it in this variant then also suggests that it may also be a verb with no subject and no agent. The given IPA pronunciations of the word are also intriguing in light of these unusual usages: "Brit. /ˈpɛtl/ , U.S. /ˈpɛdl/." That "petal" (in both noun and verb forms) should not sound so different from "pedal" in the transatlantic migration of its saying prefigures Pound's own verbing —so to speak— of the term, which in both instances pairs and positions its action with first a feminine and then a bestial foot, and always set within an imaginary space of nature. In the first Poundian instance, the 1930 example is drawn from Canto IV, from *A Draft of XXX Cantos*:

> Torches melt in the glare
>
> set flame of the corner cook-stall,
>
> Blue agate casing the sky (as at Gourdon that time)
>
> the sputter of resin,
>
> Saffron sandal so petals the narrow foot: Hymenæus Io!
>
> Hymen, Io Hymenæe! Aurunculeia!
>
> One scarlet flower is cast on the blanch-white stone.[184]

Adopting and recasting the apostrophic refrain in Catullus' Sapphic epithalamion (Catullus 61), Pound's verbal use of the word here is caught and contained within a pastiche of eroticized metaphor that equally draws on mythology and the two modes of nature that it calls upon (the way things are, but also the phenomenal manifestations that are ideologically secluded from humanity and culture—rocks,

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[184] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 15.

sky, flowers.) In its original writing, Catullus' poem celebrates a marriage and, perhaps more specifically, its impending consummation; in a similar vein, Pound's reimagination presents a remarkable movement from saffron petals to a scarlet flower, from being petalled on a foot to being an entire flower "cast on the blanch-white stone." The narrow foot perhaps gives a time-worn metaphor for the poetic foot (surely important for Pound, whose attention to prosody has already been established); but how then to read and theorize the implicit transfiguration from poetic foot to passive, receptive stone?

Indeed, the image here additionally calls up the image of the petals on the bough, but with very different actions as coordinates: instead of being prepositionally situated "*on* a wet, black bough" (my italics) with no further description, the flowers here are either forcefully "*cast on* the blanch-white stone" (my italics) or becoming implicitly fragmented into petals, then turned into a sandal, so that they can in turn "petal" a foot. Far from eroticized conventions of virginal purity when lined up together, then, tracing the movement from black bough to (sandaled, petalled) foot to a stone bleached white by the elements perhaps begins to contour the ideological complicities of nature as figured in Pound's imagist poetics, and as rendered through the uncanny afterlives of his foundational petals: the petaling here is distinctly in the transitive mode.

The other, later 1955 OED example comes from a moment near the end of *Canto XCI*, in the section known as *Section: Rock-Drill* (published in 1957):

The water-bug's mittens

petal the rock beneath,

> The natrix glides sapphire into the rock-pool.[185]

Perhaps slightly more evocative of "pedal," the feet of the water-bug here again seem to be prepositionally located alongside "the rock beneath," invoking the stone of the previous example. The strange description of the water-bug's feet as "mittens" is rendered even stranger by an almost-humorous (?) remark from Pound in a 1941 letter to the Japanese avant-garde poet Kitasono Katue, with whom Pound maintained a long correspondence:

> If I were 30 years younger I would call 'em [the "mittens" - ed.] his boxing gloves. I wonder if it is clear that I mean the shadow of the "mittens"? and can you ideograph it; very like petals of blossoms.[186]

Pound's remark, made more than a decade before the writing of *Canto XCI*, was actually made with regard to an earlier instantiation of the "water-bug's mittens": sending his friend a few lines "to go into Canto 72 or elsewhere,"[187] Pound's 1941 variant reads: "The water-bug's mittens show on the bright rock below him."[188] Although odd and almost presumptuous at first glance, the request to "ideograph it" (another noun-as-verb) is slightly less odd in the context of their mutual respect and influence: Kitasono's avant-garde theoretical leanings owed much to Pound's notion of the ideogram, leading him also to incorporate foreign words and script in

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[185] Ibid, 636.

[186] Ezra Pound, *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941,* ed. D.D. Paige (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974), 449.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

his own poetry.[189]

More pertinently, however, Pound's remark here brings together his interest in the ideograph with the naturalistic trope of the petals as a matter of showing, while also introducing something of a shadowy interruption. In fact, contra Pound's question in the letter to Kitasono, it is *not* clear from reading either the 1941 version or the 1955 version that it is "the shadow of the 'mittens'" that are meant to be petaling, pedaling, or showing on the rock beneath, and the historically-coded reference to being "30 years younger" for naming the boxing gloves (sometimes also called boxing mittens) render the point here somewhat more opaque. Yet my previous question of how to theorize the figuration from poetic foot to passive stone perhaps finds something of an allegorical answer in this moment, however overcast: Pound's petals are inscribed onto the rock beneath by means of shadow and light, on or through something wet and black.

Material figuration: "Can you ideograph it"

Indeed, Pound's request to Kitasono, despite its characteristic oddity, is at bottom a two-fold request: for (a kind of) *translation*; and, which amounts to the same, a kind of theoretical operation. Within the context of Pound's letter, we may deduce that to 'ideograph it,' necessarily formulated as a transitive verb, implies an imaginative operation upon a given image (in this case, the shadow of the water-bug's mittens, which is not given so much as *written*) that would rearrange the image in such a way

[189] The Japanese language has *katakana*, a specialized phonetic script that is used primarily for the incorporation of foreign and loan words. Kitasono used *katakana* as well as alphabetic scripts from English, French, etc.

that the consonance between *more-than-one* images (i.e. the shadow, which is "very like petals of blossoms") would somehow be apparent and visible. Whether or not such an operation is even possible remains an open question[190]—after all, Pound's offhand "can you ideograph it" may easily be read as a questioning of possibility rather than a request per se: '*can* you ideograph it'— but what is most suggestive here is the break from translation in its conventional sense as a transmission of semantic content between two implicitly equivalent languages. In its stead, Pound begins to frame translation as a manipulation or perversion of writing *qua* script.

Even more particular, however, is the translational axis implied in this moment. In the first direction, moving linguistically from English to the ideograph is first and most banally a translating move from one kind of language to another kind of language (with all the cultural, historical, and epistemological dissonances all that would entail); but the particularity of this translational vector is suggestive in that it parallels and enacts the movement from abstraction back into concretion. To "ideograph it" is thus also a theoretical operation that takes place *prior to* and *in* the threshold 'material' of script. (A quick contrapuntal to illustrate this point: if one desired a translation from Chinese to English, requests for a friend to "alphabetize it" or "phoneticize it" would bear somewhat idiosyncratic —though no doubt interesting— results.[191] The basic point here is simply that target script and target

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[190] I have wondered about Kitasono's response to Pound, which would no doubt be intriguing regardless. If given the opportunity for archival research, I would follow up on this by looking in Pound's papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Yale) in order to incorporate it into my argument here.

[191] Jonathan Stalling, *Yingelishi: Sinophonic English Poetry and Poetics* (Denver: Counterpath, 2011). Stalling has undertaken heroic attempts at such experimental translations.

language make their respective appeals to different aspects of the linguistic system: translating the medium does not always translate the message.) Moreover, if we abide by the posited rules of the ideogram, the translating (ekphrastic?) movement of "ideographing" would therefore also require not just a restoration of the concrete, but further, an infusion of the semantic truths of alphabetic syntax into the visual dynamics of the ideograph.

By this point it should not come as a surprise that the Japanese expression for the reality of "language" is connected to the image of petals that emerge from the sky.[192] Yet even in moments where translation—"ideographing"—is a manipulation of material and visible script, here we have still remained in a figural domain of language. Fenollosa and Pound have made strong claims for insisting on their translinguistic and transcultural ideographic language as matter if not material reality: and yet—to refigure the argument via one of my most salient examples—these figural petals have not quite passed into an objective apprehension of the crowd. In the chapter that follows, I gather and reexamine the doubled threads of figure and material history that I have followed throughout the dissertation. Transforming one into the other is a fraught and contingent gesture; I outline the complications and limits of this gesture by thinking about affect, china, and China in Gertrude Stein's late writing of what she still wants to call "America."

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[192] This fact is of particular interest to philosophical scholars of Martin Heidegger: in his "Dialogue on Language" with an unnamed Japanese friend, the friend makes this very point in an extended discussion articulating the "Saying" of petals through its relation with the sky. This relation is the reality in and through which language emerges. Martin Heidegger, "Dialogue on Language" in *On the Way to Language,* trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 47-53.

Chapter 4

Affect:
Building a Steinese Wall

Three acts

The premises for this chapter's argument can be staged in three acts from Gertrude Stein. First: "[b]uilding a Chinese wall,"[193] Stein pronounces in an oft-cited interview from 1934, "is always bad."[194] In the same interview, she also proposes that Adolf Hitler be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: "he is driving out everything that conduces to activity. That means peace." Building Chinese walls, one gathers, is for the likes of Hitler and Chinese emperors, not a good democratic American. For Stein, peace is not the freedom from war, but an intellectual stagnation that marks the opposite of political progress, and the enemy of an activity that she explicitly frames as a positive thing. With the help of literary critics who have parsed these idiosyncratic and negative gestures, Stein's political statements have been recuperated as the logical results of her propositions about aesthetics and language. Yet even on a closer and sympathetic reading of these claims, Stein is still proposing a liberal

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[193] Stein presumably has in mind the Great Wall of China, a set of ruined fortifications built over the course of ancient Chinese history along the northern borders of China to prevent attacks from the nomadic tribes living north of the border. It was most famously consolidated by the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (from which the western name "China" and variations thereof is derived), who sought to unify the then-warring states of China into a single empire: unifying the Wall was a vital aspect of this unifying project. The Great Wall has also become an object of orientalizing fascination for many Anglo-American and European writers and thinkers particularly in the twentieth century: the trope has appeared in varied treatments in works by Kafka, Borges, and Walter Benjamin amongst others, and is a recurring theme for Hegel in his *Lectures on World History* and *Aesthetics*.

[194] Lansing Warren, "Gertrude Stein Views Life and Politics," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1934, 9.

ideology of struggle and "constant stimulation" through heterogeneity and mixture as the only means for democratic progress: this we might even recognize today as a proto-neoliberal insistence on self-determination and American exceptionalism that remains difficult to explain away as irony or satire.[195] In Stein's account, the Chinese wall becomes a figural stand-in for a nationalist protectionism acting against the progressivist interests of the American nation. Instead of building this wall, Stein's argument demands—as it slips in and out of a different address, this one both more

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[195] An example comes from prominent Language poet and literary critic Charles Bernstein: "[s]aying that Stein endorsed Hitler for the Nobel Prize in the 1934 interview is like saying that Mel Brooks includes a tribute to Hitler in *The Producers.* In Stein's remarks about Hitler and the Nobel Prize, she associates Hitler with all that is bad in Germany… What is left out is Stein's explicit claim that 'activity,' 'struggle,' and contest (which she later calls competition) are necessarily good… Stein's views on immigration directly contest the ethnic cleansing (of non-Aryan, "new blood") in Hitler's Germany. In the 1934 interview, Stein also, explicitly, expresses her distaste for Germans and expresses her preference for the Americans and the French." Bernstein further notes in defense of Stein that her detractors would do well to read the entire interview, which would provide a fuller picture of her positions. Having read the entire interview, I would nevertheless suggest that there is far more violence in the nuances of Stein's liberal politics than Bernstein is willing to allow in his simplistic and essentializing schema. For him, Stein's politics can apparently be recuperated by noting that she dislikes the "bad" Hitler and Germans in general, while endorsing immigration as "good." Perhaps Bernstein's disappointing analysis can be explained as a strategy to counter the similarly simplistic tenor of criticism following the revelation of Stein's wartime record: indeed, this is the occasion that has led to Bernstein's defense of Stein and compilation of the online *Jacket2* dossier aiming to set the record straight. Unfortunately, he does not seem to notice that Stein equally explicitly qualifies her call for a relaxed immigration policy by noting that immigration can still be selective to maintain the "color line, for instance." My interest here is not so much to label Stein a fascist or a racist, nor to accuse her of fascist sympathies; rather, I seek to account for her deeply problematic politics from *within* the ambit of her aesthetics of a material poetics—and I suggest that this can be done through considering the multivalent figure of "china/chineseness" which, contrary to her "Chinese wall," is not always (though still sometimes) bad in both Stein's and my accounts. See Charles Bernstein, "Gertrude Stein taunts Hitler in 1934 and 1945: (Sieg heil, sieg heil, right in der Fuehrer's face)," in "Gertrude Stein's war years: Setting the record straight," edited by Charles Bernstein, *Jacket2*, May 9 2012, accessed July 5 2015.

intimate and imperative—that "You must face life and struggle."[196] Yet who should be struggling? Despite the liberal argument for breaching the "Chinese wall" and relaxing the stringent immigration laws in the United States, Stein is unafraid to qualify the argument for a larger "we": she suggests that immigration laws should certainly be relaxed, but "[t]here is no reason why we should not select our immigrants with greater care, nor why we should not bar certain peoples and preserve the color line for instance."[197]

Second: in the very same year, Stein's libretto *Four Saints in Three Acts* (written in collaboration with Virgil Thomson) was touring the United States as she was giving a series of celebrated lectures eventually collected as *Lectures in America*. (The interview above was part of the same public event, bearing the traces of her ongoing meta-reflections on being a prominent object of curiosity and confusion in the home country that she had left behind in many years of living in France.)[198] In a small moment from *Four Saints,* a question is posed to its protagonist Saint Therese: "If it were possible to kill five thousand chinamen by pressing a button would it be done." Her ambivalent answer comes as something of a surprise: "Saint Therese not interested."[199] True to Saint Therese's response, the moment is never mentioned

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[196] Warren, "Gertrude Stein Views Life and Politics," ibid.

[197] ibid.

[198] For an account of this process, see *Karen Leick, Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[199] Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903-1932,* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 613. My citations from Stein's published work generally come from the two-volume Library of America edition aiming to span her career.

again throughout the opera's performance, and is only partially and elusively explained in Stein's voice when she writes *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937).

Third: twelve years after the premiere of *Four Saints*, its little conundrum passes from an ethical and moral hypothetical into brute historical reality. In her essay "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), Stein—this time in her own first-person voice—reiterates her thorough uninterestedness in the killing of thousands of unnamed people in an unspecified place and time. Yet here, a reason is given. She cannot take an interest in the atomic bomb, Stein claims, because of the way it absolutizes destruction and destroys the distinction between subject and object: it will leave nothing behind, such that there will be no one to be interested, and nothing to be interested *in*. It is not so much that the bomb is boring or induces boredom; it only and quite simply renders interestedness impossible. By the total reach of its destruction, the atomic bomb obliterates all the basic conditions for affectivity to take place: a feeling subject; an affecting object; and the unnavigable sea of distance between them—a total annihilation from which even Stein herself would not be exempt. As my readings will show, this textual moment disentangles the dual meanings of the term "disinterest," which can describe both a general lack

of interest as well as (such as in the Kantian sense of the term[200]) a more complex impartiality or detachment of a pseudo-objective judgement stemming from not being personally involved in that which is being judged: where Saint Therese's disinterest simultaneously implies both senses of the term, Stein's disinterest in the atomic bomb and proleptic invocation of the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD) oscillates between the two and in so doing prevents one from settling on a single definition. Something of a paradox, then: this speaker may well die from the object in which she takes no interest, and yet in this material involvement she still *cannot* be interested, if only because the operations and operators of interestedness are in apocalyptic crisis and will soon cease to exist.

In what follows, I consider the implications of these moments—and the nuances between their differences—as they mark points of convergence between figure and history. Their concatenation here provides a map for my argument. What draws them together, I argue, is not so much the belabored figure of China *qua* distant and externalized Orient, but the ways in which they distort and even inhibit the relation between that figurality and its potential reference to history. By calling attention to these seemingly peripheral moments, I argue that Stein's repeated

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[200] Kant's German "interesse" also connotes pleasure, which Kant works over in his argument. By insisting on *disinterested* pleasure in the judgement of the beautiful, Kant is able to argue that aesthetic judgement solicits a universal assent to that judgement in the form of the *sensus communis*. In other words, the move from subjective judgement to universal assent requires (a) the disinterestedness of the subject as well as (b) a universally-available faculty of judgement in all subjects to be disinterested. Something of a similar gesture from disinterested-subject to universal consensus is made in Stein's text (on both constative and performative levels), but obviously Stein's atomic bomb crisis operates quite differently from Kant's reason—at least on the constative level. If there is disinterested pleasure in Stein's account, it is extremely subtle and likely requires substantial elaboration: this lies outside of my purview for the present.

refusals of interest in the mass deaths of Chinese and anonymized peoples also disregard a move from the *figural* deaths of *Four Saints* to the *historical* deaths inflicted by the atomic bomb, from a conditional tense to a past tense. How then to translate and read this historical debt into the material poetics of Stein? In readings that examine Stein's poetics as they center on the figurality and materiality of "china," I show how a "stupid" and "basic" material poetics that takes liberties with the rules of English may indeed be "Steinese" in the fullest sense of the neologism: still pejorative and pathologizing as in the original intention of the term, while additionally denoting a translation prohibited from taking place. Stein's denials of figure-*as*-history and insistence on history-*as*-figure provide explicit ethico-political, transnational, and transcultural stakes for my argument on translatability. If translatability names only a tenuous relation between two poles—concretized as two languages, figured here as affect[201]—then Stein would sever even that most minimal of relations. Where affect can forcefully transform figure into history, Stein cuts to the extreme implications of attenuating this force. In the end, it is by enmeshing her material poetics with her irrecuperable politics that my dissertation's argument faces its most radical, concrete test.

Arriving at Stein at this point in the argument might be something of an anti-climax. Indeed, to make Stein the pseudo-culmination of a project about

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[201] Affect can be understood here in Sara Ahmed's minimal definition as simply "what sticks, or what sustains, or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects." See Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29. In considering this notion of affect alongside the literary question of un/translatability, I am then interested in the strains that might be revealed in this connection when such ideas, values, and objects come into crisis as rendered by Stein.

translatability might even seem a little perverse, or at least unusual: while her poetry certainly fulfills the old dictum insisting on the *de facto* and properly untranslatable status of poetic language, her relationship to the literal act of translation itself might be a little more tenuous. Confined for the most part to her plodding English translations of Vichy Chief-of-State Philippe Pétain's speeches, Stein's work of translation is thereby haunted by the specter of her wartime association with the Vichy régime in France.[202] Moreover, her work on *self*-translation was done through an ill-fated collaboration with a young friend Georges Hugnet, who admired Stein's writing and helped to translate some of her later work into French (working primarily from Stein's self-translations into French, rather than her English originals).[203] But if translation is a negotiation of a certain mode or form of translingual and transcultural difference, then Stein's negotiation of

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[202] Václav Paris, "Gertrude Stein's Translations of Speeches by Philippe Pétain," in "Gertrude Stein's war years: Setting the record straight," edited by Charles Bernstein, *Jacket2*, May 9 2012, accessed July 5 2015. Paris provides a comprehensive survey of Stein's translations, currently housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in Yale University. For more general and nuanced scholarly studies of Stein's fascist associations, see Annalisa Zox-Weaver, *Women Modernists and Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Charles Ferrall, *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[203] Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises: 1923-1934* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 309. Dydo and Rice provide a helpful account of the Stein-Hugnet collaboration. Their intense creative relationship went south when Stein sought equal billing as a translator on the title page of *Enfances*, a collaborative project between the two in which Hugnet had written his poems in French and Stein was to translate them into English. As justification for her demand, Stein conceptualizes translation as a direct reflection or mirror-image, writing to Hugnet: "la traduction qui est plutôt reflet… [Translation, which is rather a mirror-image…]" (quoted in *Language That Rises*, my translation). Stein's response to the irremediable fallout that ensued is recorded in her *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded* (1931).

transn*ational* and trancultural modes of difference also come in contact with this work. I suggest then that the fraught places I identify in Stein's corpus would be a germane place to begin addressing the challenge that Simon Gikandi issues to critics of modernist studies, whose work should lie "not in reading notions of alterity that are already embedded in the high modernist norm, but in thinking through the limits of the difference modernism celebrated."[204] In thinking through these limits, I ask how the modality of that difference may well conceive of such a limit with an additional nuance. Whether these limits are celebratory, antagonistic, or something else altogether is then an affective question that I leave suspended for now.[205]

Historical death in the future conditional

Written in 1946 and published in 1947 in the *Yale Poetry Review*, Stein's late *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb* is collected at the end of the Library of America edition aiming at a comprehensive selection of her writings. Tacitly presented by the editors as something of a closing grace note to her career, this short reflection on mortality written in the year of her death both intensifies and undercuts the ambivalence surrounding Stein's politics. In response to an amorphous "they" pressing her on her views about the atomic bomb and its destructive effects, Stein professes simply that she is "not interested" in the fact of this watershed cultural

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[204] Gikandi, Simon. "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity,* edited by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 37.

[205] For Jonathan Flatley, melancholia is a central affect in the political work of modernism. See *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

event and—by implication if not by direct indication—the distant suffering that it has caused. What lurks in the background is, first of all, the as yet unarticulated logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD) through nuclear warfare: although Stein did not live to witness the gradual escalation of the Cold War and its attendant arms race, the totality she ascribes to the bomb suggests a strong proleptic awareness of the MAD argument.

Additionally, the first victims of the atomic bomb's inauguration in 1945—the people and bodies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, most of whom were civilians—are strikingly not mentioned or delineated through any particular markers at all. This absence weighs heavily in Stein's account. At first legible as a troubling political evasion, it takes on further significance when one considers the calm and unyielding nihilism legible in Stein's piece, in which the speaker's ambivalence towards the mass engineered murder of distant and unnamed peoples nevertheless spares absolutely nothing and no one: not even, it seems, the speaker herself, who pitilessly suggests through omission the coming fact of her own death. The proper names on the unwritten death toll here are then the people and bodies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then, and also, the careless, unfeeling speaker Gertrude Stein.

Little wonder then that the text begins with a very short paragraph hinting already at something like exhausted incapacity on the part of the speaker, and initially written in a past tense that indicates a simple factual recounting: "They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it."[206] Unlike the other moment in *Four Saints*, *this* profession is framed as

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[206] Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1932-1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 823.

a lack of ability rather than an arbitrary judgement or a willed failure of imagination. It is notably distinct from being unable to imagine a catastrophe of this magnitude—the logic is not a rehashing of the Kantian sublime. Instead, the speaker cannot be interested because being interested would first and foremost require an affective investment marked by being "scared," a fear which for the speaker has already been eliminated by the sheer scale of the phenomenon: for those who find the atomic bomb interesting, "[t]hey may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting."[207]

Somewhat counter-intuitively, Stein's speaker is not scared because she has noted the bomb's potential—only a potential—to destroy a universal *everything* that is living, leaving nothing but the dead in its wake:

> What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there is nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. If they are not as destructive as all that then they are just a little more or less destructive than other things and that means that in spite of all destruction there are always lots left on this earth to be interested or to be interesting and the thing that destroys is just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people shooting it off, but really nobody else can do anything about it so you have to just live along like always, so you see the atomic (bomb) is not at all interesting, not any more

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[207] ibid.

> interesting than any other machine, and machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested.[208]

Curiously employing an 'if … then' conditional formulation and the simple present tense in her argumentation, Stein presents both possible sides of a debate, which turns on a recurring question: *if* the atomic bomb is "really as destructive as all that."[209] Indeed, up until this point in the text (a little more than halfway through), Stein strikingly continues to write as if the atomic bomb's effects are still hypothetical, as if it had not been deployed yet, and as if its deployment could not and would not elicit any symmetrical response. Her rhetoric still figures the historical event of the bomb as a conditional.

One plausible reading is then that Stein's approach to the atomic bomb not only blindly disregards its clear victims and willfully claims knowledge only of the aggressor's perspective, but also deliberately and strenuously steps away from even the more available and proximate perspective. In the given passage, Stein seems to suggest even in her distancing that the atomic bomb interests and "concerns" only the aggressors and not its already-dead and/or future targets: this might then already suggest something of the foundational violence located in her affective divestment. For what is initially at stake when Stein sets up her prevarication between the two potential outcomes of the bomb is the ambiguous indemnity of the indeterminable subject from destruction by a determinate object (here, the bomb). Her analysis presents *only* two possibilities: (1) an absolute annihilation that is

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[208] ibid.

[209] ibid.

uninteresting insofar as it would leave no interested witnesses or interesting objects behind; and (2) a less extensive destructiveness that is itself uninteresting because it is then merely similar to all the other banal forms of destruction already given in the world, but which also leaves interested witnesses and interesting objects other than itself behind. Between these two possibilities, the atomic bomb's ontological status shifts rapidly. In the first, it is a world-destroying event that obliterates even its own origin and ends, whereas in the second it is "just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people shooting it off,"[210] that is, it is a weapon-object that is subsumed under mere technocratic domination by those responsible for its selective deployment towards distant persons other than themselves—an act of aggression which still keeps them safe from its effects. Denotatively speaking, Stein's interest centers on neither side of this forceful divide. Yet considering the sentence lengths corresponding to each possibility, it seems clear that for her it is the latter possibility—that there might be something remaining in the aftermath of the bomb—that requires a somewhat more extensive elaboration. (This is, of course, also what has *actually* happened with the atomic bomb: certainly many, many people died in the act of aggression by the United States, but there were also many left. Parardoxically, per Stein's dismissal in the text, this is still uninteresting.) Conversely, when discussing the total annihilation of everything that exists, very little is said and needs to be said: there will simply be nothing left, no one to be interested. And then, which passes only implicitly and unmentioned on the surface of Stein's account: not

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[210] ibid.

even I, myself, the speaker will be left, nor can there be any sense of self or subjectivity at all.

As the text shifts in its second half from a rhetoric of dis/interestedness to a rhetoric of risk, threat, or fear, Stein's twinned conceptions of the atomic bomb—as annihilating event and annihilating object—begin to merge together in order to form a continuum of destruction:

> I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldnt [sic] any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. And really way down that is the way everybody feels about it. They think they are interested in the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not.[211]

In a slight and almost unnoticeable moment, the speaker shifts from the conditional in her discussion of the bomb into a future tense before moving back into the conditional for the sentence's subordinate clause. Where she was previously arguing in a hypothetical vein that wondered *if* the atomic bomb was really as destructive "as all that,"[212] here she passingly notes, as if as a concession, that "[s]ure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot"[213] before arguing that this still is not interesting because modes

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[211] ibid.

[212] ibid.

[213] ibid.

of killing do not constitute an object of interest; living people do. The conditional that ensues returns us to the previous apocalyptic scenario: "if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction."[214] If nothing—Stein seems to be saying—then nothing. Total annihilation of everyone and everything is associated with the conditional, a nihilist fantasy that will never happen as long as the material world continues to exist; the partial annihilation of "a lot" is associated exclusively with the future. Holding out with one hand a conditional vulnerability for all, Stein eliminates with the other hand that condition, holding out too a future that does not raze us all to the ground, only the bodies of those *already* dead.

What then is at stake in the troubling and double-handed gesture of projecting "a lot" of historical deaths into the figural future? Why does Stein's text so insistently and improperly transcribe a reality that should properly be written in the *past* tense in the *future* tense? For it is certainly difficult to read this text purely on its own terms, without hearing and imputing the historical violence that it references. Through Stein's account, the actualized potential of the bomb as inflicted on a select group of people has become, quite casually, only an *un*qualified potential whose actualization is still yet guaranteed. In this instance of Stein's figuration of the distant and annihilated other, even figure takes on a dimension of historico-temporal

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[214] ibid.

potential. At stake in the potential that Stein callously secures might then be the affectivity of history on figure, figure on history.[215]

Killing China: death as figure

In turning from the atomic bomb text's figure of disinterest in mass murder to another iteration of a similar figure in Stein's libretto *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934)—this time connected to a western tradition of sympathetic subject-actualization through an ethical quandary of the other—a few premises for this comparative move are necessary. First, where the atomic bomb text of 1946 traffics quietly in historical reality, the similar moment in *Four Saints* remains firmly in the hypothetical. Although critics have understandably focused on *Four Saints*' problematic moment on its own terms and within the parameters instituted by the text, I would add that a comparative reading alongside the atomic bomb text reveals how the thought experiment of *Four Saints* becomes materialized, through a

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[215] In this regard, Roland Végső explains that the bomb's catalytic rhetoric of crisis and catastrophe "introduced a new kind of universality to politics. This universality turned Cold War politics into a truly global politics. The problem, however, was that according to the political theology of Cold War anti-Communism, national sovereignty was a necessary limit on this universality. As a result, anti-Communist nationalism had to maintain its affective foundation by reference to a set of "necessary illusions": it had to constantly dramatize a global catastrophe that never actually happened, and it had to maintain the illusion that it is possible to survive such a catastrophe. The ultimate consequence of the official propagation of this institutionalized illusion, however, was the collapse of a distinction between crisis and norm. The necessary illusion of anti-Communist politics became justifications of a permanent crisis." Stein however needs no such illusion: her account demonstrates a keen awareness that just as it is possible to survive the atomic bomb, so too would it be possible *not* to survive—and in both cases the bomb would remain uninteresting. Indeed, Stein is interested in neither crisis nor catastrophe. See Roland Végső, *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 80.

weaponized materialism at war with vulnerable and racial bodies. What happens in Stein's atomic bomb text is then precisely the belated fulfillment what Eric Hayot reads as a refusal of "the premise of the hypothetical as hypothetical."[216]

That my analytical move from the literal bomb to a figural killing also takes place in parallel to a move from *actual* and unnamed Japanese victims to *imaginary* and unnamed Chinese victims is perhaps not incidental: in an analysis of *Four Saints* that takes the "Orient" as an organizing epistemological category for approaching Stein's corpus as a whole, Josephine Park finds that Stein's relations to these orients are at once contradictory and carelessly conflating. At the same time, such a conflation also yields an account of an imagination that must first divide itself in order to secure its identity:

> Through the figure of the Orient we may see what is and is not "for Stein" in her own habits of thought. The phrase "peaceful penetration" suggests the pragmatic reasoning that permits the appearance of a Japanese geisha in "Susie Asado," but the other to incorporation is just as revealing: when Stein signals that she is "not interested" in "five thousand chinamen," she gestures toward a fundamental division in her imagination, in which she can imagine her brother's suffering but not that of the Chinese masses.[217]

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[216] Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 250.

[217] Josephine Nock-Hee Park. "The Orients of Gertrude Stein," *College Literature* 36.3 (Summer 2009): 40. For a similar argument, see also Anita Patterson, *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Park here reads Stein's disinterest as one that is absolutely centered on herself—the death of five thousand Chinese is not interesting "for Stein"—while precisely allowing the constitution of 'Steinness' by allowing her to externalize what is and is not "for Stein"—that is to say, what does and does not serve the endpoint of that subject's constitution.

The question is then how and on what/whom that affectivity bears: a question that may potentially be framed outside a subject-object dyad considering Stein's discussion of the annihilating potential of the atomic bomb.[218] In my reading of the textual moment from *Four Saints*, I trace the possibility of a refusal of interestedness in even a historical figure of China that does not in the end lead back to the subject. Rather than having an enabling hand in the western constitution of subjectivity, I consider, against the critical current, a China whose externalized and orientalized position outside such an economy of self-constitution and thereby calls into question the possibility of transnational affect as well.

The figure-specter of China and its undifferentiated multitudes looms large near the beginning of Stein's libretto *Four Saints in Three Acts*, written in collaboration with the American composer Virgil Thomson between 1927-8. Premiering in 1934 in Hartford, Connecticut and subsequently selling out on Broadway, *Four Saints* also inaugurated Stein's fêted series of traveling lectures

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[218] Adam Frank incisively argues that Stein's writing for the theater offers a new configuration for conceptualizing affective relations. My question of the object on which affectivity bears is similar to Frank's; however, unlike Frank, I am less interested in the theatrical or generic dimensions of this affect, but rather only the denotative figure of Stein's/Saint Therese's non-affect, which appears elsewhere in her non-theatrical texts as well. See Frank, *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

gathered under the title *Lectures in America*. Yet despite the strength of their popular reception and self-proclaimed ambitions of explaining Stein's work to her readers, these texts did not overtly lend themselves to popular understanding; symptomatically, newspaper journalists at the time were fond of parodying Stein's repetitive style as a means of wittily flaunting their own incomprehension.[219]

Indeed, it is difficult to separate *Four Saints* from the America lectures, and not simply because of their historical proximity. For they had much in common stylistically and politically as well: both the America lectures and *Four Saints*' libretto employed the repetitious, a-grammatical plain speech as well as the "continuous present" that had come to be associated with Stein's writing. Furthermore, it was also a first in being performed by an all-black cast, directed in 1934 by choral director Eva Jessye, who would later be invited to direct the similarly ground-breaking *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. This casting choice was itself unprecedented for any musical production in the United States, but the claims of novelty through black voices and embodiment extended further yet. For in a move with difficult and even contradictory political resonances, the black singers were cast in an opera nominally set in a Spanish and European locale and played all the roles, including those of the protagonist saints. (Places such as Barcelona and Avila are explicitly named as the homes of the historical inspirations—Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint Therese of Avila). Further, the opera premiered and was performed in the United States concomitant to an ongoing series of lectures that partially treated the idea of America itself. That the cast of the opera received much critical

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[219] Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998).

attention is perhaps itself an index of contemporary attitudes towards race and racialization on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the wake of Josephine Baker's seismic visibility in the Parisian scene and the European avant-garde's ongoing fetishization of African art: indeed, the decision would initially seem to be a progressive departure from what Gikandi has theorized as a high modernist tendency "to be attracted to the other as a schemata or idea but to avoid its materiality."[220] Although one need look no further than Josephine Baker to find a material body that has precisely been appropriated and sexualized as an aesthetic idea, the kinds of performances that *Four Saints in Three Acts* demanded certainly did not come close to that degree of fetishization. Yet the materiality of the black body, instead of being fully confronted *qua* materialization of a brutal epistemological violence, becomes instead a conduit for a further transnational violence: by grafting the European aestheticization of Africa onto a visibly racialized discourse of 'America' in *Four Saints*, Stein's work straddles complicity and critique, paradoxically effecting a critique of America as ideology through a complicity with European aesthetic ideologies.[221]

When one first hears or read about China in *Four Saints*, then, one does so within these ambivalently quasi-nationalist, quasi-cosmopolitan, and quasi-

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[220] Gikandi, "Africa," 46. In this regard, see for a *locus classicus* on race in American modernism Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

[221] Perhaps less critically observed, and again symptomatic of critical blindness to its own positioning, is the required suspension of disbelief in having an opera set in Spain be entirely written and sung in English (albeit a Steinese English). I note this here for future consideration.

progressive historical frames. Its more immediate context lies near the end of a short Act One, which presents Saint Therese, one of the titular saints, in a storm surrounded by the chorus. In these difficult conditions, the first question Saint Therese is faced with is "if to stay to cry…if to cry stay to cry to cry to stay" (613). By repeating and inverting the dilemma between the emotive expression of crying and the material perdurance of staying, each opposing side of the dilemma becomes instead stacked onto one another in a characteristically Steinian repetition, each becoming the subjunctive condition as well as teleological purpose for the other. The two actions here—crying and staying—are then recapitulated together through a later repetition and reduction: "No saint to remember to remember. No saint to remember."[222] If to cry and stay is also a gesture of remembrance, then these gestures have not been performed on either the literal or the meta-performative levels, and indeed cannot be performed because there is no subject to perform the remembering, and no object to be remembered.

It is amidst this obliteration of a subjective historicity that the second question surfaces, with no obvious forewarning and no recollection later in the libretto: "Saint Therese knowing young and told./If it were possible to kill five thousand chinamen by pressing a button would it be done."[223] Stein's idiosyncratic habit of ending all of *Four Saints*' lines with a period and a line-break operates here with a particularly material effect: although the sentence is grammatically a question, it is not correspondingly marked by a question mark, and so in

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[222] Stein, *Writings 1903-1932,* 613.

[223] ibid.

performance need only be inflected by musical sound, and not so much the letter of the text. It is further difficult to tell what the preceding description of Saint Therese implies: perhaps she is both a "knowing" person as well as a "young" person; perhaps she knows something about youngness and being young; or, further still, she might know something about her own youth. In all cases, the correspondent qualities of knowledge and youth are rendered more ambivalent when, in the next line, we eventually get the answer to the difficult moral question: "Saint Therese not interested."[224] Saint Therese's knowledge and youth, then, have arrived at a limit that is specifically framed as an aesthetic and subjective pronouncement, through which any affective investment in either the question or its object is roundly negated.

When reading this isolated moment in the libretto as a linguistic text, it is not clear who is speaking what, in large part because Stein does not attribute each line to her characters and chorus members here. (This gradually changes further in the performance.) Eliding specific attribution may lend greater freedom to stage praxis, and indeed the instantiations of this opera over the years have ranged widely on their treatment of this fraught moment; relatedly, too, it also effects a dispersed subjectivity and corresponding ethical ambiguity that parallels Saint Therese's supposed disinterestedness. It is unclear, for instance, if the question of the five thousand Chinese should be spoken by Saint Therese herself, or posed by the chorus at large, or indeed spoken by individual choral members. Moreover, the very same

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[224] ibid.

ambiguity of attribution also applies to the response given in "Saint Therese not interested."

Crucially too, there is no clear object designated by this dense fragment. We are told only that Saint Therese is "not interested," yet one might well ask—not interested *in what*, exactly? In a twist on what is conventionally a transitive verb, Saint Therese's negation of interest is radicalized to the performative level of its language: she is so absolutely uninterested that the transitive verb cannot even take on a grammatical object as it usually should. Indeed, the question is ambiguously formulated as "would *it* be done" (italics mine)—where a far more direct alternative might be "would you do it"—and thus in the passivity of its construction also paradoxically opens yet wider domains in which Saint Therese's disinterestedness might be operating. Thus the ambiguities surrounding subject and object work together to remove the necessary conditions of affective involvement: without these, we cannot know if she is disinterested by an abstract and distant possibility of committing such an act unto yet more distant others, or if she is not interested in *herself* committing the act of mass killing.

These bifurcating possibilities initially seem reduced by Stein's authorial commentary in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), an autobiography this time written in her own name and persona but whose title and conceptualization claims a wider subject and audience. Here, Stein moves with some alacrity between Spain and China by remembering some responses to *Four Saints*:

> Everybody in the opera Four Saints in Three Acts [sic] thought it was funny when they asked Saint Therese what she would do if by touching a button she

> could kill three thousand Chinamen [sic.; in *Four Saints*, the given number was five thousand - ed.] and the chorus said Saint Therese not interested.
>
> But of course Saint Therese was not interested she was building convents in Spain why should she be interested in Chinamen.
>
> When I was about seventeen I remember with excitement having decided that all knowledge was not my province. After all, you have to be able to imagine a thing to know it is there and how could Saint Therese imagine the three thousand Chinamen [sic.] when she was building convents in Spain.[225]

Why and how, indeed. Here, much of Stein's intention for the difficult moment is implicitly divulged: first, she suggests that it would be the chorus posing the question to Saint Therese; second, that the question was specifically about what Saint Therese *herself* would agentially do in this hypothetical scenario; and third, that it should be the chorus that speaks the disavowal "Saint Therese not interested." As a corollary, it can also be deduced that Saint Therese's response to the moral question is not marked by any speech at all—at least in Stein's authorial account—but by an unresponsive silence that is in turn interpreted by the chorus as being "not interested." A further deduction is that what reads as a dialogue between the chorus and Saint Therese is here being framed as something of an ethical soliloquy: the chorus is speaking to itself qua commentary on Saint Therese, though of course still being overheard by its omnipresent audience. Furthermore, we also learn that Saint

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[225] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1993), 91-92.

Therese is so indifferent simply because she has more immediate concerns closer to home: the saintly activity of building convents in Spain.

In the very next paragraph, however, Stein abruptly changes her tune, admitting that "[a]ctually that came to me rather differently."[226] In the second account, the story comes to her by way of family friend Hutchins Hapgood (Stein sardonically calls him "a philosopher then"[227] but in fact he was primarily a journalist and author), whose amateur interest in the vacuous ethical prescriptions of scholastic philosophy led him into conflict with Stein. Her narrative of Hapgood's "test question" (a question intended to test her virtue) differs in slight but important ways from the other versions given in *Everybody's Autobiography* as well as *Four Saints*:

> Would I if I could by pushing a button would I kill five thousand Chinamen [this swiftly restores the correct number - ed.] if I could save my brother from anything. Well I was very fond of my brother and I could completely imagine his suffering and I replied that five thousand Chinamen were something I could not imagine and so it was not interesting.[228]

In a dense footnote comparing the two formulations from *Everybody's Autobiography*, Eric Hayot elaborates the stakes in the difference between the Steinian Saint Therese's logic of immediate pragmatism and Stein's self-owned logic of the unimaginable: "[t]he relation to the hypothetical opens always in two

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[226] ibid, 92.

[227] ibid.

[228] ibid.

directions: [Saint Therese's] towards an economy of costs (including opportunity costs), [Stein's] inside an economy of representation (including the transfer between reference and the sympathetic imagination)."[229] What interests Hayot in this difference is the juxtaposition between cost and representation within two strikingly different economies. Indeed, as his book reveals, sympathy in modernity—and particularly a kind of sympathy for a distant and unrepresentable other traditionally figured as the Chinese mandarin—becomes an affective metonym for the costs of modernist strategies in the face of failed representations. Such a reading then articulates the relation between the modernist subject-position (Stein and Saint Therese who would prefer not to) and object-position (China) as a specifically affective one, albeit one that is expressed by its negation.

Hayot's reading can be augmented by amplifying a further difference between the two formulations. Whereas Hapgood's question to Stein is framed as an *exchange* of gain in which the easy and unimaginable killing would result in saving her imaginable brother, the question as it appears in *Four Saints* is presented as an absolutely motiveless act of violence, to be committed with no promise of any returns. This is something of a departure from the Anglo-European tradition of *tuer le mandarin* ('to kill the mandarin') in which Hapgood is operating, and which Hayot is tracing in his book: the ethical dilemma behind Adam Smith's and Balzac's mandarins is the gamble that an event far away and unimaginable is less likely to affect one, compared to something that is imaginable for being closer to home. What Stein is rejecting in *Everybody's Autobiography*, then, is an ethical question that

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[229] Hayot, *Hypothetical Mandarin*, 205.

centers on one's subjective capacity to perform invisible harm *for concrete gain*. Such a moral calculus is thus thoroughly effaced in Stein's *Four Saints*: *if* Saint Therese had taken an interest in the killing of five thousand Chinese people, she would not have gained anything at all, simply because she did not have anything at risk in the question to begin with. Her choice was a starkly binary one: building convents, *or* killing others for no reason or gain. From one instance to the other, what was an affect framed by an economy of calculation then becomes an affect that is much more immediate, that is, an affect that is simply posited for itself. That this affect is denied means nothing more or less than itself.

Material disfiguration: "In china china is not china"

This then brings us to the material figure of the "Chinese wall" that frames and stages my argument. If at this point I turn to a closer analysis of Stein's attention to the material dimensions of language, it is in order to show how this question of a denied affect surreptitiously works its way into the language derisively known as "Steinese." There is, I want to argue, not only something "non-English" or "non-standard" about Stein's writing as critics have claimed:[230] more than that, it is this very negation of English that bears a close kinship to the material and unreadable

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[230] For variations on this argument, see: Miller, Joshua L Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001); Juliette Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Daniel Katz, *American Modernism's Expatriate Scene: The Labour of Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

qualities insistently ascribed to Chinese writing.[231] Stein's poetry then, so to speak, breaches the Chinese wall: the wall that has historically become associated with literal Chineseness.[232] I am particularly concerned with accounting for the particularity of this encounter between Stein and the Chinese linguistic stereotype, which in turn allows me to examine how Stein's thinking of material language and poetry does not take place on a racially or epistemologically neutral terrain, but rather in its very status *qua* figure mirrors the charged operations of her affective disinterestedness. For Stein, her figuration of China has always been at work within the material of "Steinese."

We might begin by asking, as if banally: does Stein find *anything* interesting? The previous passages on China and the atomic bomb are striking in part because they depart so radically from the innovations of Stein's earlier work, in which her poetry enacts intense attachments to and observations of objects that are, so to speak, closer to home. In her writing, the materiality of her language (and the vanished subject) is coincident with a materialism of objects.

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[231] My argument is a particularized and small-scale distotion of C.D. Blanton's much more general argument, which charts a dialectical movement in modernist poetics, particularly as it appears in late-modernist appeals to the epic genre, which fragment its claims to historical totality. See *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[232] Peter Quartermain has influentially called attention to Stein's poetics as one of breakage; in a similar vein, Marjorie Perloff has argued for Stein's work as a "poetics of indeterminacy." My work is interested in historicizing the Sinicized undertones of this disjunction and indeterminacy; that modernist poetics appropriates a racialized English has been comprehensively studied by Michael North. See Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

The results of these object attachments and observations are named, in her later parlance, "portraits." What Stein exactly means by "portraiture" is difficult to pinpoint, and has some connection—both conceptual and situational—to the idea of America. "Portraits and Repetition," one of the *Lectures in America* delivered in the 30s, is organized around an attempted disambiguation of 'repetition' from 'insistence.' The latter is also the driving force behind the titular 'portraits,' which Stein purports to explain in her lecture:

> And so I am trying to tell you what doing portraits meant to me, I had to find out what it was inside any one, and by any one I mean every one I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did not by how much or how little they resembled any other one but I had to find it out by the intensity of movement that there was inside in any one of them.[233]

The explanation hinges on the "intensity of movement" impelling these portraits: this intensity is also what allows insistence its privileged differentiation from repetition. Insistence and its movement also endow each portrait with its self-contained singularity through emphasis—this is what makes them "intrinsically exciting." Stein's insistence on gesturing towards an immanent movement through the work of the literary portraiture had previously been set up in the same piece with high stakes, and itself with a striking figural intensity:

> But the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move

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[233] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 298.

> against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that moving is existing… in a way the American way has been not to need that generations are existing. If this were really true and perhaps it is really true then really and truly there is a new way of making portraits of men and women and children. And I, I in my way have tried to do this thing.
>
> It is true that generations are not of necessity existing that is to say if the actual movement within a thing is alive enough. A motor goes inside of an automobile and the car goes. In short this generation has conceived an intensity of movement so great that it has not to be seen against something else to be known, and therefore, this generation does not connect itself with anything, that is what makes this generation what it is and that is why it is American, and this is very important in connection with portraits of anything.[234]

The operative difference here is between the example of the industrial train and the example of the Fordist motorcar: in Stein's construal, whereas the empirical and yet irreducibly relational proof of a train's movement comes from comparing it to the static landscape within which it moves, the car's movement is simply derived and knowable from the motor within itself, which is the mechanism that makes it "alive enough." This figural difference and slippage into modernity—possible only in the Fordist era which emerged in 1934 as an analytic via Antonio Gramsci around the time of *Lectures in America*—conditions the difference between repetition (train) and insistence (car). Moreover, and crucially, it is also the vital condition for the

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[234] ibid, 278-279.

"realization" of the American nation, whose fabled self-sufficiency extends here even to the writing of its history within Stein's continuous present. Unlike a train whose existence has to be corroborated via previous generations, the contemporary generation of America is fueled by nothing but the intensity of a motor transplanted into its own auto-mobility. It does not need the movement of anything else to let it know that it exists and moves and works: only the capitalist beating of an artificial motor that can reproduce a pure singularity *ad infinitum* but within a single insistent moment that does not get passed into previous or future generations. Stein's figure produces a reproduction with no futurity; America here is temporally caught in itself.

One might in turn be moved to ask where this immensely powerful motor might come from, and how it operates in the production of this figurative motor car that is America: indeed, Stein herself points out that "my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going."[235] Such a fraught and elusive essence points not simply to the emptiness at the heart of the American and capitalist myth, but additionally also to the ways in which such a myth conceptually readies itself to absorb and assimilate any object of its choosing.

Moreover, Stein's performative insistence on the materiality of the language of "china" forces her geographic thematics into an even stronger claim, aestheticizing her approach to differentiating power and difference. The point is

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[235] ibid, 305.

cogently and even humorously made in a portrait of an iconic American writer, whose ties to America are both strong and radically dislocated:

> Chapter IV.
>
> The portrait of Thornton Wilder.[236]
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> In china china is not china it is an earthen ware. In China there is no need of China because in China china is china.
>
> All who liked china like China and have china.
>
> China in America is not an earthen ware.
>
> All who like China in America like china in America and all who like china in America do not like to have china in china to be an earthen ware. Therefore it is not.
>
> Remember therefore it is not but better not remember.
>
> It is better not to remember because there is no such thing no such thing as remember. Therefore there is not.[237]

The title of the piece from which this excerpt comes, "The Geographical History of America: or, The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind," perhaps clarifies the larger epistemological ambition broached here. Continuous with the far longer *Making of Americans* in its thematics of "America" and modernist perversion of historiography, "Geographical History" is still unique for its emphasis on

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[236] Thornton Wilder also makes a surprising appearance as "Thornie" in the "T" entry for Stein's children's alphabet book. In the book, "Thornie Rose" and "Tillie Brown," both children of missionaries, find themselves in China encountering an undifferentiated "miles and miles and miles" of Chinese men, women, and children who sing "Tender and True." See Gertrude Stein, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (New York: Green Integer, 2000).

[237] Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 378-79.

"geography" (most literally, the writing or record of physical and material features) as well as its highly dispersed and erratic narrative structure, wherein the narrative's attention drifts very rapidly from one historical or fictional person or thing to another. Passingly presented in Stein's text as only one element in a large American machinery, Thornton Wilder is a Pulitzer-prize winning modernist playwright and novelist born in Madison, Wisconsin. He is most well-known for the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, notably also a pseudo-historiographical account of the collapse of a bridge in Lima, Peru, as well as the plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. As well, Wilder lived for a short time in rural China as the child of a U.S. diplomat father but returned to the U.S. in 1912 due to concerns about China's political stability: this is presumably the biographical event that lies behind the odd and suggestive portrait being made of him here.

The singular "insistence of movement" in this portrait of Thornton Wilder thus bears the traces of his short-lived migrations from the U.S. to China and then back again: indeed, through Stein's authorial framing, the abstracted Wilder poetically becomes the implied American subject who traffics the earthenware from one place to the other, and whose geographical location becomes the ultimate guarantor of the aesthetic object's existence qua aesthetic object *or* earthenware—depending on whether it is in America, it either is or it is not. Indeed, the refrain "Therefore it is not" resounds twice in the passage—a repetition that paradoxically instigates a reflection on the undesirability of remembering—before appearing as "Therefore *there* is not" (italics mine). The connection being made in the passage is thus a common ontological tautology that binds earthenware with the work of

remembrance, both of which are nothing prior to the presence of an appreciating or remembering subject: they must await something or someone that can place them "there" through a "therefore." The status of "china" as earthenware or not becomes contingent not simply on whether it is at home or abroad, but further on the aesthetic predilections of the lampooned fetishists who "like" and "have" china, but inexplicably dislike its iteration as earthenware when in its place of origin.

In fact, "like" and "have" are the two verbs (in addition to "is") consistently pegged together as an implicit commentary on the productive force of aesthetic taste. When the word "have" first appears, it refers generally to possession—to like something leads a collector to also have it, and to own it. Yet the second appearance idiomatically amplifies the sense of dominance that was already latent in admiring and possessing something. This takes place through the enchainment of the two verbs: the Americans "do not *like* to *have* china in china to be an earthenware" (italics mine). All this is not particularly surprising until the punchline, where we learn that this desirous imperative actually does causally affect the ontological status of the china, but only insofar as it results in a negation: "Therefore it is not." So *because* the Americans would not have it this way, *therefore* the china simply could not or would not be an earthenware, it would continue to be china. The humorously reductionist joke takes aim at a mechanistic and immediate affect of causality as it functions within an artificial realm of material language and discourse, with perhaps a wider effect of suggesting that such an immediate force might in the end be impossible.

Indeed, the satirical moment is also framed by a diagnosis of necessity, gesturing thereby towards the broader stakes of this joke: "in China," it is revealed, "there is no need of China because in China china is china." In this ventriloquized logic of the American object-fetishists who do in fact "need" China in order to continue aestheticizing china and keep it in its place, those in China have no need of themselves because they are already in the right place. Stein's joke thus shows up the epistemological conditionality of such a transnational object, while also providing an interesting departure from the previous statement that the American way "has been not to need that generations are existing."

Further, two closely related moments offer the observation that "in china china is not china" as well as the equally valid observation that "in China china is china."[238] The latter claim is familiar as an ironizing twist on one of Western modernism's nostalgic claims about the Orient as a site of absolute referentiality: a distant place where things can just be themselves in the most precise way possible; and furthermore, where even the linguistic names of things are absolutely coincidental with their material being. Yet here the orientalist fantasy is being subtly registered through the western name for the object: certainly no one in China would refer to their plates or earthenware as china. The former claim might be equally familiar insofar as it mobilizes the western philosophical dictum that a distance between subject and object might be necessary in order for the subject to grasp the object in its existence, a necessary epistemological condition for the object to exist at

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[238] ibid.

all: thus for china to "be" china, it cannot be "in china"—it must move outside its status as china and material thing.

What differentiates these two claims is thus the slippery movement between china and China: not from one place to another, but rather a displacement from an analytic of the material object to an analytic of place, such that the material assimilation that was ontologically impossible under the terms of western epistemology becomes ontologically possible under the terms of an exotic other place. Crucially, the distance of the latter is precisely predicated on the former—the spatial distance becomes a figure for the epistemological externalization and impossibility of material assimilation—so that the repetition between china and China becomes not one of oppositional and mutual exclusion as Stein frames it, but rather a difference of nuance from material figure to spatial figure. Here, china is not an allegory for China, nor is China an allegory for china: instead, they are both allegories for yet something else.

What might then be the insistences implied in Stein's counter-intuitive choices for this portraiture of Thornton Wilder? For, when placed alongside her remarks about arriving at portraits of people and objects by revealing the motor behind their temporal and historical self-sufficiency, the above case seems somewhat unusual: what is given about the object Thornton Wilder from Stein's portrait is a biting series of linguistic dramatizations unraveling the metaphysics of the object known as china through a critique of the aestheticizing ideologies of the American élite. Even if this is taken as an obliquely allegorical representation of Wilder, it certainly points to something wider and further than its own professed

terrain: whether the object of this portrait might be the many names for earthenware or U.S. American writer, its formation and production in this iteration of Stein's thinking is intimately bound to the affects that triangulate china between China and America.

The affect here then strikingly inflects and develops the affective divestments of *Four Saints* and *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*: previously, the affective disengagements had turned on either Saint Therese's privileging of the immediate present over the radically distant, or the radically inclusive destruction generated by the atomic bomb; yet here, affectivity is claimed on the premise of a distance that is both epistemologically and figuratively spatial—the gap between object and object, China and America, within which china repeats itself.

Coda: the end of the world

Perhaps there is much more than idiomatic language at stake when one speaks of Stein's poetry as "untranslatable." More than an old saw, the Chinese wall we saw Stein building in the beginning of this chapter has become a figure not just of transnational disengagement but also for untranslatability: not exactly a "bad" thing for a translator, only the forcefield of overlapping systems of differences that she must negotiate as she brings a text from one language into another. More than that, this is not a wall built merely of sticks and stones and breaks and bones. It is rather composed of a series of racialized negations and denial that transform historical events into conditionals, and hypotheticals into history. What Stein rejects in her affective refusal is, I argue, the very possibility of translation itself. In this analogous

account, the translator does not seek to translate the affect of a text, nor does she actively suppress its affect in order to translate it. Instead, translation *is* a work of affect, insofar as it renders language into an event: what I have called a transformation of figure into history. What remains to be thought, and which I have deferred still endlessly, is what a non-eventful language might be.

I began this dissertation with a question that was too large for it: can translation be a mode of thought without force? Throughout these readings in which the English and Chinese languages collude and collide, the question has resized, morphed, and even specified itself. For Chapter 1's Eileen Chang, translations lead without calculation or forethought into an unnecessary space that is surprisingly disentangled from the demands of revolutionary history. History then comes to both stop and start in Chapter 2 for Yang Lian's reading of Ezra Pound, in which translation becomes a means of negotiating historical ("European") time imposed in the advent of Chinese modernity. Pound and his antecedent Ernest Fenollosa claim an ease of translatability in Chapter 3 by ontologizing language qua (Chinese) matter, figured in the petals traveling on the breeze from east to west that are still reined in by their status as language and metaphor. And here, in the end, Stein builds a wall of language only through looking away from an annihilation of the other that always threatens to, in a centripetal force, pull in the self.

But is this thought? Stein was, critics agree, not much of a translator. Yet if I had to choose, her impossible death-wish would also be the image from which I derive a theory of everything a thought of translation without force might be: that it also implicates the most forceful thing in the world still belies the near-certainty

that its total catastrophe never has and will never happen. For now, then, this is my best approximation for thinking, translating, and writing without force: neither scared nor interested, without self and other, turning my back on a mutual destruction assured by the rest of the world.

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