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FALL

Ezra is honored that Rainer Hanshe, Editor of the first-rate *Contra Mundum Press*, is this issue's featured writer. In our previous issue, ***Ezra*** was pleased to offer readers a selection of Hanshe's extraordinary works in our Special Editions section. For our readers' continued enjoyment, those works will remain available there as part of our permanent collection.

On multiple levels (even as reflected in recent national and international events) it is clear that we do indeed "live in a world of opposites" (as Jake Sheff notes here in his review of Carlos Rojas' translation of Yan Lianke's *Sound and Silence*). The notion of opposition and the inherent tension that persists within opposites resonate in the selections below. Antonin Artaud, for example, juxtaposes life and death, the human body and the conscious mind, man and God, existence and nothingness. Ennio Moltedo tells of the clash between speaking and censorship in an authoritarian regime; of walking "safely" on the arm of the executioner. Likewise, Sergei Yesenin apposes, in pure tenderness, the pain of loss in death with the "promise" of "the coming of tomorrow".

The poetic value of these themes is beyond question. But translation itself has always inhabited a universe of opposites, and could not exist without them. Indeed, translators are inevitably impelled toward work inside contradictions, attempting to reconcile them (or, failing that, at least to hold space for the paradoxical). Translation theory and practice operate in two realms: (1) **the physical** - the words of the original text on the page, the act of translating with pen (or keyboard) in hand, the concrete forms of the signs and symbols that transmit meaning, the hours spent poring over texts to arrive at *le mot juste,* the harsh realities

of the world of publishing; and (2) **the metaphysical** - the relationships between languages, the construction of meaning, the role of the translator as mediator/transmitter of thought, the role of the everpresent reader as receiver of and contributor to the translated text.

Translators confront the tension between those realms daily, with the intention of breaking meaning open and increasing its accessibility. At the same time, we seek to harmonize, integrate, correlate - even synthesize two languages to create a translated text that both transmits meaning to a new audience of readers **and** remains faithful to the original text. Every literary translator who has experienced the pull of all those opposing forces knows not only how daunting a task this is, but likewise how utterly addictive the process can be at the same time. In translation, the search for meaning never ends. Walter Benjamin understood that fact all too well as he pursued his quest to grasp what he termed the "language of things" - that communicative force which exists universally, beyond human language, beyond our limited human comprehension, which joins all of life, all that exists, together.

In a sense, the task of translation is not unlike Abdellah Taïah's description in *The Chatterbox* of a nearby woman speaking at length who completely captivates the narrator:

> [T]he more she speaks, the more she allures me, the more I fixate on, I cling to her words, trying to guess what she doesn't say, imagining what she's really thinking, what preoccupies her. She bewitches me, she fascinates me: she sends forth her siren song; I answer it immediately, enthusiastic, ignoring all the perils that could lurk behind . . *I'm still fascinated* . . . [italics added].

To all those translators of beautiful works of literature who just cannot seem to get enough : you are not alone. Cheers.

Featured Writer:

Rainer J. Hanshe is a writer and the founder of Contra Mundum Press and the journal *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*. He is the author of two novels, *The Acolytes* (2010) and *The Abdication* (2012), the hybrid entity *Shattering the Muses* (2016), *Closing Melodies* (2023), a phantomatic encounter between Nietzsche & Van Gogh, and *Dionysos Speed* (2024). Work of his has appeared in *Caesura*, *Sinn und Form*, *ChrisMarker.org*, *Asymptote*, Black Sun Lit's *Vestiges*, and elsewhere. In 2016, Petite Plaisance published an Italian translation of his second novel, *The Abdication*. Shorter and longer works of his have been translated into other languages, and in 2021, the journal *Po&sie* staged an event at Maison de la poésie in Paris to honor his work. His own translations include Baudelaire's *My Heart Laid Bare* (2017; 2020), *Belgium Stripped Bare* (2019), and *Paris Spleen* (2021), Évelyne Grossman's *The Creativity of the Crisis*, Antonin Artaud's *Journey to Mexico: Revolutionary Messages*, Léon-Paul Fargue's *High Solitude*, and longer and shorter works by other authors. *Beyond Sense*, a vatic exploration of the aphasiac disintegration of Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Artaud, is forthcoming in 2025, *The Accumulating Wreckage: Poems, Essays, & Other Texts* in 2026, and *Paris Without End: Assorted Translations From Giacometti to Artaud: 1914–1964* in 2027. He is at work on a new book entitled *Humanimality*.

Rainer Hanshe, translating

ANTONIN ARTAUD

Texts Contemporary
to the Vieux-Colombier Lecture (1/13/1947)

THE COUNCIL OF PEACE,
the newspapers, the radio, the circulation,
all that is only a facade,
there are books, systems, plays, poems, philosophies,
things are that and not that,
that's what we notice in this,
the great names pass,
but those who had something to say like Nietzsche, they thundered,
they did not build a system,
it's fine to say there is this and that,
and then after that it does not go beyond the printed page
things are neither that nor that, they are neither that nor not that,
and shit,
and what encloses me.
I do not want to know what is or is not.
I want to live.
That's all.
For as this masquerade takes place,

poem, system, speech, etc.,
consciousness works under there,
it advances,
and those who lead it do not think,
they make holes,
they do more than empty out a system,
to unravel glimpses,
to raise the propositeux, the noteux, to delabyrinther the pseu, pseu,
may or may be whore whore,
to advance the universal or principal
i's of them
as they tie little drapes,
they do not indulge in cerebreux
like Kant or shit Spinozoo,
they don't enter into lying,
they don't believe that there is a liar
where everything is referred and liquidated,
they don't believe that things are a void
crossed as they say by animated ideas,
as we say animal spirits when the mind décafaltes its oxen,
separates itself into 3,000 bestieux,
they don't believe that the intelligible is a world or a zoo
and that there is an intelligibleux,
they don't lift themselves from their bodies
to enter into consciousness,
they don't rise in spirit above this frightful world,
knowing that they would lose the best of themselves,

their bodies,
which is not where the mind itself moves,
and what is a mind without a body?
Something from a rag of dead cum.

YOU, YOU ALONE BELIEVE
it's not true
you are a multitude
you, you believe your body
is an other,
you, you believe yourself the master of your body
no
it belongs to others,
to an other,
to the other,
that other,
who was the tarantula of Plato,
Plato, that sinister skinner of turds,
sinister, sinister skinner, tanner,
grater, weeder,
filer, fat scraper,
hoarder, squanderer,
deadbeat, sufferer and expiator,
(it's thus how skinners work, as indeed all tradesmen)
lapper,

turds, formal residue of excrement,
which means that Plato, like many others, but more than others,
    worked on residues and on remains, an old Jewish cloakroom,
    a solemn and gothic christian jade [*illegible word*], etc., etc.

AND NOW I WILL SAY A THING
that will perhaps stupefy many people.
I am the enemy
                of theater.
I have always been that.
As much as I love the theater
I am, for that reason, its enemy.

The theater is a passionate surfeit,
a terrible transfer
        of forces
        from bodies
        to bodies.
That transfer cannot duplicate itself twice.
Nothing is more impious than the Balinese system, which consists,
    after having produced that transfer
instead of seeking another,
of resorting to a system of special bewitchment

so as to deprive
astral photography
of the obtained gestures.

THIS MEANS THAT THE BRAIN MUST FALL
the man that we are
wasn't made to live with a brain,
and its collateral organs:
marrow, heart,
lungs, liver, spleen,
kidneys, sex organ, and stomach,
it wasn't made to live with blood circulation,
digestion, an assimilation of the glands,
it wasn't made to live with nerves of a limited sensitivity
  and vitality either,
when its sensitivity and its life
are endless
        and without bottom,
        like life,
        for life
        and for perpetuity.

The man that we are resembles nothing more than a monkey,
which we left and made in our image of masturbator and castrator,
when there are others
that the imageless
did not finish
imagining
will never finish
imagining.

Because it's too true, hélas, that we have been created,
when all of us came from the uncreated
with whom we had to make peace
and who would have done well to exist
when he lived.

Where were we
in the Orient
in an orient that was perhaps the infernal south of things,
when God bothered us
to create us
while we were all atheists.
And God, who we had never heard of,
and who was the battle
that is not yet complete
between man
(because that is what was done with my *inert,*

ignorant, living
unconscious
body
and what was done with the residue expelled from my body after use)
and, I was going to say the divinity,
but no,
but: all that hasn't happened yet,
all those half-body parts, which until man did not arrive,
which never managed to make whole a body of man
and which wanted to live
in mutilated swarms,
all those larvae of truncated bodies that have one sure day
settled in beings of pure essence
never having been men
in full
yes, all that has ranked god
and *in* god
as if god had ever existed.

And that's what has always bothered us,
that
which could never be a body
which was too cowardly to be a body,
and which called itself soul,
being too loose to go to the body,
which is that escaped human skeleton,
that escapee from the human carcass,

that one day faded into a rocket,

that rocked into an alleged empyrea

to constitute the divinity,

that,

this canner meat of a nausea of nothingness

expelled from the void,

which could never make a book

but which claimed to have inspired them all.

DURING THE THREE YEARS THAT I SPENT AT RODEZ doctor Ferdiere, clinician-director of the asylum, did not let a week pass without reproaching me at least once for what he called my humming, my sniffling, my exorcisms, my whirlings.

Yet in *The Theater and its Double* there is a text entitled "Affective Athleticism" that concerns the various ways of applying human breath, to use breathing: inhalation and exhalation, like a crucible, to which is attached a whole system of attitudes and gestures, placements and emissions of the voice, multiple ways to enunciate a text not only sentence by sentence or word by word, but syllable by syllable and letter by letter; that in order not to form an actor but to form a man's character, to recompose the human organism on a plane not above the theater, but above life hitherto and forever engulfed in false consciousness, in that sordid parody of consciousness which forms the world in which we live. The enterprise is time-consuming and it needs endless patience. In any event, arriving at Rodez I believed the atmosphere would be favorable to such works.

I was mistaken.

WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS INUNDATES A BODY
a body also emerges from it,
no,
it's a body that inundates
the body from which it exits,
& that new body is everything.

Think long and intensely about someone, you:
1. the vampire with crossed arms in my left nut,
2. the woman with the supported nape,
3. the grey Satan,
4. the black father,
black lice applied,
5. and last night finally at *Nouvelle Athènes*
the great revelation of the whole system of god-formation
in the slimy mucus of my left nut,
after the revelation of the antechrist chasm.

The life that we lead is the facade
of everything that the dreadful criminal salacity
of a few have left to us: —
A grotesque masquerade of acts and feelings.
Our ideas are only the remainder of a breath,
the breath of our lungs,

asphyxiated and trussed,

which means for example that if the blood pressure of the man is 12, it could be 12 times 12 if it were not constrained & squashed somewhere so as not to exceed that sordid level. —

And thank goodness that some physician does not come to tell me that that is called hypertension and that it is not good to be in a state of hypertension.

Me, I answer that we are all in an atrocious state of hypotension, we don't have an atom to lose without risk of immediately returning to the skeleton, while life is an incredible proliferation, the hatched atom lays another, which in fact immediately shatters another.

The human body is a battlefield that it would be good for us to return to.

It's now nothingness, now death, now putrefaction,

now resurrection;

awaiting I do not know what apocalypse from beyond that,

the explosion of what beyond so as to decide to take things back,

is a crapulous joke.

It is now that we must return to life.

Who is the man who decided to live with the idea that he will not go to the coffin —

Contrarily, who is the man who thinks that he still may profit from his own death —

As firmly as they try to make us believe it, we profit not from thinking that we will one day be dead, to go rejoin the dead, to rank one day in the troop of the dead, to let our limbs leave our selves and flow into the (liquid) serous charnel houses.

We do not die because we have to die,

we die because it is a fold into which we have constrained

consciousness,

one day,

not so long ago.

Because we do not die to return and rebuild, but only to cede life, to *give back* what we *had* of life.

And he who dies is he who wanted the coffin.

It's because he once *accepted* that dread of going through the

coffin —

forced acceptance perhaps, but effective,

for no one dies who has not consented to it. —

Consciousness lives before birth.

It lives somewhere, if only for an hour.

All living consciousnesses have lived, I do not know in which sphere or in which wells.

And they find this well here. —

What would be the use in effect of the unconscious if it weren't to contain in the depths of itself that pre-world, which by the way is not one, but which is only the old repressed receptacle, and through others that we repressed, of everything that consciousness could not or would not admit, can not or will not admit, not under the commandment in us of that other, which is not the double or contra-part of the self, which is not the immanent dermis of all that the ego of consciousness will assume, which is not the being that it is not and will become or will not become, but truly and palpably an other, a sort of faux spy glove that monitors it from morning till night in the hope that consciousness will spoil it. —

And that other is no more than what all the others who have always wanted to have a foot in every person's consciousness are. —

Psychoanalysis has written a book on the failure of the old Baudelaire, whose life did not precede him by 100 years but from that kind of secular infinity, that age-old infinity of time which returned to him in his aphasia — when he learned and tried to say it, but who believed him, and who believes the affirmations of the great poets who have become sick trying to dominate life. For Baudelaire did not die of syphilis, as has been said — he died from the absolute lack of belief that was attached to the incredible discoveries that he had made through his syphilis, and repeated in his aphasia.

What he learned then and tried to say,

that he had lost one of his *selves* in Thebes,

4000 years before Jesus-christ.

And that that self was that of an old king. —

What he learned and tried to say,

that he had not been Clopin Trouillefou,

but the poet of a court of miracles where poetry was stuck,

in Brittany, before the druids settled in the country.

And the skeleton of the human cock, against all onomatopoeia and meaning, tried, to find life,

a timbre without echo or cry,

without shadow or double in life,

without the old shackle of the organ that accounts for the five senses,

one day, much later, when there was time for the consciousness of the yokels,

and the timbre of his poetry was the inert weight of the planks, the horrible crushing of those six planks that they could never fit his corpse into.

Because to cure Charles Baudelaire it would have been necessary to surround him with only a few organisms,

enough

to not fear facing a delusion so as to find a truth.

He therefore lost to psychoanalysis in not being afraid of reality, because it seemed to be so monstrous to him, and not to reject in that symbol the whole sadistic machinery of crime, carding a fabric of life that Baudelaire wanted to sew, and about which I ask, for how long will the few men who are its victims continue to remain its born torture victims and fated scapegoats.

AND THEREFORE, OVER DAILY LIFE,

consciousness forms beings and bodies that can be seen gathering & colliding in the atmosphere, distinguishing their personalities. And those bodies form

frightful councils where everything that can become life on earth is discussed as a last resort.

I am not André Breton and I did not go to Baltimore, but that is what I saw on the banks of the Hudson.

I died at Rodez under electro-shock.

I say died. Legally and medically died.

The electro-shock coma lasts fifteen minutes. Half-an-hour and more. And then the patient breathes.

Yet an hour after the shock I hadn't awoken and had ceased to breathe. Surprised by my abnormal rigidity, a nurse had gone to get the chief doctor, who after auscultation found no sign of life in me. —

I have, me, memories of my death at that very moment, but I do not rely on them to make my indictment. I keep strictly to the details given to me by Dr. Jean Dequeker, a young intern at the Rodez asylum who got wind of them straight from the mouth of Dr. Ferdière himself.

And that day Ferdière told him that he thought me dead, and that he had already instructed two guards from the asylum to carry my body to the morgue because an hour-and-a-half after the shock, I still had not come back to myself. —

And it seems that it was at that moment that the nurses came in to take away my body that it made a slight twitch, after which I awoke from the slab.

Me, I have another memory of the thing. —

But I kept that memory to myself, and secret, until the day when Dr. Jean Dequeker confirmed the fact to me externally.

And that memory is that everything that Dr. Dequeker told me I had seen not on this side of the world, but on the other, and simply from the cell where the shock had taken place and under its ceiling, although at times there was neither cell nor ceiling for me, but about a meter above my body, in the air, a kind of fluidized balloon that swayed between my body and the ceiling.

And I will never forget in any possible life the horrible passageway of that sphincter of *revulsion* and asphyxia through which the criminal mass of beings forces the moribund to traverse before granting them freedom. There

are more than 10,000 beings at the bedside of a dying man and I myself realized it at that very moment.

There is a conscious unanimity of all those beings, who do not want to give life to the dead before they have paid them to get through, by the total and absolute abandonment of the body, because being won't give even its inert body back to itself, especially its body. — And what do you expect a dead man to do with his body in the tomb. —

I am you and your consciousness is me — that's what all the beings say: clerks, druggists, grocers, subway ticket handlers, gravediggers, knife grinders, road workers, shopkeepers, bankers, priests, factory owners, pedagogues, scientists, doctors —

not one of them is missing from the sinister turning point.

Too bad that no other dead man than me came back to confirm the thing like me because, in general, in fact, the dead do not return.—

The accomplished electro-shock did not happen that time, as did the first two.

I felt that it was not happening.

And my entire internal electric body, the whole lie of this internal electric body, which for a number of centuries has been the burden of every human, turned, became in me like a great return of flames, monads of nothingness bristling at the limit of an existence detained by my lead body, which could not emerge from its lead or rise like a lead soldier.

I could not anymore be my body; I did not want to be that breath which would whirl around it to the point of extreme dissolution.

Thus twisted and folded fiber upon fiber, I felt the frightful corridor of an impossible revulsion. And I do not know what suspended void invaded me with its black holes,

but I was that void,

and hangman;

as for the soul, I was no more than a spasm between several suffocations.

Where to stand and where to get out, that was the one and only thought that jerked in my throat seized and blocked on all sides.

Neither by soul nor by spirit, that is what threw me through each wall of charred flesh,

and everything of the former world, that's what each heartbeat said to me.

It's the body that will remain,

without the mind,

the mind is the sick person.

I OBSERVED

a weird, abnormal,

strange thing,

which no one will have wanted to,

and does not want to confess,

because there are slogans,

impassable barriers,

and some kind of prohibited essentials:

we are a life of controlled puppets,

and those who lead us & hold the strings of the dirty *guignol* table before all, I say BEFORE all about the inveterate self-love

of everyone that makes for that nothing of a world which everyone wouldn't want to believe themselves free of, and confess,

and honestly and sincerely acknowledge that they are not.

We are a world of automatons without consciousness,

nor freedoms,

we are the organic subconscious grafted onto a body, we are bodies grafted onto nothing,

a kind of nothing without measure and without edge, and which has no milieu or axis, or would it be the axis in nothing, and which would be the milieu of nothing (and what would be the milieu of nothing)? and how would nothing form the center, when there is *no* invariable milieu,

when the invariable milieu is a decoy

which dislocates reality.

— THUS, TO UNDERSTAND YOU, Mr. Artaud, the current man would have to go back no more than 2000 years before J.-C.

— Barely.

— And before that was the end of the world?

— Not even.

— And what is the advantage of your thesis?

— The advantage is that 31 years ago I understood that I did not understand myself and over time I understood why.

— It's because I haven't had the body I should have had.

The mind does not weary of the body, but the body releases the mind; and the body of everyone gives off a terrible spirit because 4,000 years ago man had an *anatomy* that had ceased to correspond to his nature. The anatomy in

which we are constrained is an anatomy created by saddled asses, doctors, and scientists who have never been able to understand a simple body and who needed to live in a body that answered and understood them.

And they seized the human body and did it again according to the principles of a clear and sound logic,

point by point,

organ by organ,

analytical in their own way.

— But it's a nonsensical story, Mr. Artaud, see. — You're raving. I would like to know what doctors and scientists could have done to remake the human body?

We could say however that it's the syllogistic functioning of the human body as it currently exists which is the cause of all diseases.

To suppose an action-reaction in the equilibrium of a common measure is to admit the alternative also of a possible disintegration.

The previous body was without measure, unspeakable, unconditioned.

— Shit and barbeque in the end with philosophy and with its terms.

Go back to where you left off.

— I have to say that the human body was not made to be sick, to degrade itself and die. It's the dreadful proliferation of the nerves, the terrible splitting of blood circulation, which is the cause of all diseases.

The blood is an electric body, it is not an aqueous body, we do not liquefy vital energy, we do not slice up the clot of a sigh, the electric trance of a sigh, we do not divide the orifice of a spasm, one does not divide a jaw into open arms.

— But tell me, Mr. Artaud, you speak of all this as if you were absolutely there, you are not going to make us believe that you have witnessed the metaphysical and mythical constitution, the organic preparation of the human body.

— But it's precisely because I have an idea that I was there and that I did witness it.

And I do not know how we prepared the bodies of others, the few [ ]

but I have the memory of a kind of ignoble surgical operation where it was my body, Artaud, and not another that curled up and turned on the block. —

— It's a dream. —

— That moment of my memories is indeed like a dream because the time when I remained in the hands of my enemies was very short, and I remember on the contrary a kind of magnetic bomb jolt where I escaped from a block from my supplicants. Unfortunately that is not what happened in Rodez; it's not what happened in the asylums of Le Havre, Rouen, and Sainte-Anne in Paris, where I remained for 3 years in secret, deprived of any relationship with the external world, and during which they said to the friends who came to visit me:

Don't worry about Mr. Antonin Artaud, he's dead. —

If I'm not dead it's because I have a hard life.

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Aleksandra Djordjevic	(self-translation)
Dominic Siracusa	(Emilio Villa)
Marguerite Feitlowitz	(Ennio Moltedo)
Maro Ghukasyan	(Ara Jouharian)
Eric Daffron	(Abdellah Taïa)
William Dennis	(Ida Jaroschek)
Yevgeniya Druzhinina	(Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelshtam)

In The Frame Of Your Eyes

(~~translating her own work) Aleksandra Djordjevic

once I was a girl
with an abashed smile
and a ladybird
on my thigh

once I was a young woman
with lashes thick as a pine forest
and fog
in my eyes

then I was a mother
with a cloud in my chest
and a crystal ball
on my palm

once I was someone else
far less yours
a murmur of the wind whisper of the air

I was even ordinary
with a scarf in my hands
apprehension upon my lips

once I will be a grandmother
with a birthday of one's life

in my eyes
without words
amidst people

once I'll be an old woman
with the scent of your body in my dreams
a vagabond word

I'll splash like water
cold in the night
warm in the hearth

of a storyteller's tale

ALEKSANDRA DJORDJEVIC

Imprimatur

~~*translated by Dominic Siracusa*

This composition was originally printed in Italian in Rome in 1958 as part of a short collection entitled *3 Ideologies from Piazza del Popolo / Without the Imprimatur*… and included watercolors by the visual artist Nuvolo. The following is an excerpt from Dominic Siracusa's facing English translation published by Contra Mundum Press in 2014. For more on E.V. and his work, please visit: https://www.contramundumpress.com/the-selected-poetry-of-emilio-villa

Imprimatur

castrated the Modern Terror with a simple gust, then spat
the necessary stone it had chewing, committing phallus, and
passed the beveled cup of geological events and
popular weather wimps, adorned with diplomatic poetry, and in the Omnivorous

ibi et ubique

womb turned inalterable images inside-out, aliquid inconcussum,
without season seed peremptory encounters the meek panting, and ordered
that for 40 days of 40 nights (since 40 is that Sort of number) from the Probable
Alps, from the Absurd pre-alpine range, all the way down down Down
to the Quaternary Tribunes, each is assigned as Much Universe
as the head of a homunculus man can work
who lost the panting the end-of-the-line the sense of recouping

oh Amazon bluejeans, why do you chase through the allies Ghiants
fallen into the Ontario, with a thud, with a dangling
umbilical cord! what! why, almost certainly,

ibi et ubique

it was: the Big Big Big Glissade
dans la solidi-fication dans la déso-lidari-sation
de l'Inéxécuté Spécial, but douce douce douce Gomorrhe!

pour le Chien du Ciel égorgé et
dont l'Ecrat terrife, sweetest Gomorrha, sweet

organ, scant
orifice for a Monstrance of the Eternal locution,

and fountain of the withered Hiccup that keeps watch with the
authority of a musical saber, as if drunk had to tear
into four rather clear-cut portions the advent of the Generals' wrath,
that thing seen for the first time, one time alone,
and once and for all, then that's it

ça c'est qu'il disait d'avoir bien reçu de Sodome
accroupie le Sens donné somber mutilé
peuple energique des…! mon peuple au carcan
le présent reste Mais
en s'exhaussant rejoindre le Souffle
de la bête divine Paroxysme Invective
des jaillissements novenaux
des réflexions arides d'Holocaustes
collatéraux et le fait émerger
rejeton, mystérieuse Vigilance
de l'épée des Syllabes qui gardaient les Liens

dolores quasi dolores quasi dolores

pour un hymne-guérison
épithète primorialique qui
sur la trame-songe des archanges
des grandes Hantises du jour chargées
d'amphores de cendre de victims splendides

isolées
chacun sa cognée, Démolisseur
méprisant, chacun sa lignée
ténébreuse massive confidence
sur les tatables
ibi et ubique
terre terre terre! écoute
le souffle d'Un homme comme d'Un Homme
qui niche au milieu des couronnes
de la Grande Grande Métacalypse

and now? now who exorcizes anymore flour and meat and baskets
of vegetables? Oh, verdant Pinus Pinea
numbed by sensitive parousia, by the order of the universal
pruning, the leafy
crown we'll mangle just like a storm its secret song
listing in measured theological lists, or its branches
will rot in the water of the
Modern Terror, polluted
throat, age-old crown of the crescent, left
abdomen and the solemn
spastic exalting convocation of erotic sugars
from the most remote cellular station, from the irremediable
borders, and with perverse
emotion so we salute the moderate omen

ibi et ubique

and the religious and moral Resolve of this people of ours
perhaps confused like a handful of peanuts, surreptitiously,
or, what am I saying, of popcorn: with offended
immortal heavens, or verdant Pinus Pinea,
like hell and goddamnit, containing
evolved entropisms, recital gargles, and all
the cases of Marriage annulled in the Various
sectors and classes, shamed by top-shelf seismic laws,
sold at set and discounted prices, below cost, dumping,
and many come with figurines from the ecclesiastical contests,
the history of popes and virgins, described
alongside the digital sinixter, run to sow

ibi et ubique

the executed ashes of amorous deceit, instigator
of ironic celestial shelters, there where assailants are no more,
or, in the oblique rustling of the dead, may the soul be surprised
in its private reasons, and Act! it's time, it's almost late

oh belles folies orgueil tyrannies
telles paroles oublies
lignes cruelles mot-vase
brisé que je dois vous donner

ibi et ubique

and when as soon as or right after no one knows when

the satyre is over and done, you summon,
Beniamina, on the phone Vegetable of the
Modern Terror, which lost that specific
famous face, the mines
of the Eyetesticles, the spirital oppression regularly
equipped with the Viminal seal
and mark me on the marble voice, between the grout
of slabs that no one really knows if they do or do not match,
the most tenuous Messianic opening, our
impenetrable Verbal creature, the term
of the oracle, etched in diorite, the syllable, the blaze

numquid, inclyte, concrepabunt?
artifex pereo! qui nidificabo
in cerebro aspidem et basiliscum
et thoen! ascende igitur et calma
sepulturam Asini
dormientis in gyro saturniae maxillae

eh, dirty tricks and unspeakable acts that happen on the double chin
of the irrigated terrain in lombardy in umilia in pome
in malan and in drianza, on the humps

under the sloped pavement of the windache
of the thick fog that whistles in the towpaths
in the indigenous gusts of red dust that irrupts here
all the way from Syria, the tempest of sports culture
of the spell cast on the Canadian Vineyard

and all I really mean all the archetypes of storms that if I

were by chance a proper meteorologist, here, I would act! But who

I was saying, but who exorcizes anymore! […]

EMILIO VILLA

Las cosas nuevas (selected poems)

~~ translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz

53

I was forbidden to speak. Day and night I worked in censorship (government windows lit

up like screens). Now it is possible to speak (at noon?), but that gets mixed up with

“waving the flag of the past all over again.” Roberto, tell me when we’ll be able to speak

all day long and how and about what. With so many distressing considerations you end

up with nothing to say but you’re open-mouthed until the day of the next surprise.

34

But isn’t there a single activity that isn’t a secret, that doesn’t get filmed or studied or

processed, that isn’t a privatized function under the flag, that doesn’t appear in small

letters or dead letters to later be filed by our towering numbskulls?

78

Here, along the boulevard by the sea—what a lovely summer—a lady can walk safely

on the executioner’s arm.

ENNIO MOLTEDO

Light threatens with lightening...

ԼՈՅՍԸ ԿԸ ՍՊԱՌՆԱՅ ԼՈՒՍԱՒՈՐՈՒՄՈՎ

~~ translated by Maro Ghukasyan

light threatens with lightening

it can’t be denied by darkness

it can’t be denied by the lines, which have become maps

by the roads turned into travelling

by frequent thoughts turned into beliefs

it can't be denied by the sounds turned into bells
light threatens with lightening
and we find a place to walk.

ARA JOUHARIAN

Around Salé from Afar

~~ translated by Eric Daffron

I am from a town renowned in history for its corsairs. Salé! *Sala*, in classic Arabic. *Sla*, in Moroccan Arabic.

I am a Slawi: that name is pronounced the same in both Arabic and French. A Slawi by adoption only. But a true Slawi in the soul and in the heart all the same.

The Corsairs of Salé are especially celebrated for their exploits during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They won numerous battles and accomplished legendary feats. They defended Muslim Morocco from attacks by European infidels who invaded the world to civilize it. They left behind them bastards, prisoners, fair-headed women forever captive, one-legged scribes, treasures hidden in the High Atlas, orphans, widows. Above all, they left firmly rooted in popular memory incredible tales, fabulous stories that will never die, entire romances in the wild minds of Slawis, who pass them down from one generation to the next.

The corsairs: all we need to do is go to the medina, to pass through one of the grand and majestic gates, and suddenly we're transported, enchanted by those men, by their spirit, which

will never leave the town; we're possessed despite ourselves without knowing why, but enthralled. We then lose all self-control. We let ourselves be swept along.

The desire to venture takes hold of our body, goosebumps all over our skin, and a voice summons us to move forward, go, go farther, go higher, higher, surpass the horizon, reach the ocean's blue line, abolish boundaries, bare ourselves before the sun and its golden rays, fly by moving our hands, then our arms, lose ourselves in the invisible labyrinths, open our eyes to better shut them, pierce the eternal dream, the clouds of the seventh heaven. And, before coming back down, greet God and kiss Him three times, hands and feet.

The Chatterbox

In a square not far from Pigalle, in Paris, I hear voices. These voices caress my ears but without interrupting my intellectual work, without arresting my train of thought. But one of these voices, unique, stronger, more resonant, dominating all the others, makes me stop everything, both my reading and my reflection. The voice of a woman who talks, who is accustomed to talking, a chatty woman, a chatty Moroccan woman who still seems to be there, on the other side of the Mediterranean. And the more she speaks, the more she allures me, the more I fixate on, I cling to her words, trying to guess what she doesn't say, imagining what she's really thinking, what preoccupies her. She bewitches me, she fascinates me: she sends forth her siren song; I answer it immediately, enthusiastic, ignoring all the perils that could lurk behind . . .

I'm still fascinated; only she remains: plump, pretty, chatty. A mother: her children around her, arguing rather than playing, youngsters from our homeland, from my neighborhood of Hay Salam, where all day long the kids occupy the streets, the alleys, and the cul-de-sacs—at night, the drunks chase them away to take their place and indulge in other pleasures.

Now she speaks all alone; the other women, not the Moroccans, to be sure, have abandoned her, but she doesn't care; she continues her speech, her monologue. She must finish it; it's stronger than she is. She's possessed. Her djinn is enraged; he commands her, he martyrs her. She still speaks . . . still . . . . Time no longer exists for her. Neither for me: I willingly forget my appointment, and I stay with her in that square, small and slightly grassy, only a few meters from sex shops and adult movie theaters (another world nearby). I'm still there.

The Lunatics

Everyone knows it: people from Salé go mad after the prayer of Al-Asr. That's why, for so long, the town gates were systematically shut at the end of that religious rite. They wanted to keep the Slawi madness for the Slawis and save others from such a distinctive malady that still forms part of the town's character, its image.

For so long, the world had only one name for me: Salé! More exactly, it summed up four neighborhoods, four names: Hay Salam, where I lived with my family; Douar El-Hadj Mohamed, where I went shopping almost daily with my mother; Tabriquet and its dispensary, which I knew well; and the M'dina, the heart of our life, the center of our beliefs, old and narrow, next to the sea. Going out meant stepping foot in that M'dina, to buy clothes, fabrics, babouches, rare herbs for the fquihs, to marvel and dream before the jewelry shop windows, to attend the souk El-Ghzel's unbelievably frenzied auctions, which were always full of women, to eat honey-filled beignets standing up. . . That's what it meant to be in the world, in the middle of the crowd, transported by it, loved, loving, delighted, happy, smiling . . . The noises and the screams bothered no one; they were proof of the uncommon intensity of the relations, the exchanges, and the more there were, the happier one was. Never leaving my mother's hand, I

inhabited that world with awakened senses, open to all, open especially to people, their faces, their gaits, their hairstyles, their djellabas, their looks, everything interested me, everything could easily make me happy. My mother was absolutely determined every time on finishing our outings in that M'dina, at once small and vast, by visiting her two favorite saints. On our path we passed by Dar El-Kadi, a big theater house, tragic and spectacular, reviled by women, and by la Mederssa El-Bouananiya: we never went into those two places; they didn't belong to the world of my mother, who was always pressed to get to her saints. First of all, Sidi Abdallah Ben Hassoun, Salé's patron saint, his magnificent candles and his sacred window known for its power to heal children who scream too much. Then, a kilometer farther, Sidi Ben Acher, next to the immense sea, in the middle of a magic cemetery, which was disappearing little by little. My mother venerated Sidi Ben Acher and had a great tenderness for his lunatics. She loved them for some reason; she fed them (dates and milk most of the time), spoke to them willingly and even told them, and without holding back, some of her personal stories. Their lives blended gradually and naturally with hers, thanks to her words. Every time, I watched that communion from afar, frightened and, at the same time, completely fascinated. To that scene alone, which for so long was tirelessly repeated, sums up Salé perfectly, the town to which I belonged and which I betrayed later in continuing my life in Rabat at the risk of losing myself there.

ABDELLAH TAIA

First Examen: Hands

~~translated by William Dennis

I.

You can never disappear—
not you, not anyone.
We suspect that dirt can fill
a mouth, that we make the stone
a stone, the night a night;
that black is black
because we say so.
My mouth is a well,
your voice echoes out,
uncontrollable,
unforgiving, your name
has dropped into my body's
watery night, knocking against
my ribs—knock, knock,
knock.

II.
Now that it's winter,
let's light our grassy graves on fire.
Let's never wait for the night
to lift our stones.

Let's say that winter engulfs
everything in red prayer
lifting up flame and ash—
the color of devotion, of
disappearing.

Who's this you I'm talking to?

III.

The day struggles to return,
a shroud across the plain.
I can't see the boot prints
of my dead through these mists.
So many forgotten shadows,
so many contorted shapes of sleep.
Absence wins
and bears the day.

IV.

Near the end, you couldn't sleep.
I saw torment within torment,
knuckles of spine, pale silver flesh,
as moonlight painted your body.
Before the window, bent in half,
your head lowered toward your

feet, your hands lifted—
outstretched—bowing,
as though inviting the storm inside.
Now, I carry you: your shirts, the color
of that incarnadine organ: red
and blue and gray. I am your
vessel. I even love this, your
opacity: its blank face, its eyes
closed, your back turned away

V.

Snow covers up the garden,
a green memory. Outside,
the gleaming white glints like
chipped crystal glass raised to
the sunlight, where heaven
is hoarded. I don't sleep. I watch
the hands, the invisible ones—the spirit—
known as the wind. It lifts up the snow
into a veil for the sky, a mock
reunion with the highest,
winter's handiwork.

IDA JAROSCHEK

Saw my friend to the front door…/Проводила друга до передней…

~~translated by Yevgeniya Druzhinina

Saw my friend to the front door.
Stood in gold dust.
The nearby bell tower
Sang of something important.
As a flower, as a letter –
Cast.
But the look is stern
In the reflection in the darkened pier glass.

ANNA AKHMATOVA

Take from these hands…/Возьми на радость из моих ладоней…

~~translated by Yevgeniya Druzhinina

Take from these hands
A little bit of sunshine, a little bit of honey,

As we were told by Persephone's bees.
You won't untie a boat unfastened,
You won't hear the sound of a shadow's footsteps
when dressed in fur,
You won't overcome fear in this troubled life.
All we've left are kisses,
Fuzzy as little bees
That die, having left their beehive.
They rustle in the dark of night.
The woods of Taygetus are their home,
Time, lungwort, mint are their food.
Take, take this wild gift of mine,
This plain dry necklace made from dead bees
That have turned honey into sunshine.

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

REVIEWS:

SOUND AND SILENCE, by Yan Lianke, translated and with an introduction by Carlos Rojas. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024. 200 pages.

We live in a world of opposites. Opposition, as a relationship, need not be unfriendly. Take the volume's title, *Sound and Silence*. The musician makes something beautiful from both. Opposition can be fruitful. Juxtaposing opposites clarifies what we juxtapose. In the contrast born from juxtaposition, there is epistemic value; as the saying goes, "You can't know the sweet without the sour."

In 2014, the Chinese novelist Yan Lianke toured prestigious universities across the United States (henceforth, US) and lectured on the conditions for authors in his native land, providing an eyewitness account of how they had evolved. Ten years (and a pandemic) later, those lectures, along with his acceptance speech for the Franz Kafka Prize which he had won that same year, have been translated into English. They, with the translator's introduction and the author's brief afterword, make up this collection of essays, subtitled "My Experience with China and Literature." No doubt, the interest these lectures generate is from the differences and similarities between life in a socialist society and that in a free one. What adds depth to that juxtaposition is the author's (qua author) point of view. Let us agree that literature is the perennial silence to reality's sound. We contrast ourselves and our world with what we see in it, the sort of writing — lets call it creative or imaginative — which "holds a mirror to nature." And let us remember that

nature's mirror image is not an exact replica of nature itself, for when we touch our own reflections, they touch us back with the opposite hand.

The relationship between authors and authority has been an interesting one which this book will beckon you to consider. The emperor Caesar Augustus was coeval with Ovid and Virgil; one he had banished and the other venerated. Not only does this show the authority's power, but it also proves how the individual talent is powerless against it. But now, consider the name Octavian gave himself upon assuming office: 'Augustus' shares a Latin root, *augēre*, with the English words 'author' and 'authority'. The common meaning for them all is "to increase" (from which we get 'augment'). Awareness of this clarifies the text of the essays, and we shall return to it.

"First, I fear power." Thus begins a talk entitled "Fear and Betrayal have Accompanied Me throughout My Life." A western reader would not be alone in hearing echoes of what he or she might know as the beginning of wisdom; namely, "fear of the lord" (Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 111:10). Power, in its most basic sense, is the ability to make things happen. (For contrast, W.H. Auden says that "poetry makes nothing happen.") Why, one might ask, does the author in China fear power? Before his writing career, Lianke was a military man. In the same talk, he says that while he was serving, he "use[d] and abuse[d]" the little power he had to do favors for those beneath him simply

to buy their love. He enjoyed what sycophants did for him, but he saw others do worse with what power they had. In one talk, a chauffeur loses his job over a faux pas, while in another, entitled "My Ideal Is Simply to Write a Novel That I Think Is Good," he describes how a commander, having inspected the family section of the barracks and seen the various poultry being raised by the families living there ("chickens, ducks, and even large white geese"), "whispered a few words to a staff officer behind him, then walked away." The following morning, "various officers from the family area…went outside to conduct their drills, whereupon they discovered that all their chickens, ducks, and geese in the compound had been poisoned." Poisoned, it is implied, at the commander's orders. When nobody speaks up, but instead claps even louder for that very commander on that very day, the author's attitude towards power shifts "from reverence to awe, and finally to bona fide terror," and rather than seeking promotion, he redirects his focus to literature. "After expelling these delusions [about a military career] like viruses," he says, "I found that my only remaining ideal was literature." (To Socrates, we remember (for contrast), the beginning of wisdom is awe.)

Power, the wariness, weariness, and critique of it, might be the primary theme of these essays. Lianke proclaims his admiration for Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn on numerous occasions in the collection, as he and Boris Pasternak (among several others) are seen as writers who composed great

works under working conditions similar to his. That is, under the total or near-total authoritarianism that goes with Marxist regimes in their various political or ideological guises. The first half of the author's life was during the reign of Chairman Mao and his Chinese Communist Party (henceforth, CCP), while the latter half has been in the Reform and Opening Up era (still under CCP rule). He contrasts the two halves using the metaphor of a window: "The situation in contemporary China…is completely different from thirty years ago, when, as in contemporary North Korea, all doors and windows to the outside world were tightly closed. In contemporary China, one window (the economy) is now open to the world, while another (politics) remains closed, because of the state's need to control society and the people." This is from a talk entitled "National Amnesia and Literary Memory." He goes on to say the open window is only partially so, and that how open it is is up to a "powerful ideological system." Much of the closing is in support of collective forgetting. "The process of forgetting," he says, "is a national strategy." The purpose of "compulsory amnesia" is to erase any "negative incidents with the potential to harm the nation's image and power." He describes intellectuals who support this amnesia and "see only what they are meant to see," intellectuals who, "like obedient children," willfully socially distance themselves from their knowledge of the past. This might call to mind George Santayana's warning about what happens to those who cannot remember the past, but Lianke is not talking about what can or cannot happen; here, it is a matter of

will or will not, i.e., a matter of choice. Regarding how open the window to the world is, it depends entirely on the powers-that-be; that is, “all hope rests with our leaders’ enlightenment and morality.” Returning to the Book of Psalms (as a western reader might): “Do not put your trust in princes” (Psalm 146:3). One could not be blamed for getting dejected about the situation in his homeland, when he says, “In contemporary China, amnesia inevitably overpowers memory, just as falsity overcomes truth and fabrication becomes the interface that links history and logic.” This was before the pandemic in which so much depended upon reports and recommendations coming out of there. And returning to the subject of fear, it too is no memory aid. On this, Pliny the Elder says: “Nothing whatever, in man, is of so frail a nature as the memory; for it is affected by disease, by injuries, and even by fright; being sometimes partially lost, and at other times entirely so” (Natural History: Book VII, Ch. 24). I can attest to what Pliny says. As a physician, I have seen frightened colleagues forget what they have known for thirty or more years to be true. While Hannah Arendt agrees with Lianke that politics is no friend of truth (knowledge of which we keep in our “warehouse of memory” (Lianke); see her essay, “Truth and Politics”), she nonetheless offers up this consolatory observation in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, on the subject of memory-holing: “It is true that totalitarian domination [in Nazi Germany] tried to establish these holes of oblivion into which all deeds, good and evil, would disappear, but just as the Nazis' feverish attempts…were doomed to

failure, so all efforts to let their opponents "disappear in silent anonymity" were in vain. *The holes of oblivion do not exist*. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story...[T]he lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not... Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation." (Emphasis mine.) Or, as William Shakespeare has it in *The Merchant of Venice* (2:2): "But in the end truth will out."

We term what aids the memory a 'mnemonic' device, whose name shares a root with that of the Greek goddess of memory, 'Mnemosyne'. Mnemosyne, who is also the mother of the nine muses. Might this, in part, be a reason that friction can arise between the authorities and an author? If the authorities depend on amnesia, be it for obtaining and retaining power, or to enact some policy, while the author serves memory — depends on it, in fact — and produces "memorable speech" (Auden's definition of poetry), then instances where the two have counter purposes are inevitable. Lianke supports and expands on Auden in his talk "My Thoughts on Literary Censorship" — wherein he hammers home the point that "a banned book is not necessarily a good book" — when he posits "that one of the objectives of writing is to

extend individual and collective memory." His example of one who bucked the power's will is Zhang Zhixin, a professor during the Cultural Revolution, who, in 1968, ignored the "prison house of language" and "insisted on speaking the truth, [and] revolutionaries [that were students at his university] therefore cut out his tongue." For contrast, in the US around this time, we had the lauded protests of Berkeley, the tragic events at Kent State and the (in)famous concert at Woodstock. "We could say as authors," Lianke says in the collection's opening essay, "we live for the sake of our memories and feelings, just as it is those same memories and feelings that transform us into authors."

And what we cannot forget is pure beauty. Love it or hate it, it makes a permanent impression.

In the collection's opening essay, entitled "He Who Has Been Selected by Heaven and Life to Appreciate Darkness," Lianke begins with talking about China's efforts to promote socialism from 1960 to 1962: "[it] resulted in what is known as the Three Years of Natural Disaster, during which more than thirty million people starved to death. One evening, after the beginning of this devastating "man-made" catastrophe…" The preceding essay in the book, the translator's introduction, says of that time that it had marked "the high point of the Great Leap Forward campaign…[and] within months of [it]…the

Party's *wildly unrealistic* production targets had backfired, triggering an economic crisis. The nation was subsequently plunged into a devastating famine that is estimated to have claimed tens of millions of lives during the three-year period that official historiography euphemistically calls the "three years of natural disaster."" (Emphasis mine.) This difference of descriptors for a historical event is an example of what the introduction calls the "politically acceptable parameters" writers can work within, i.e., that "prison house of language" mentioned above. "Almost all awards in China in the fields of literature, art, news and culture are administered within state approved boundaries," Carlos Rojas (the book's translator) goes on to write, quoting Lianke from a 2013 *New York Times* essay. Returning to the opening essay, Lianke says that "darkness and light must exist together," (this is a world of opposites,) but "[I am] destined to be someone who can appreciate only darkness — I'm like the child who noticed that the emperor was wearing no clothes." He will not socially distance from his knowledge of the past, nor will he cover up the truth with a state-approved euphemism, those linguistic and transparent masks. Later, he says "I see that in depth of the people's souls there is unthinkable evil." How like his admired Solzhenitsyn, who says "the line separating good and evil passes…right through every human heart." How unlike that canonized commentator on Confucius, Mencius, who believes men to be inherently good. Of China in 2014, he says, "There is no comparable period of Chinese history when there has been so much

brightness but also so much darkness and *obstruction*." (Emphasis mine.) He goes on to say, in the same essay, "for true darkness is that which everyone sees but insists is actually brightness and warmth." Speech, to Lianke, is not a perfect mask.

Returning to the idea of contrast, and considering this book is by an Eastern author and for Western readers, I am again hearing the echoes of tradition: "Without vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). It is axiomatic that leaders succeed first by sharing a vision. Power, on the other hand, simply comes with the office. (Excepting, for the sake of argument, natural charisma.) Vision is an inner endowment, power, (mostly) an outer one. Vision is what the author qua author has; that is, they can bring non-being into being only by having the ability to see beyond (or through) what is and into what is not. (In China's great novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Cao Xueqin speaks of "the Void (which is Truth)." In it, the narrator says one title considered for the story was *A Mirror for the Romantic*.) In the afterword, Lianke says "Authors are but people who can rip open and peer into that dreamscape." By doing what authors do when they are creative or imaginative, by bringing non-being into being, they "increase" (as the Latin root of 'author' would suggest) what is. (We know that Harold Bloom credits literature with providing "more life.") One might call this generative capability godlike. (Recall that Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro initiated the

creationism (*creacionismo*) literary movement in 1912, wherein he implored his fellow poets to each become "un pequeño dios.") As Mario Cuomo tells us, politicians campaign in poetry but govern in prose; they share a vision which promises to "increase" the good, but after coming into power, they inevitably come up short. (In this world of opposites, let us agree that prose is to sound what poetry is to silence.) "Why," the politician looking at the poet, might ask, "why does he have an abundance of vision with no real power, while I have an abundance of power but little to no vision? The people have invested me with power because I am their favorite. Who or what is he the favorite of, to be invested with so much vision?" That politician might arrive at the same conclusion as Lianke; viz., the author is selected by Heaven and Life. This could lead to a level of resentment in the authority for the author like that seen in Cain for Abel when the latter by the former is seen as the favorite of God. It may also dawn on the authority that, for all his power, he cannot control the author or anything that takes place in the imagination. The authority is humbled in the presence of the author, who makes evident the existence of an unseen place and a higher power. The author is in the service of spiritual beings that may, for all intents and purposes, be the unacknowledged nemeses of every would-be tyrant that will ever be. Caesar, right or wrong, may wish everything under the sun to be rendered unto him. No authority's jurisdiction extends, however, into the generative-imaginary realm, which is forever outside the secular one, into the darkness only open

to the visionary (not even to the sun!), into the land inside the mirror. I will term this resentment on the authority's part 'vision-envy.'

"Even if I can't change reality, at the very least I hope that reality will not change me," Lianke, confessing to his being powerless, says in "My Thoughts on Literary Censorship." As I read Lianke's essays, touching so much as they do on power, my mind turned to the world's first essayist, Michel de Montaigne. I have never forgotten what the Frenchman said of his own aims in his essay, "On the Power of Imagination": "There are authors whose end it is to speak of what happened. Mine, if I could get to it, would be to speak of what can happen." Of what can happen, I have always considered its opposite the miraculous. But Lianke's essays share similar concerns with those of Montaigne, concerns about memory and power and the imagination's role in life.

"In contrast to China's economic tortoise, its political hare has not merely slowed down or stopped; it has even turned around and headed back whence it came. For the past several decades, China has demonstrated that the success of a planned economy lies not so much in the planning of the economy itself but rather in the planning of people's hearts. The ultimate objective of economic planning is not economic prosperity itself but rather control over the national and political aspects of people's souls." This is from a talk entitled

"The Distinctiveness of Writing in China." It describes the authority's desire to extend their jurisdiction into those spiritual spaces which communicate with the generative-imaginary realm — the heart and soul of man — and their reasons for desiring it. That same essay also touches on another theme of the essays: the nature of groups, of the collective. Groups qua groups must first distinguish themselves. It is a choice of distinction or extinction. Of the decade-long Cultural Revolution, he says it was "so absurd and tragic that [it] left the entire world dumbfounded. For this reason, people did not dare, were not able, and were not willing to return to these memories so that their children might have an accurate historical image." He goes on to express his desire for monuments to national tragedies that people seem unwilling to confront in public or in private conversation. He challenges them with "dare to remember" in an echo of Immanuel Kant's *Sapere aude!* (This reminds me of Dante Gabriel Rosetti's observation that a sonnet is a "moment's monument," an idea to which we shall return.) "We must acknowledge that our contemporary writings have absorbed too much from Western knowledge and western technique," he says in "My Literary Review." He continues: "The question is not what we should absorb from Western literature but rather what we should discard." He recognizes this need to distinguish. But he also recognizes that in this world of opposites, the oppositional relationship is impossible to sever: "I…pray that we may achieve some resistance to and release from Western literature, while also

recognizing that complete release would be impossible." In labeling the impossible, one might notice, Lianke, as a way of getting to what can happen, is speaking of what cannot.

One might read 'vision-envy' in the context above and dream up 'power-envy.' Then, one might intuit that, if it exists, by some law of opposites, it must be the corresponding author who feels it. While I do believe it exists, I conclude that, based on logic and evidence, it too is felt by the authority. Consider the durability and universality of literature in comparison to the works of statesmen and conquerors. A great piece of creative writing can be preserved on earth and in men's memories, so in the secular and in the spiritual realm, and it can be translated for people to read in countries other than the author's. As Auden puts it, "A poet's hope: to be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized elsewhere." In comparison, we often look upon the great works of ancient kings in the remnants of their kingdoms and we despair. (See Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias.") A king more often finds immortality in the idyll of a poet than through his own works. Things fall apart, especially a king's. In another "moment's monument," Shakespeare tells his love: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." The poet has more keys to immortality than does the prince with all his castles. Of the two, only the author of literature can be everywhere and for all-time. The bard is closer to omnipresence than

Alexander the Great, whose dust, for all we know, might be plugging a bunghole somewhere. Consider the first verse of the Gospel of John (KJV): “In the beginning was the Word…” The pen is mightier than the sword, if one measure of might is longevity.

When nothing happens, it is miraculous, and the pure beauty of it makes a permanent impression.

Let us agree that something is to sound what nothing is to silence.

The soul is silence, the body is sound.

Time is sound, eternity is silence.

As the expression goes, “Nothing lasts forever.”

In “On the Distinctiveness of Writing in China,” Lianke says, “China’s professional writers’ system is the most distinctive feature of the nation’s socialist literature regime, in which power is used to standardize literature, thought, and art. This kind of administrative system is possible only in socialist countries, and it features the Chinese Writers’ Association.” Later, he continues: “[it] encourages authors to lose their individuality and become collectivized and nationalized.” But then, he admits, “To tell the truth, writing is a very solitary and lonely endeavor vested with religious sentiment.” In his essay on literary censorship, when describing what makes a book great (and arguing that its being censored is no prerequisite), he says that “possessing a

unique creativity and a loving interrogation of the human spirit…[that] will be assured of becoming…a landmark for which the human spirit, in its pain, is continually searching." Unique is the opposite of standardized. Unique requires individuality. The human spirit transcends nations, and thus it resists nationalization. The subject of spirit is one we will return to. The relationship between the collective and the individual is most likely to be fruitful if it be in some degree oppositional, but the group qua group does not want this. The collective, its system, likely too experiences vision-envy, since it is composed of authors, and, as Socrates tells Crito in *Euthydemus*, "[I]n every profession the inferior sort are numerous and good for nothing, and the good are few and beyond all price." Or, as Jonathan Swift has it, "When a true genius appears, you can know him by this sign: that all the dunces are in a confederacy against him." Lianke says, "The [professional writers'] system achieves its objective of having [authors] produce works that lack independence, freedom, and thought." "Power corrupts," as Lord Acton tells us; but Lianke might add that it corrupts more than just the one in power. In describing China's current contradictory environment, he says it is "neither extreme left, like the Cultural Revolution, nor fully democratic, free, and balanced." While no man is an island, and it is not good for him to be alone, the individual talent is physically a group of one. And he too must decide every day on distinction or extinction. Doing so until the very end, a group may have to say, "We cannot beat him, so we will join him." This might

explain how in the west, our concept of Hell is Dante Alighieri's, and our image of Satan is John Milton's. Of course, for other examples of how the individual resisting extinction in the pursuit of distinction might fare, we also have Socrates and Jesus. (Both of whom were by their respective local powers extinguished.) When Lianke says of China's writers' system that it is only possible in a socialist country, it is impossible to know if he is being sarcastic or not.

Lianke does not seem to view anything mundane as all-good or all-bad. While elucidating multiple downsides to socialism, collectivism, and authoritarianism (at times, totalitarianism), he does not put capitalism, freedom, and democracy on a pedestal. While, in the latter half of his life, prosperity in China goes up when the markets are less planned from above and are closer to those in a capitalist society, i.e., freer, he says that things do not all change for the better: "For the sake of money and desire, everyone is losing their beautiful ethics, morals, and ideals, as the simple spirit that people once possessed is quickly being hollowed out and fragmented." He laments the sacrifice of what little spiritual life the nation once had for these new material gains. "The region's abundant forests were chopped down by poachers, whereupon the forestry department developed and introduced a *genetically modified species of tree* — a new kind of poplar that could be harvested in just two years…This was such a terrifying new

reality!…Moreover, now people like to steal." (Emphasis mine.) Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are also, by Lianke, not put on a pedestal. On that subject, let us agree that sound is to antigen what silence is to antibody. When Hippocrates says, "Above all, one must not play at God," he is imploring the sound, that is, student-doctors taking his oath, to never pretend at being the silence. In the Reform and Opening Up era, China still wishes to uphold the glories of socialism. In one anecdote of Lianke's, the state attempts to make of one village an example of how good the "new socialist village" can be by providing it with two airplanes for the villagers to use. But the planes fall apart before construction of them is complete, and "the village [goes] back to being poor." In this collection, socialism (good intentions) is the emperor and Lianke is the child who points out the emperor's nudity (null or bad results). One can see power by its crown, scepter, and purple robes (or variations on these symbolic accoutrements) Or, as J.R.R. Tolkien has it, power is the "One Ring to rule them all," and we see the effect that has on men, inside and out. One cannot see vision in the author; rather, by a visionary's fruits you shall know him. It is rare for power to proclaim its own nakedness, like King Canute before the tides; for a ruler to publicly declare, "No, I can't." It may be even rarer than power stepping down, like George Washington and Cincinnatus. But of democratic practices (which were employed in some settings) he says, "the [candidate] who spent more money and was perceived as being more generous" would win elections

because the people vote for stuff. Lianke's elder brother was a Party member tasked with electing the Party secretary. He grew exhausted by the attempts of candidates to buy his vote with flattery and food. "Why do we need democracy" he asks Lianke. "[It] has transformed me into a thief and has made it so that I'm not even willing to see anyone." (Both Lianke and his brother may or may not agree with Winston Churchill's comment on democracy, that it "is the worst form of government, except for all the others.") In a separate essay, titled "Living without Dignity but Writing with Honor," Lianke says, "Chinese people and intellectuals do not place as much emphasis on the individual or on spiritual concerns, and instead they focus on material matters such as money, food, and sex. This is why for millennia Chinese people's lives have been shaped by material factors rather than by issues of spiritual dignity." Later, he adds, "To achieve dignity through one's writing is the foundation of what it means to be an author in the first place." And to Lianke, there is the rub.

After talking about power and collectivism in China, the still small theme which appears in *Sound and Silence* is a longing for a more vital spiritual life in the land today. For the people to have one foot in the sound and the other in the silence, as opposed to two feet planted firmly in the sound (the mundane). (The opposite — having both feet in the silence (heaven) — is, as far as we know, impossible for the living.) Like Abraham in the idol shop,

Lianke surveys his life so far, all the earthly and collectivist values under a big government (with democratic practices) in an atheist society, and their transmogrification as the economy opens, and he finds them all wanting. He is, according to the book's introduction, "often introduced as "China's most controversial and most censored author,"" and it is interesting to consider if this plays any part. In the author's first essay, he tells us the first lesson he recalls from childhood: "Son," his mother tells him. "You must always remember that when people are starving to death, they can eat this white clay and elm-tree bark. However, if they try to eat yellow earth or the bark of any other kind of tree, they will die even faster." During the "man-made" catastrophe of the Three Years of Natural Disaster, his mother instructed him on good and evil; the "elm-tree bark" is good, but the bark of any other kind of tree is evil and inherently forbidden. Forbidden inherently to anything with an instinct for self-preservation. In China, he says later in the same essay, everyone is "simultaneously awaiting but also dreading something;" for both, one may presume they are looking to earth and to man — everywhere but the silence — as Lianke continues lamenting the absence of anything spiritual.

In a brief digression, I would like to mention Lianke's talk about American authors and their influence on literature in China. He says, "Young people [in China in the 1980s] were not sure what they should do, yet they idealistically

continued trying to enact change." This aimlessness, coupled with their natural belief that they can and should change the world, coincided with the introduction of Beat writers and the Lost Generation into their society. Lianke says, "The Beats taught Chinese authors and readers that one can ignore or even *resist* revolution." (Emphasis mine.) That line floors me every time I read it, since to American readers, the Beats led the way in our nation's cultural revolution; to put it another way, they had the opposite effect in the East to what they had in the West. This would suggest something about intentions; as the saying goes, "Man proposes, God disposes." Lianke refers to American literature as a "wild child." But he does not consider the Americans' impact on China's literary culture to be as profound as was the impact of Honoré de Balzac or Leo Tolstoy. He wonders aloud why that is but does not venture a guess. Mine would be that, considering the unmet need of a spiritual life in China, the two 19th century writers from more religious and aristocratic backgrounds will provide more planes — more somewhat unfamiliar, let us say novel territory — for the reader's soul to fly in than will the 20th century novelists from democratic lands in a less religious (and more materialistic) time. The reason for that is simple: authors from aristocracies have no qualms about matters of high(er) and low(er), while their democratic counterparts are from an early age taught to see all things on a level. (Which may require a mental hammer on occasion.) Whether one likes it or not, these societal differences are going to work to the

benefit of an aristocracy's author, because, as Lianke says later in the book, "[M]ost people like to read things that are unfamiliar to them, that contain a hint of familiarity, or that contain an element of familiar unfamiliarity…" Examples of a familiar but unfamiliar things would be a winged woman and a man with horns and hooves. And we all recall in *The Necessary Angel* when Wallace Stevens says that "poetry is a cemetery of nobilities." (Nobility, it goes without saying, is, like rank and privilege, a product of aristocracy.) Of the relationship between nobility and the imagination, he goes on to say the following: "It is hard to think of a thing more out of time than nobility. Looked at plainly it seems false and dead and ugly…[however, it] is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our *self-preservation*; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives." (Emphasis mine.)

Another similarity between Lianke and the American poet Stevens: in a talk entitled "The Abjection of Alt-China and Its Literature", the author says that a "novel [is] all make-believe (which is to say, fiction)," while the poet famously describes poetry as "the supreme fiction."

Let us agree that non-fiction is to sound what fiction is to silence.

Naturally, then, while Lianke respects the freedom and wildness of American authors, he gravitates towards those 19th century writers. With the higher and lower planes of spirituality comes an increased potential for wonder, for an even greater feeling of smallness than one would get in a worldview without them (a bigger sky, a deeper sea, and a longer time to ponder), and that also brings with it humility, the opposite of arrogance. (The might of feeling like a mite.) Kafka famously says that literature holds a mirror to how incomprehensible reality is, and Nathaniel Hawthorne echoes that sentiment in *The House of the Seven Gables*: "[T]his is such an odd and incomprehensible world! The more I look at it, the more it puzzles me; and I begin to suspect that a man's bewilderment is the measure of his wisdom." Lianke views the world in an analogous manner, only he attributes the incomprehensible nature of the world to its complexity. "It is now conventional wisdom," he says in "My Literary Review Book," "that Chinese authors' literary imagination is no match for the richness and complexity of real life." Later, he says, "One of literature's most important objectives is to describe the complexities of humanity and human emotion." The complexities and incomprehensibility of reality are what Lianke recognizes and wants to see more of in Chinese literature, I believe. He says, "When we recall the great authors and works from nineteenth-century world literature, we find that they all have their own "I believe."" Not what power — the state or the collective — wanted them to believe, in all their arrogance.

“The world is my spiritual concentration camp,” Lianke — not averse to shocking imagery — says at one point. He laments: “The market [in contemporary China] can be controlled by power.” He says further that “(Most) readers are also controlled by power, given that for decades it (the state) has been controlling all the nation’s newspapers and television stations…” This interferes with an author’s work: “When all media outlets are managed and controlled by the state, then (virtually) all readers will similarly be managed and unified, as well as folk entertainment and misery. Today, China permits you to “party til you drop,” but it does not permit you to think critically on issues…You are not permitted to choose the exploration of artistic truth or literature’s unremitting inquiry into *the reality of the human soul*.” (Emphasis mine.) In an earlier essay, again bemoaning the cultural state of his homeland, he says “China is no longer a country that holds culture, literature, and reading in high esteem.” Is that something which can only happen in a socialist country? Can an ideology independent of the government have a similar effect? And how might that happen? Lianke suggests through education: “[E]ven if a preschool is an ideal site for children to grow up, it is also a site of societal education inflected by politics…” He continues: “It is still appropriate and necessary to consider the faults of education…All life, even the most pristine preschool, is replete with the destructive effects of power and politics…Can we ever excise the corrupting

influence of politics and power from even the purest sites?" Returning to Lord Acton's observation that power corrupts, Lianke might add that it corrupts more than just the one in power. That it can, and often does, in fact, corrupt what it touches, like Tolkien's One Ring. Again, Lianke, while critical of socialism, is not necessarily a champion of capitalism and the materialistic-scientific mindset that can accompany it: "What is bred under the open window of the economy is capital, desire, and evil, and what is bred under the closed window of politics is corruption, greed, and contempt for others. People's hearts become deformed, distorted, and absurd. If an author wants to realistically describe people's deepest souls, this is his *God-given* responsibility." (Again, emphasis mine.)

"Kneel before the land that has nourished you." This is a lyric from a popular Buddhist song, according to Lianke. It echoes sentiments in Plato about honoring the laws of the country you grow up in. The way to do this as an artist is to make that land special; for Lianke, to make his village "the center of China and the world." "Making [something] special" is a concept about art and aesthetics that I first came across in the work of American anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake. On creative writing's primary goal, Lianke speaks in similar terms: making his village special has been his aim and this is what he hopes to have achieved thus far. He says, however, "Political education is a big thing in China…I have to make sure I remain in accord with the [political]

center and can't afford to deviate from it even for a single day…Ever since the Cultural Revolution, political education in China has almost never relaxed." He continues: "The more individualistic and artistic my works become, the more permanence that this evidence [that our village is the center of the world] will have." ("Make it unforgettable" might be another way of saying what Ezra Pound implores poets to do, which is another way of saying "make it special." And because pain is the best teacher, I wonder if pure beauty is unforgettable because of the pain one might feel at realizing it is not real. Or, if the beauty be natural, at realizing it is fleeting.) Having come this far into Lianke's essays, as this is from one of his very last talks, we now know what danger the individual talent faces qua individual when up against power and the collective. For that is what the individual is, as we have seen: an affront to powers which are numbers other than one, which are one in name only. Or which gaze upon the individual talent, see one, but know it is not alone.

As Wikipedia reminds us: "In Ancient Rome, the 'genius' (plural in Latin *genii*) was the guiding spirit or tutelary deity of a person, family, or place. Connotations of the word in Latin have a lineal relationship with the Greek word *daemon* in classical and medieval texts, and also share a relationship with the Arabic word *al-ghul* (as in the star Algol; its literal meaning being "the Demon"). The noun is related to the Latin verbs *gignere* ("to beget, to give birth to") and *generare* ("to beget, to generate, to procreate"), and derives

directly from the Indo-European stem thereof: *ǵenh* ("to produce, to beget, to give birth"). Because the achievements of exceptional individuals seemed to indicate the presence of a particularly powerful 'genius', by the time of Augustus, the word began to acquire its secondary meaning of "inspiration, talent"." The similarities between the etymologies of 'genius' and related words to that of *augēre* are striking, but even more so is the difference; that of the presence of an invisible guide.

The individual is to silence what the Leviathan-like power is to sound. And sound feels threatened by the absence of sound.

Pure beauty is unforgettable. More so than the greatest pain. If one cannot forget a hated impression (because of its permanence), the next best thing might be to forget its maker. By any means necessary.

There is a well-known proverb in China's island neighbor that applies to the artist's dilemma as described above: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." But the poet and his divine benefactor are a means of production forever beyond the collective's control and the state's possession. Mundane power can never equal the one transcendent.

“To have literature, *one* must have readers…” (Emphasis mine.) My mind returns to what Lianke says about censorship in China, and I ask, Who might be a citizen censor and why might they do it? Then, I remember Niccolo Machiavelli: power is either feared or loved, and for power the former is better. So, when a citizen censors a fellow citizen, it could be out of fear or love for power. What is better materially for the citizen? What makes a citizen morally better? Or might his or her feelings for the censored author motivate the censorship operator more than any combination of feelings he or she has for power? *Cui bono*?

Might that exquisite pain one feels when recognizing pure beauty be due, in the final analysis, to the dual recognition that it is forever its own property and that this can never be otherwise? And then, one thinks of Aesop’s sour grapes…

“It may be possible for literature to avoid politics, but for an author to avoid politics is as futile as trying to avoid the plague.” Lianke might say the idea of an author avoiding politics (or the plague) is as “wildly unrealistic” as were the production targets of the Great Leap Forward campaign. (He would no doubt credit his sense of what is realistic or not — of what can or cannot happen — to his ability to write fiction.) He speaks of “the unavoidable relationship between writing and politics,” and we recall how opposites are

inseparable and will, I might add, inevitably mingle. As he says, ideals "are inextricably entangled" with reality's baseness and the two "cannot be disaggregated." "Because people [in contemporary China] fear death, they become determined to live and are even more inclined to *worship* health and longevity." (Emphasis mine.) We see here a comment on what the people worship in a materialistic society absent a spiritual life. In 2022, the introduction tells us that Lianke opened a lecture by asking his students, "Do you have the capacity for memory?" Then, he points out that the capacity for memory is what distinguishes humans from animals, and he asks the students if AIDS, SARS, and the novel coronavirus are man-made disasters, or are they natural, like earthquakes. "Where did our memories of these earlier crises go," he asks. "After this plague [covid], let us become people with memory." The same essay reminds us that in the first months of 2020, President Xi Jinping took the "tell the good China story" slogan he had introduced in 2013 and asked the Chinese people "to tell the good China story of fighting the pandemic." ("China," Lianke says in a different essay, "is a nation of slogans.") It was out of concern for shaping how China would be viewed by the rest of the world, and also how the Chinese people would view the biopolitical measures that the state was enacting in response to the crisis. In a later talk, on a similar issue, Lianke asks, "When we consider [the Three Years of Natural Disaster], is it possible to describe only the starvation while ignoring the underlying causes, rooted in politics and power?"

Lianke often refers to the guiding principles in Chinese literature today as Mao Zedong lays them out in his "Talks at Yan'an Forum," delivered originally in 1942. In it, Mao says, "Literature and art are subordinate to politics…in our criticism we must adhere firmly to principle and severely criticize and repudiate all works of literature and art expressing views in opposition to the nation, to *science*, to the masses and to the Communist Party…" (Emphasis mine.) Lianke refers to Chinese literature in the decades between the Yan'an Forum and the Reform and Opening Up era, when authors were subordinate to politics, as "virtually a complete blank within world literature — an utter wasteland." As "corrupted by power," Lord Acton might say. (I do wonder if subordination to an ideology in an otherwise free society could have a similar effect on the nation's literature.) In the early parts of the book, Lianke describes how he shows the dark by contrasting it with the light. "My writing…is like the blind man with the flashlight who shines his limited light into the darkness to help others see the darkness — and thereby to have a target to avoid," he says. (Again Tolkien: "One Ring to rule them all…and in the darkness bind them.") When President John F. Kennedy eulogized Robert Frost — the American poet who was "acquainted with the night" — he had this to say of the poet, which makes an astonishing contrast when viewed against what Lianke says throughout this book and what Mao says at Yan'an:

“…[B]ecause he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair. At bottom, he held a deep faith in the spirit of man, and it is hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

“The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state…This is not a popular role. If Robert Frost was much honored in his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths. Yet in retrospect, we see how the artist's fidelity has strengthened the fibre of our national life.

“If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth…In free society art is not a weapon

and it does not belong to the spheres of polemic and ideology. Artists are not engineers of the soul. It may be different elsewhere…

"… I look forward to a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity but also for personal distinction."

It makes a very stark contrast juxtaposing the visions of these two former world leaders and the choices they (still) offer.

"With respect to contemporary China's complex politics, literature's avoidance of power and politics makes it possible for power and politics to win without even trying," Lianke says. Since 1949, Chinese authors have continuously found "their art to be oppressed by the forces of revolution, politics and power." He worries about how focusing always on the dark side of man will affect him: "I risk losing my appreciation of ordinary people, emotion, and affairs…" But on a positive note, he assures himself that "in the end, the sky will clear up and people will smile again." Elsewhere, he says, "Kindness, beauty, and love — this is the ground on which humanity relies." He closes his afterword with the following: "At the heart of Chinese Buddhism is this: "Oh, myriad beings, remember the kindness of others, and you will possess everything."" It means, I believe, that everything is gratitude,

that which is “not only the greatest of the virtues but the parent of all others.” And we remember what happened to the person who said that.

It may easily pass unnoticed that the best authors are, in time, invested with authority. This happens through what G.K. Chesterton refers to as “the democracy of the dead.” For what is my making use of quotations from so many venerable writers if not a blatant appeal to their authority, if not casting my vote for each one of them into the ballot box that is whatever posthumous audience I may someday have? Their authority in the field of truth (the void, the silence); that field which so agitates the political (sound) authorities. (Consider Ovid and Virgil, both of whom we speak of in reverential tones. This, despite the wishes of Caesar Augustus.) Lianke tells a story from the time when his military and writing careers overlapped. It is a story of a lieutenant general who joins his unit and likes to read. He tells the assembled that he recently read two books, one of which was *Lenin’s Kisses*, a novel by Lianke. The officer proceeds to tell those gathered round him that “if China were to have another anti-Rightist campaign and was given a quota of only two targets to persecute, the authors of these two novels should be used to fill that quota.” Lianke is the “most controversial and most censored author” of novels in China, but he has the soul of a poet, the kind of poet that would be banned from power’s ideal republic and prized elsewhere. For anyone with a similar soul, I cannot recommend this book enough.

~~Jake Sheff

WHEN YOU GET TO THE OTHER SIDE, by Mariana Osorio Gumá. Translated by Cecilia Weddell. Cinco Puntos Press, New York, 2019. pp 300.

Mariana Osorio Gumá is a Cuban-Mexican psychoanalyst and writer. She is the author of several books of fiction in Spanish, among which *Tal vez vuelvan los pájaros* (2014), winner of the Premio Literario Lipp La brasserie. *When You Get To The Other Side,* published in 2019, was translated into English by Cecilia Weddell, a translator and writer herself.

When You Get To The Other Side follows a 12-year-old Mexican girl, Emilia, and her 15-year-old brother, Gregorio, who upon losing their grandmother, a curandera, do their best to raise the money to pay coyotes to cross over to U.S. to meet their father. Mamá Lochi, the grandmother, raises the children with stories about the what it means to be a curandera/a healer and connect with the supernatural world. Upon her death, the two decide to cross the border and reach their father and uncles in the U.S. Although their journey proves to be dangerous and leads to their separation, the two children manage to survive by using their grandmother's teachings to inhabit the thin line between the real and supernatural world.

The plot has a good flow on the page and the book is a dense reading. There is simple, vibrant language that ensnares the reader's senses:

> "The hours passed as they dove from the tip of a tall rock and stood under the waterfalls that splashed over the riverbank's edge. The sky turned black, and, before they knew it, big drops were falling on the water's reflective surface, sending ripples across it" (82).

The book is thick with imagery and symbolism and the border between the real world and the supernatural one becomes fluid and is bending to meet the characters' needs.

However, the book is not only an encounter with magic realism, but also an opportunity to consider the plight of human trafficking, and the disruption immigration brings along. Seen through the eyes of the two children, the reality of immigrants and refugees becomes even more painful, yet it is carried with dignity and the specific innocence. Their profound bond and the connection to Mamá Lochi help them cross borders, both geographical and emotional, and be reunited, even if for a brief moment, with the father and his new family. The book ends with Emilia's thoughts on the siblings' journey:

> "Sometimes I believe that I have a path and a destination. Sometimes I also feel really lost, as lost as I was when I was adrift in the middle of the desert. And a feeling comes to me like everything that happened

> just happened, even though in reality it's been twenty-something years now since I left Amatlán. And I ask myself when they stop happening, those things that mark you like a scalding ember buried deep in the skin" (299).

Mariana Osorio Gumá tackles these important themes with grace and lyricism, without minimizing their impact. The changing point of view offers the audience this intimacy with the characters and a real understanding of their trouble. It is smoothly rendered into English and creates this dramatic irony where the reader has the chance to also see Gregorio, Emilia, Mamá Lochi from a detached perspective. Translator Cecilia Weddell skillfully and beautifully renders into English the author's ingenious, straightforward voice. Her translation is fresh and engaging and keeps the reader invested in the story.

In her *Translator's Note: Voicing a Voice*, poet and translator Mira Rosenthal asks an important question: "Is it possible to write an introduction to a work in translation without a voice filled in part with awe for the original, in part with persuasive rhetoric to convince an American audience to care about the foreign?" *When You Get To The Other Side* by Mariana Osorio Gumá lacks a translator's introduction where the reader could get an insight into Cecilia Weddell's process and the challenges every translator has when carrying over

work from one language into the other. However, Cecilia Weddell manages to create a beautiful new book that the American audience can appreciate while also, ideally, caring about Mariana Osorio Gumá's Spanish book. Part of the successful creation of a new book, *When You Get To The Other Side,* comes from Cecilia Weddell's awe with the original, *Cuando llegues al otro lado.* As always, translation begins from a place of love before becoming a labor of love. Hers is a precise and moving translation that captures Mariana Osorio Gumá's lyrical style and unique voice.

Rosenthal, Mira. kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2019-mayjune/selections/mira-rosenthal-656342/

~~Clara Burghelea

THE SUBTLE FOLDS OF SHADOWS by Óscar Hahn. Translated by G. J. Racz. Diálogos Books, 2024. pp 119.

Óscar Hahn is one of Chile's most important poets, author of some twenty books. He is also a writer and professor who has won distinguished awards. *The Subtle Folds of Shadows*, in G. J. Racz's translation, is a compilation of poems, spanning Hahn's more than six-decade career. The last poem in the book, "Ukraine Under Fire," appears for the first time in translation in a collection and is the perfect match for the book's cover art, closing an invisible circle. The

themes around which the poems in the collection congregate are love, historical figures, humankind, poetic tradition, and political oppression.

G. J. Racz is an experienced poetry translator familiar with Hahn's poetic choices and his recurring themes. My first encounter with Hahn's poetry was also through G. J. Racz's lenses; his translation *The Butcher's Reincarnation* beautifully captured the flavor of the Spanish original. The lingering feeling I was left with was the manner in which his translation stood its ground like a living thing, while also engaging the reader.

The second line in the first poem in the collection, "I'm a Skipping Stone," is the one giving the book its title: "You Death hiding on the outskirt slums of silence/ inside the subtle folds of shadows" (19). The Spanish original on the left nudges the curious reader to follow the way the speaker addresses Death and questions their relationship. The English alliteration of the title verse confers the poem and the collection an audible pulse, while also emphasizing the lyrical effect of Hahn's poetry. The theme of Death is later reprised in poems such as "Come Join Death's Dance" — "Come one come all ye mortal-born and join death's dance" — and "Tailor Shop" — "I've tried on death as if it were a suit" (79).

Despite tackling a dark subject, Hahn's poems are not somber and rather mirror the poet's preoccupation with the philosophical questions around "death." They are in conversation with those poems that invoke or allude to God such as his sonnet, "Read My Defective Poetry Oh Lord." Here the speaker conveys the poet's anxiety about his work and the lingering shadow of failure. The translator carries across Hahn's ABAB rhyme scheme in the first two quatrains

and the ABA of the last two tercets. While calling himself an unworthy poet and summoning God's grace to fall upon his work, Hahn masterly delivers a musical sonnet.

"Read My Defective Poetry Oh Lord" is paired with the previous sonnet, "Fixed Stars in a White Sky," where the speaker compares fair sonnets to the "fixed stars un a white sky" (39). The speaker addresses the form of the sonnet—the fourteen lines—and this needs to capture the "light that radiates out from their cores" to be alive and enduring. Similarly to the above-mentioned sonnet, there is a lack of punctuation that gives the connect flow and a sense of urgency. Both of them reflect the poet's preoccupation with both form and content and how a sense of inspiration/ duende/ illumination is needed to have them sparkle on the page and resist time. The poet is a perfectionist, always honing his craft as later echoed in "The Perfectionist": I've ruined this poem/ I pounded it so hard/ It's been reduced to nothing" (67).

Love is another one of the recurring themes in the collection addressed by the poet in its many iterations from passionate declaration to absence to carnal love to separation. In "The Beloved's Exaltation," the speaker calls the woman keeping him awake at night, with a love stronger than death and the gods, "thief of my pained sleep" (21). There is regret in his voice for having wasted the chance to really tell his beloved that in the end, love is enduring, and that "like ripe fruits reaching upward toward the sky…/its nature never changes, never dies" (23).

G. J. Racz captures the flavor of the original poems and successfully brings Hahn's unique voice and style into English. The enduring collaboration between the poet and the

translator also shows in the latter's skillfulness in balancing the original structure of the poems with a diligent scanning of the poet's craft choices, and adequate transformation into English.

Through a variety of poetic forms and styles, Óscar Hahn proves to be a resourceful poet whose voice echoes place and time and never fails to reach a wide audience. To the new reader, this is a delightful discovery; to the familiar reader, a rewarding reconnection.

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