

Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

Trans-cultural and trans-temporal translations

A new theory of world literature – a brief introduction

Abstract: This paper reads a group of contemporary poems in English and their precursor-poems, written in either Chinese or English, and charts the metamorphoses that occur between the two versions. The newer poems may follow the language patterns and ideas of the ‘originals’ but transpose and translate the earlier texts into different temporal, cultural, political and social contexts as a means of addressing contemporary concerns. Such multi-layered crossover translations, I argue, epitomize the notion of globalized literature and the ways in which form and content can be recycled across cultures, historical periods and languages. In this sense, the new works simultaneously draw attention to the cultural specificities of the ‘originals’ and engender new meanings in new target languages or cultures. The paper presents the possibility of considering trans-temporal and trans-cultural translation as one mode of reading, identifying, understanding and teaching World Literature. It also argues that texts that have undergone the treatment of trans-temporal and trans-cultural translation (such as Auden’s “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and Li Bai’s “Changgan Xin”), regardless of their original language, exhibit qualities that other texts that have been translated straightforwardly into different languages may lack and can be viewed as ‘exemplary World Literature texts.’

Keywords: translation; Chinese literature; premodern Chinese poetry; adaptation theory; universalism; cross-cultural studies; World Literature

The ‘classical’ notion of World Literature, one that stems from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who first used the term in 1827, centres on legitimacy and is interested in how a literary text expresses “the universal possession of mankind” (qt. in Eckermann, 1827, 212). My argument is that there is no such thing as an easily defined shared humanity. Instead, literary texts can only speak for the specific cultures and contexts that lead to their creation. But the experience or event explored in these texts can be transferred and relocated to – translated into – different cultural and linguistic settings, articulating an experience or event that are

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specific to these divergent cultures. This article, then, aims to look at World Literature from a ‘trans-cultural and trans-temporal translation’ perspective. I argue that texts which have undergone this process tend to exhibit characteristics that other texts, straightforwardly translated into other languages, may lack. My research theorises trans-cultural and trans-temporal translation as one mode of reading, identifying, understanding, and teaching World Literature. I argue that texts that are subject to this process, regardless of their original language, can be considered to be ‘exemplary’ World Literature texts.¹

The significance of translation across temporal and cultural axes first occurred to me when I was reading several adaptations or *updates* of the Tang poet Li Bai’s “Changgan Xing” by several contemporary poets, whose reading of Li Bai’s poem was largely filtered through Ezra Pound’s version, “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”, in *Cathay* (1915). In the new poems, Li Bai’s original, written from the perspective of a sixteen-year-old wife waiting for her husband’s return, is restaged in contemporary times, against the backdrop of diverse cultural settings. I was also inspired by the English poet W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940 [1938]), an ekphrastic poem in response to Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (1560), and the poem’s transposition to the American poet Robert Masterson’s “To the State Electric Worker” (2011), which is set in post-Mao China. I will be discussing these works more elaborately later on.

This process of trans-cultural trans-temporal translation is not only seen in shorter texts and narratives. There are examples of similar transpositions in other genres. Lu Xun’s *The Diary of a Madman* (1918) reworks Nikolai Gogol’s story of the same title (1835), while his *The True Story of Ah Q* (1922) is inspired by Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605). Gao Xingjian’s play *The Bus Stop* (1981) recalls Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Dung Kai-cheung’s *Atlas: An Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (2012) is modelled on Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972) and Xue Yiwei’s *Shenzheners* (2016) is a Chinese version of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), to name some examples.

All the texts discussed in the project have a strong affiliation with Chinese literature, either because the source texts are written in Chinese (e.g. Li Bai’s poem) or the new works, inspired by Western literature, are in Chinese (e.g. Gao’s *The Bus Stop*, Dung’s *Atlas: An Archaeology of an Imaginary City* and Xue’s *Shenzheners*). The focus on Chinese draws attention to the role played by China (and Hong Kong and Taiwan) and Chinese texts in the field of World Literature.

With the publication of Pheng Cheah’s *What is a World? Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016) and more recently, *World Literature: Institution*,

¹ I have previously explored this topic in two articles, “Icaruses” (Ho 2014) and “Contemporary Faces of the River Merchant’s Wife” (Ho 2017).

Recognition, Location (2020), edited by Flair Donglai Shi and Gareth Guanming Tan, the field, or topic, of World Literature continues to capture the imagination of students, readers, and scholars alike. The research I am proposing, which centres on translation and cross-cultural interpretations, will contribute an original theory to the field. The objectives of this project are 1) to propose an entirely new theoretical approach to consider World Literature through the lens of trans-cultural and trans-temporal translation, 2) to identify texts that can be considered ‘exemplary’ World Literature texts, looking at (and at times re-examining) creative works across centuries, national/cultural boundaries and genres, 3) to provide an interdisciplinary intersection between adaptation theories, literary criticism, translation, transcultural studies, comparative studies, cultural critique, and textual and intertextual analysis, and 4) to highlight the important role of China (and Hong Kong and Taiwan) and Chinese-language texts in the field of World Literature.

Case study (1): Li Bai

T. S. Eliot, in 1928, famously called Ezra Pound “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time” (xvi) in his introduction to Pound’s *New Selected Poems and Translations*. Eliot was referring to Pound’s renditions of fourteen Chinese poems in *Cathay*. This remark, for some, may seem arrogant and orientalist, a term Edward Said would half a century later coin to critique the West’s at times self-serving constructions of the East. That said, many consider *Cathay* to be responsible for first sparking an interest in classical Chinese poetry and also its translation in the West. Eliot Weinberger, for example, in his introduction to *The New Directions of Classical Chinese Poetry*, writes that “*Cathay* had set off a small landslide of Chinese poetry translation” (2003, xxii). In his article entitled “Tribunals of Erudition and Taste: or, Why Translations of Premodern Chinese Poetry Are Having a Moment Right Now,” Lucas Klein, no doubt making a reference to Eliot’s appraisal of Pound being “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time”, expands on this and writes that Pound’s translations are ‘inventions for Chinese translation’ (2016).

The circumstances of the publication of *Cathay* have been recounted many times. Pound, who knew little Chinese, if any, wrote the English versions of selected poems by the renowned Tang poet Li Bai by consulting transcribed notes made by the late Ernest Fenollosa, who had in turn been helped by Japanese scholars. One of the poems from this slim collection that has received much attention is Pound’s version of Li Bai’s first poem in “Changgan Xing” (长干行), retitled as “The Merchant River’s Wife: A Letter.” Despite the availability of other more ‘accurate’ translations, Pound’s work has played an important role in the popularisation of the poem in the West.

Although set centuries ago in a city in eastern China, Li Bai's poem expressing the love and longings of the faithful and determined wife of a travelling trader has continued to resonate in contemporary times. Adaptations of and homages to Li Bai's poem, filtered through Pound's interpretation, can be found in English-language texts set in diverse settings, attesting to the poem's cultural commensurability and Pound's lingering influence in introducing the Chinese poem to a wider readership. In the following, I will investigate three examples of such English-language adaptations.

The female poet Luca L.'s "Letter to Ru Yi, the River-Merchant's Wife" (2013) is a response poem written from the husband's perspective. As such, it reverses the gender roles in the Chinese source text and Pound's version, in which a male poet 'cross-dresses' as a woman by donning the voice of a yearning wife.

Letter to Ru Yi, the River-Merchant's Wife

by Luca L.

*A response to Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter,"
in turn based on the first of Li Po's "Two Letters from Chang-Kan"*

In the evening the boats and people leave.
The river stills. I see the moon in it
and think of you – like you
it keeps one face hidden.
(When you read this you will protest this,
that much I know of you.)
We spent two summers together, one in indifference,
the other approaching love. Even then
you vanished in moments, becoming dark again;
sometimes I flashed in anger at your elusiveness.
When I left you, the insects were humming in the sorghum
and you were squinting at me through dense bars of sun.
That morning you tied a charm around my neck,
wood-coloured and smelling of incense, your gaze
as fixed and full as on our first playdate,
the adults plotting the stars behind us. We could not
see their map, so we focused on the flowers and plums,
the things we could hold in our hands.
Now I go upriver and you clean house.
Sometimes I glimpse that starry map,
and wonder how it looks
from your place at the end of the river.
The string around my neck broke yesterday;
I've replaced it with a new one.
I expect I shall be back by June,
but you can never tell with these currents.
(L. 2013)

L.'s poem is tender and gives the silenced husband in the original poem an opportunity to also express his love for his spouse. This is reminiscent of A. D. Hope's "His Coy Mistress to Mr Marvell" (1978), a cross-temporal response to Andrew Marvell's *carpe diem* poem "To His Coy Mistress" (1861). Hope's poem, narrated from the perspective of the 'coy mistress,' imagines the unnamed woman in Marvell's work to be sassy and able to see through nonsense. She is not so easily wooed and won over by a poet skilful with words. Hope, a male writer impersonating a female voice, provides an entertaining and feminist rebuttal to Marvell's classic poem.

The gender politics in L.'s poem is even more complex. Li Bai's poem may have been composed following "a tradition for early Chinese poets to write about the complaints or longings of traveling merchants' wives" (Tang 2012). This form of gender-crossing may also be interpreted as an example of the exclusion of women from educated social and political societies in pre-modern China. According to Paul F. Rouzer in *Articulated Ladies: Gender and the Male Community in Early Chinese Texts* (2001), the world of the male literati rarely admitted women, and even though some women did enter some texts, this was either through "male adoption of gendered behavior (writing *as* a woman in the process of writing *about* her)" (8) like in Li Bai's poem, or by learning to imitate male language and express male concerns. In L.'s poem, we see a female poet from the twenty-first century writing as a merchant addressing his wife and revealing his vulnerability – a reversal that, given the history of the representation of gender and desire in early Chinese texts, is particularly interesting.

While Luca L.'s poem is presumably set at the same time as Li Bai's original, in Alistair Noon's "The Expat's Partner: An Email" (2008) the Tang poem is updated to the contemporary world.

The Expat's Partner: An Email
by Alistair Noon

A hundred miles from swells and tides,
planks flotsam a building site.
Trees practise for spring with first buds,
though snow survives in dumper truck ruts.
Shadows of girders lattice the light.
The beaked pick at dark tufts.

At twenty we snogged in a low-lit squat bar,
cracked glass guitars and dirge vocals a serenade,
one-mark pilsner our aphrodisiac.
We came back for the next decade.

This year you flew to a contract with change,
to a shift no longer in sync with mine.
Jets sobbed above my head.
They banked into sunshine, my feet
almost floated from the ground.

Across these months we've coordinated calls,
 your dawns my dusks,
 tapped out alphabets along deep-sea cables,
 like voices down halls,
 clinked no bottles on chafed sofas.

Tell me the arrival time, the connecting flight,
 I'll wait with my hands on the trolley brake.

(Noon 2008)

Noon's poem, subtitled "An email," is a conscious update of Pound's 'letter.' In this wonderfully poetic 'email,' a lover is writing to an absent partner, the 'expat' of the title – again, a reference to a more modern phenomenon: globalisation and the convenience of international travel.

In the first stanza, the persona appears to be describing a late-winter scene from a slightly ambiguous perspective. It is clear, however, that spring is anticipated: "Trees practise for spring with first buds, / though snow survives in dumper truck ruts. / Shadows of girders lattice the light. / The beaked pick at dark tufts" (Noon, lines 3–6). The reader later realises that these early lines also foreshadow the return of the partner – the poet uses the traditional trope of associating spring with returning love. While the trees practise for spring, is the persona also practising for the lover's homecoming?

In the second stanza, the persona recollects moments from their early relationship. We are shown nostalgic flashbacks of a bohemian romance, possibly in Germany: "At twenty we snogged in a low-lit squat bar, / cracked glass guitars and dirge vocals a serenade, / one-mark pilsner our aphrodisiac" (lines 7–9). This young love proves to have legs, however: "We came back for the next decade" (line 10). This line has a nice double meaning: the lovers are not only starting their second decade together, but have they also come back to the locale where their love germinated?

Soon, we see a fully mature relationship, and the formerly bohemian atmosphere has changed to a pragmatic one. The partner is about to become an expat by pursuing a career abroad: "This year you flew to a contract with change, / to a shift no longer in sync with mine" (lines 11–12). To the persona, this new arrangement does not seem to be an easy one. There is a sense of losing touch: "Jets sobbed above my head. / They banked into sunshine, / my feet almost floated from the ground" (lines 13–15). With the absence of the lover, the persona seems to suffer from not only uncertainty but also rootlessness. Or perhaps the speaker is being lifted towards the faraway lover, attracted by the magnetic pull of their affection.

Later, we are shown glimpses from this long-distance relationship, the routine of absence: "Across these months we've coordinated calls, / your dawns my dusks, / tapped out alphabets along deep-sea cables" (lines 16–18). But the com-

munication of the separated is imperfect; they speak to each other “like voices down halls” (line 19). And there is of course the inevitable loneliness and longing. The couple have not shared any real moments of intimacy, have “clinked no bottles on chafed sofas” (line 20).

And yet in the final stanza, there is the possibility of the reunion that was foreshadowed in the opening lines. With the assurance, practicality, and unquestioning devotion of love, the persona finishes the email with the following: “Tell me the arrival time, the connecting flight, / I’ll wait with my hands on the trolley brake” (lines 21–22). In Li Bai’s poem, the wife agrees to meet her merchant husband two hundred miles from their hometown. The promise of the protagonist in Noon’s poem to wait for the returning lover at the airport is less extravagant and speaks to the changed world where mechanical machines fly in the air – unimaginable in Li Bai’s days. In both the Chinese original and Noon’s adaptation there is confidence in the stability of the relationship and a promise taken for granted in this conclusion. But the reader is never certain whether these feelings are reciprocal or whether the lover will really return. An email, like a letter, remains one-sided unless answered. Is the persona actually making concrete plans to pick up his or her partner? Or are the final lines a plea for the lover’s return?

Finally, for this section, I would like to look at a poem that responds to and updates “The Merchant River’s Wife” in a more oblique way, even though traces of the source text are still recognizable.

Ghost Husband

by Renée M. Schell

Uncountable miles away your cells undergo
respiration in the air of a land I do not know.
Strange tones, alien vowels ring
in your ears like wood striking bronze.
New words permeate your dreams but I hear only
fragments like “garlic sauce” or “rice paper.”
You inhabit another cityscape now: pagodas,
inscrutable black marks on neon signs. Roasted scorpion.
The music of its pretty women tapping their heels
along crowded sidewalks echoes just beyond my hearing.
Can they read in your face what I would read
were I not uncountable miles away?
Mornings I take your bottle of hot sauce, twist off the cap
and shake uncertain drops onto cooked eggs.
Pungent and sour, the scent rises.
I smell what you smell, taste what you taste.
Uncountable miles away you gaze upon a great
wall of stone and bricks, tamped earth and wood.

I stare out the kitchen window.
 The neighbour's rickety fence blocks my view.
 One day soon you'll leave behind the spicy soup,
 spend some necessary time over the Pacific.
 Your atoms and molecules will reappear before my eyes,
 an apparition out of the western sky after
 our sun sets into the same Saturday morning
 you woke up to when my Friday eyes were closed
 in afternoon dreams uncountable miles away.
 (Schell 2014)

Renée M. Schell's poem, 'gender appropriate' this time, describes the separation of a couple in the present. The husband is away in an Asian city, which to the persona's mind is saturated with "strange tones" and "alien vowels" (Schell, line 3). We know the husband resides in Asia, as the poem provides these clues: "garlic sauce," "rice paper" (line 6), "pagodas" (line 7), "spicy soup" (line 21). The time difference – "our sun sets into the same Saturday morning / you woke up to when my Friday eyes were closed" (line 25–26) – also indicates that the persona lives in an American time zone, "over the Pacific" (line 21), contrasted with the one observed by the husband. "Uncountable miles away" (lines 1, 12, 17, 27), repeated four times in the poem, emphasises the immense distance between husband and wife. The distance is so great and so abstract that the wife uses the term "ghost" to modify her husband, as though he is now on an entirely different plane of existence.²

In Li Bai's poem, the wife can imagine only very little of the daily realities of her husband's temporary home – perhaps a suggestion of the restricted experiences of Chinese women at the time, whose lives were often limited to domestic matters. In Schell's poem, the wife tries to comprehend the foreign land currently hosting her husband – "a land I do not know" (line 2) – and she is able to make a number of conjectures regarding the differences in language ("strange tones, alien vowels" (line 3)), food ("Roasted scorpion" (line 8), "spicy soup" (line 2)), and cityscape ("pagodas" (line 7), "inscrutable black marks on neon signs" (line 8)). Added into Schell's poem is a pang of jealousy felt by the wife, expressed not so subtly in "The music of its pretty women tapping their heels" (line 9). Indeed, it is realistic for the waiting wife to wonder if her husband, now "uncountable miles away" (lines 1,12,17,27), might be attracted to those well-dressed and

² The use of the term "ghost" here may also be a play on words, as a common Cantonese slang for Caucasian foreigners is *gwai* (ghost). *Gwai* can also be used as an adjective. For example, a white man is called *gwai lo* (ghost man) and a white woman is called *gwai por* (ghost woman).

“pretty” women of the East. Instead of promising to meet her husband, as in Li Bai’s poem and its updates discussed above, the persona in “Ghost Husband” imagines a reunion to happen only in “afternoon dreams” (line 27) – all in all, a more sober, less romanticised contemporary update on the vagaries of long-distance relationships.

Case study (2): Icarus

To talk about W. H. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940 [1938]) I have to first talk about photographs and their conventions, which are both familiar and foreign to us, with their alienated and uncanny appeal. They often seem very formal and stiff compared to the images of today, although it must be said that many of the pictures we take continue to fall into specific genres (the group shot, the goofy V-sign common in Asia, the mirrored-selfie). Perhaps most importantly, today’s digital images lack the physicality of photographs of the past. In this sense, modern photography can be seen as a form of Aristotelian mimesis highly facilitated by technology, and the more often an image is reproduced, the more the ‘aura’ of its original suffers, to quote Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968). Indeed, for an image that is ultimately only bytes of information, one might wonder whether an original version can even be said to exist.

Of course, image-obsessed cultures existed even before the advent of photography, when the predominant manifestations of visual mimesis were paintings and sculptures. These two art forms have particularly engaged writers’ imaginations, often leading or prompting them to respond to works of visual art in response poems, which then become new artworks in and of themselves. Such poems also offer critical readings and discussions of the original works. They shed light on our understanding of the original artworks and even on the objects or stories being portrayed, although this occurs from several removes. First, there is the real-life object itself, even if in the painting or sculpture this exists only as an imitation of an ideal version of the object; then there is the painting or the sculpture, a new object in itself, which is at a second remove; and finally, the poem is a third remove (and if we are reading a work in translation, that would be a fourth remove). This poetics of ekphrasis, that is, the reproduction of one art form through the medium of another art form, such as a painting, a photograph, or a poem of a sculpture, or, perhaps more commonly, a poem about a painting, is prevalent throughout the history of art and literature. Writers from Homer to more contemporary poets such as John Ashbery have employed the poetics of ekphra-

sis, their techniques reflecting the unique historical and sociocultural environments in which they wrote.

One of the most well-known examples of an ekphrastic poem is “Musée des Beaux Arts” by the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden. Its title refers to the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, which Auden visited in 1938. The poem is inspired by a painting on a mythological theme he encountered at the gallery, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560) by the Flemish Renaissance painter and printmaker Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The painting portrays, as the title suggests, the fall of the Greek mythological figure Icarus. According to the myth, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, also known as the inventor of the labyrinth, were imprisoned. To escape, Daedalus created two pairs of wings by gluing feathers to a wooden frame with wax. He gave one pair to his son, warning Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, as its heat would melt the wax that kept the wings intact. Icarus, however, elated by the ability to fly, forgot his father’s warning and flew too near the sun. The wax melted, the feathers were loosened, and Icarus plunged to his death in the sea.

Bruegel’s painting portrays the moment of Icarus’s tragic fall in spring time, “a splash quite unnoticed,” as William Carlos Williams has it in his eponymous poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (1962 [1960], 4), suggesting that the inanimate objects in the painting – the trees, the ships, the rocks – are indifferent and incapable of empathy. Worse, most of the human figures and animals turn away and do not seem to be aware of Icarus’s tragic fate. The vast, glorious sea becomes the primeval womb that swallows Icarus, and everybody seems to be complicit in his death, as his final attempts to stay afloat prove futile. One might be reminded of the poem by the English poet Stevie Smith titled “Not Waving but Drowning” (1978 [1957], 303). Although the poem is not a direct reference to the myth of Icarus or Bruegel’s painting, it similarly portrays a drowning man whose audience is oblivious to his fate. In the poem, the man’s call for help is unfortunately not heard, and his gestures of distress are mistaken as light-hearted waving. Because the man “always loved larking” (Smith, line 5), in this crucial moment, he is not taken seriously. The bystanders are oblivious to the drowning man’s plight, just as the human figures in Bruegel’s painting fail, or refuse, to pay attention to Icarus’s struggle for life. Some people have argued, however, that Bruegel’s painting is more humorous than tragic in intention and tone, as Icarus’s legs comically stick out of the water in it, suggesting mockery rather than sympathetic lament. It is as though Icarus is merely waving clownishly with his limbs rather than showing signs of drowning.

Whether Bruegel's portrayal of Icarus's fall is supposed to be read as tragic or comic is left to the viewer to decide, and it is this ambiguity that makes the work interesting and perhaps even adds to its enduring appeal. However, in Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," the scene in the painting is given a definite interpretation, an interpretation that is heavier and more serious. Indeed, the scene is used to consolidate Auden's condemnation of humanity's uncaring attitude toward the suffering of others. The first stanza, for example, describes scenes of "suffering" (Auden, line 1): "while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along" (line 4); that is, while someone else is doing the most mundane and mindless of daily activities. Auden's poem is thus first and foremost a reflection on the human condition and on our indifference, or as the Chinese saying has it, "One only sweeps the snow immediately in front of one's front door." But Auden's poem is also a part-commentary on and part-narration of Bruegel's painting, which Auden uses to support his argument. The rather vague "suffering" in the first stanza is concretised in the second stanza with the example of Icarus, whose suffering sparks no stirrings in the ploughman or the people in the "delicate ship" (line 19). Everybody remains calm and splendidly unmoved while a boy has just fallen out of the sky and is about to die.

The American poet Anne Sexton presents a very different take on the Icarus story in her poem "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" (2016 [1960]). Although she does not name Bruegel's painting explicitly, Sexton is likely to know of the painting and/or its description in Auden's poem. Indeed, she offers descriptions that gesture toward certain images in Bruegel's work: "There below are the trees, as awkward as camels; / and here are the shocked starlings pumping past" (Sexton, lines 5–6). Sexton's poem, however, instead of merely narrating the static scene recalled in the painting, also imagines what takes place *before* the fall, such as the wondrous moment when Icarus first feels the elation of flying or his pride while looking directly at the sun, almost claiming it as his own, even as his neck is burning. In Sexton's poem, Icarus's fall is not shameful or pitiable. Instead, Icarus is triumphant, defiant, and without regrets, even though his actions destine him to his own death.

Whereas both Auden's and Sexton's poems are clear homages to Bruegel's painting, a poet can also respond to an artwork more indirectly. My next example is "To the State Electrical Worker" (2011), a poem by the contemporary American poet Robert Masterson. In it, Masterson transforms the story and the setting of Bruegel's painting to a different location, a different time, and a different social, cultural, and political context.

To the State Electrical Worker

by Robert Masterson

...killed while working on a giant steel pylon supporting the massive power lines spanning the Wei He River north of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, the People's Republic of China, in the fall of 1985

I still now as I did then wonder
 what it must have looked like to you incandescent,
 eyeballs ribboned with blue fire
 and below you spreading all horizon,
 the city slowly pulsed, hot and dusty for this late in the year,
 everyone says so.

Who knows, who will ever know what caused your fatal spark,
 the brilliant arc that clenched you tight, convulsed in one long spasm when
 everything inside you jammed up with electricity rampant and when
 you began to smolder, I wondered then as I still do now
 if you even noticed you were on fire.
 The river bridge was jammed both ways,
 typical post-revolutionary rush hour
 and a quarter of a million people stopped their bicycles
 and put one leg on the pavement so they could safely stare up goggle-eyed
 and open-mouthed at something different,
 at a man two hundred feet in the air who twitched
 and blackened and was never coming down.

The wrongness of this all is huge,
 and still now as then I consider what it must seem
 to you there among the wires thrumming harsh, the river silver
 and thin along the wide sandy bottom,
 just diesel smoke from idle engines like mist in a scroll painting
 one thousand years old, this same river and this same city,
 now hanging in a temple in
 the mountains far to the west.
 (Masterson 2011)

Masterson's "To the State Electrical Worker" is an evocative and powerful exploration of tragedy and our callous response to it. The poem recalls Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," but while Auden's work is about how people can be oblivious to events and suffering around them, Masterson's poem shows how the plight of others is often treated as little more than public spectacle.

As the title of Masterson's poem makes clear, the piece is dedicated to a particular but unnamed Chinese electrical worker, who is the contemporary Icarus, so to speak. The title flows into the prologue, and it is here that we learn about the worker's shocking death. Written in a factual style, the introduction informs us that the man was "killed while working on a giant steel pylon supporting the massive power lines spanning the Wei He River." Already, in this statement, we

see the themes of the poem emerging. At first glance, the event described in the prologue, while both dramatic and tragic, would seem to be a relatively minor one in the history of China. Indeed, the use of phrases such as “giant steel pylon” and “massive power lines” effectively signal the insignificance of the individual when compared to the nation’s industrial might.

Yet despite the modest background of the man, his electrocution has captured the attention of the poet and his persona. It is unclear whether the speaker in the poem was present at the scene or is simply re-creating an event he has read about. He nevertheless continues to obsess over the accident, the line “I still now as I did then wonder” (Masterson, line 1) – and its variations – suggesting a temporal distance between the worker’s death and the writing of the poem. After the intervening time, he is still unable to come to a conclusion about what triggered the event and muses: “Who knows, who will ever know what caused your fatal spark” (line 7).

The speaker imagines “the brilliant arc that clenched you tight, convulsed in one long spasm when / everything inside you jammed up with electricity rampant and when / you began to smolder” (lines 8–10). Here, the poet starkly captures the physicality of the event, and it is easy to picture the worker’s suffering. The speaker also wonders about the man’s mental state, asking whether “you even noticed you were on fire” (line 11), an image that recalls Anne Sexton’s Icarus, whose neck feels the fire. Whether or not the worker is fully aware of his situation, the speaker does present him as a kind of reverse witness to his own death, asking what it must have looked like while “you incandescent, / eyeballs ribboned with blue fire” (line 2–3), watched as the city “pulsed, hot and dusty” (line 5) below.

The city also looks up to watch the man. The river bridge below was “jammed both ways” in a “typical post-revolutionary rush hour” (lines 12–13), but the dying worker still proves enough of a spectacle for “a quarter of a million people” to stop their bicycles and “put one leg on the pavement so they could safely stare up goggle-eyed / and open-mouthed” (lines 14–16). In this description, the poet provides a sense that the crowd is formed of jaded and unfeeling bystanders who find diversion in a stranger’s misfortune. In Masterson’s poem, it is perhaps easy to overemphasise the cynicism of the crowd as there is little that any one individual can do to rescue the man. Is it worse to ignore a dying man you cannot help or watch his demise? In the use of phrases such as “goggle-eyed” and “open-mouthed” (lines 15–16), which are intended to convey the onlookers’ rapt attention, the poet, whether consciously or not, also has the crowd empathetically mirror the worker’s own physical state, his “eyeballs ribboned with blue fire” (line 3) and his twisting convulsions.

Still, for the commuters, the sight of a man “two hundred feet in the air who twitched” and “was never coming down” (lines 17–18) is little more than

“something different” (line 16) to be experienced, a living (or maybe dying) piece of art. This takes us back to Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts.” In Auden’s take on Bruegel’s painting, everyone and “everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster” (Auden, lines 14–15) of Icarus’s falling from the sky. In Masterson’s poem, however, everyone *watches* the disaster quite leisurely, and unlike in “Musée,” in which we are not privy to Icarus’s final thoughts, here we see the poet at least try to imagine the victim’s experience.

The final stanza begins with a moral judgment and a comment on Modernity’s readiness to sacrifice human life for technological progress: “The wrongness of this all is huge” (Masterson, line 19). Presumably the speaker is referring to the indifference of the crowd toward the electrical worker or perhaps the indifference of Chinese society generally toward individuals. But are the speaker and poet in “To the State Electrical Worker” also speaking about their own guilt in exploiting the event? Although they are sympathetic recorders of the accident, they too are in some sense using the worker’s death. This is perhaps somewhat overstated, as there is an honest attempt in the poem to capture the electrical worker’s final moments, moments that may have otherwise been lost to history.

As the stanza progresses, the speaker wonders “what it must seem / to you there among the wires thrumming harsh,” as “the river silver / and thin” (lines 20–22) passed below. From this image, the speaker zooms out to imagine the worker’s place in the vast history of the Wei He River and China, suggesting that the view is reminiscent of a scroll painting of the same location a thousand years ago, “now hanging in a temple” (line 25), except that the ancient mists have been replaced by “diesel smoke from idle engines” (line 23). In this final aestheticization of the event, Masterson offers an allusion to Auden’s poem and reminds us of the work’s complicated ekphrastic relationships – to the Icarus story via Bruegel, via Auden, reworked in a Chinese context, and to thousands of years of Chinese history seen through a scroll painting. Perhaps the poet is suggesting that “To the State Electrical Worker” is an attempt to capture the man’s life in art? Or is he suggesting that this particular tragedy is insignificant when compared to the history of the city and river? Or is it something else? The poem leaves it up to the reader to decide.

In his introduction to Jacques Derrida’s ideas on deconstruction and photography, the painter Gerhard Richter suggests that translation means that “something can be presented, interpreted, explained, and even understood *in terms of something else*” (2010, ix, original emphasis). Seen in this way, Masterson’s poem can be called trans-cultural trans-temporal translation of Auden’s poem, making the earlier work one of the exemplary World Literature texts that gain a new lease of life and cultural currency. Some narratives have the potential to be liberated from their origins and generate new texts that speak to other cultural and historical experiences – these texts attest to our ability to narrate stories, which is one of

the defining characteristics of human beings, and also demonstrate that there are different ways to tell the same story, each unique to a specific temporal, cultural and linguistic setting.

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