

"A FOREIGN TONGUE TO UNITE US":

BOOK TRAVELING WITH DAI SIJIE

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120

[T]he ethnographer of Bali, like the critic of Austen, is among other things absorbed in probing what Professor Trilling...called one of the significant mysteries of man's life in culture: how is it that other people's creations can be so utterly their own and so deeply part of us.

—Clifford Geertz, "Found in Translation," *The Interpretation of Cultures*

[C]ulture proves to be a kind of network that interlinks levels, positions, attitudes, and last but not least, otherness in order to gain its individuality.

—Wolfgang Iser, "Coda to the Discussion," *The Translatability of Cultures*

OTHER READING

A drop of human blood, Bharati Mukherjee reflects in her 2004 book *The Tree Bride*, is "a hemo-synecdoche of the world...like the novel, it contains the world" (10, 236). This Whitmanesque definition of the genre—and of the human genus no less—fits especially Mukherjee's novels, in particular those published after *Jasmine*. More emphatically than her previous narratives, the 1989 title puts up the identity makeover drama on the stage of global travel, transience, and migration. Besides the protagonist herself, the other lead actors are language, textuality, and specific texts, the old patrimonies and new traditions that Mukherjee's Jyoti/Jasmine/Jase/Jane appropriates more broadly to own herself fully and thus carry through her "metempsychosis."

In *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World*, *Leave It to Me*, *Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride*, and elsewhere in Mukherjee, metempsychosis is a rich cultural trope. To take possession of herself and become the self she wants to be, the heroine "wants" that

which has articulated other selves into being: language, more exactly, *their* language. Specifically, it is the relation with English that underpins her self's constitutive relation with itself. At the same time, she senses that "to want English is to want the world" (*Jasmine* 68). To desire the "foreign" idiom here means, as Lacanians would tell us, desire *tout court*, for "erotology" inheres in heterology (Kristeva 49). Further, the desire for the world implies longing for those "others out there," who make the world what it is, so colorful and desirable, so complex and capacious, as "multitudinous" as a novel. The author intimates that, far from denying us places, dreams, and modalities of being in the world, other cultures and others generally open the world up to us. This world awaits us, yet we never take possession of it directly, without assistance or mediation. In fact, we are ushered into it by others and their words, images, and books. For it is as we watch, listen to, and read, these others, as we delve into their novels that we put together our own stories and so become, in fact, the voluminous narratives capable to embrace the world. Writers like Mukherjee suggest that we must make a detour through other lands, real and imaginary, pass through other "novels" to come into our own and, again, the world. So do Jasmine/Jane as she "crosses" *Jane Eyre* and Tara Bhattacharjee in *Desirable Daughters*, where she revisits Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca* (and the movie made after it) to "explor[e] the making of [her own] consciousness" (5). Austen's and Maurier's works are of course as fictional as the Mukherjee intertextual episodes featuring them. Nonetheless, what Mukherjee's fictional readers inside her books as well as the real readers of her books learn from the scenes of reading enacted by these dialogues across centuries, continents, and cultures help them get a better sense of the world they live in. The stories the characters pore over, but also the stories *in* which they do so and we in turn peruse are relations (narrative accounts) that set up new relations (bonds), with the stories' authors, and by the same movement strengthen old ones. Not only does Mukherjee's heroine "learn" about other places and people as she reads about them. She also connects with them, *is* with them as she reads them, as much as she reconnects with her own people, and because she is with them all, she is at last able to be with—and simply be—herself.

Reading an other is here a subset of the Heideggerian "being-with" (*Miteinandersein*) (111-112), pertains to "information," literacy, and knowledge acquisition as much as to ontology and, Levinas would insist, to ethics before anything else (*Totality and Infinity* 44-47). For, as information conveys itself to the reader, it shapes his or her identity in a profound sense, and thus he or she incurs a debt, assumes an obligation, and by the same token buys into an ethics. More than merely informative, "other reading" is formative. We shall see below, the reader's identity and identity overall obtain as a result of intensifying textual-cultural commerce with others around the world. It is this reading scenario that draws writers from Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie to J.M. Coetzee, Don DeLillo, and, as I will show in detail, Dai Sijie as they try to figure out what it means to evolve a self in the late-global context of the twenty-first century. What these authors suspect is, first, that reading acts of this sort have

121

never been more identity-shaping no matter how "rooted" this identity chooses (or is coerced) to remain; and second, yet equally important, that such an identity need not coalesce at the expense of local bonds, obligations, and *Weltanschauungen* (the classical charge leveled against cosmopolitanism). Quite the contrary: reading the geographically or culturally remote other creates or takes part in the creation of the self by establishing a relation that further strengthens extant ties or even spawns new ones *within* the reader's native community. It is in this apparently paradoxical sense that a self-professed cosmopolite scholar like Yi-Fu Tuan determines the "external other" a prerequisite to "communal bonding" (146). It is in this sense too that Mukherjee's Tara turns to *Rebecca*, and by the same movement—by the same "detour" through the cultural geography of otherness—she turns in another direction, seeks out an other's voice. But again, she does so en route to herself, in an effort to get a grip on herself as heir of Tata Lata, the Bengali Tree-Bride to whom Mukherjee devotes her 2004 novel.

122 This double movement where the relation to an other serves as a preamble and vehicle to the self's relation to itself and its tradition is, I submit, a typical protocol of subjectivity fashioning in today's literature and culture. While the phenomenon itself is not unprecedented, its magnitude is. Generally speaking, people and cultures are constituting themselves "by reference to each other" more than ever before; we become self-reflective nowadays once we "imaginatively relocat[e] [our]selves in the narratives and fables of other cultures;" it is "only by discovering ourselves already in some sense situated in the stories and tales of others" that we can "fully understand all that we presently are" (Gunn 23). In particular, this proclivity to place oneself in an other's relations (stories), hence culturally, ontologically, and epistemologically "in-relation," this "self-discovery" in and across an other's narrative accounts, plays out in what critics from Yunte Huang to K. Anthony Appiah have determined as "intertextual travel" (to quote from Huang's title) and "traveling in books" (Appiah 207)—in what I call *other-reading*. Indeed, as far as literary and cultural narratives go, discovery and understanding of the self via discovery and understanding of an other's, story-made self are a matter of reading, of answering the call of the other's text and, in it, the call of otherness: to comprehend yourself as you comprehend an other is to read his or her story.

Yet in another sense, which has to do with this call itself, the twofold movement of "relocating" in an other's stories so as to locate, "find" one's own story and ultimately oneself corresponds—reenacts and responds—to a move or movement effected first by what one reads. Poetry and writing broadly, Paul Auster glosses in an essay from *The Art of Hunger*, are, or should be, "a moving toward the Other" (22). The story I tell or write carries me toward somebody else at the "other" end of telling and writing; as I narrate and speak, my story bespeaks my "craving" for an other and thus defines itself as "hungry art." Auster's critics have traced the themes of hunger and otherness—hunger for otherness—to Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel *Hunger* and Kafka's short story "The Hunger Artist," but Levinas and Judaic tradition are also there.

Commenting on the Spinozian "struggle to be" in *God, Death, and Time*, the philosopher propounds that "here, in the *conatus essendi*, hunger is astonishingly sensitive to the hunger of the other man. The hunger of another awakens men from their well-fed slumber and their self-sufficiency" (171). This is how we come to "liste[n] to the other," "ste[p] out" of ourselves "toward the other" (*God, Death, and Time* 171). Both Auster and Levinas have in mind certain social categories—the "downtrodden," the outcast, largely those in "need"—but also more general and more radical aspects of otherness toward which our innermost yearnings nudge us. A deeper hunger, this is—to go back to Spinoza—a "craving" for that which we still lack in order to wholly be, in our case whatever cultural-existential need the other's tale responds to and, in responding to it, addresses us and so calls for our own response.

Increasingly consequential as an artistic practice and theoretical awareness over the past century, the call-and-response discourse protocol has expanded throughout modernity across the arts and aesthetics. "Konstanz School" phenomenology-derived *Rezeptionsästhetik* from Hans Robert Jauss to Rainer Warning and reader-response criticism in the Wolfgang Iser-Stanley Fish-Norman Holland-David Bleich line, then what Jane Tompkins deems as the "historicizing" of reading theory by identity and cultural studies, with Patrocinio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn breaking new ground in the late 1980s, have all worked through a number of receiver-oriented, "transactional" reading models for which the nation-state or group of adjoining nation-states, usually Western, has proved a less and less accommodating framework.¹

Initially set forth in a 1976 article, Fish's "interpretive community," followed by further, primarily race- and gender-oriented qualifications of the communal, complicates this framework indirectly. Notably, Fish does not talk about a community but communities sharing distinct expectations about "interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words," he clarifies, "these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (171). The critic designates neither the nation nor a specific association—cultural, political, ethnic, or otherwise—as his communal model. Therefore, the "community" invoked in "Interpreting the *Variorum*" could, at least in principle, surface both inside "classical" political, cultural, and linguistic units such as the nation and astride national and geographical borders. While Fish does not quite elaborate on either possibility, what one comes away with is a sense of a rather limited, geo-culturally bound readers' community and competence. Not only does he insist that members of a group apply conventions deemed legitimate "only" within that group. He also appears to posit a fairly tightly knit interpretive community where people interact through face-to-face dealings. "The only 'proof' of membership" in such circle, he maintains, "is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community" (Fish 173).

What about a "nod" from others in other communities, countries, and continents, though? Whether deliberate or implicit, this nod or interpellation, this call

in a standby world itself on call, is both a condition of life and a challenge nowadays when those others' stories travel to us faster than ever before and, culturally "thick," arcane, and hard to read as they may be, furnish us with self-fashioning opportunities. On this account, Fish is not particularly helpful. By and large, his focus (and main point) is "intra-communal." In his view, people produce meaning inside communities rather than across them; meaning making fluctuates from community to community; and for that reason, reading reinforces community as a "discrete," unrelated, largely "local" and unchanging entity, in brief, community as a traditional sociocultural unit.

124 The interpretive community notion and reader-response theory overall must be, then, "rehistoricized," that is to say, adjusted to the worldwide reshufflings and realignments of communities in general and communities of readers in particular. The cropping up of at-distance, transnational sodalities of discussion and interpretation, remarkably active in digital venues such as Internet blogs and chat rooms, is surely another symptom of networked globality. In this area, we have our work cut out for us because, while we are getting some sense as to why people of different backgrounds and places argue about, say, political issues, we still know comparatively little about how they actually navigate the texts in which those issues or any other issues for that matter are couched. So inquisitive in other regards, global studies have left the question of global-era literacy in general and reading in particular largely unasked. Of course, some critics have contended that our "visual" or "postliterate" age renders the issue less relevant—people, we hear all the time, read less and poorly; when they still do it at all, they "consume," rather, stuff on the "trashy" side: super-market paperbacks, comics, tabloids, or cereal boxes à la DeLillo's "full professors" in *White Noise*. Critics like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Ben Agger, on the other hand, think that reading—customarily a slow-motion, repetitive ceremony—cannot be possibly accommodated by our speed culture, whose unsettling vitality rests on its virality, on its self-distribution as fast-circulating data. I am not persuaded by either argument. As far as I am concerned, reading remains a fundamental rite of perception and intellection, the modality of taking in the world and its representations and so part and parcel of self-representation, self-becoming, and self-fashioning more broadly. If anything, it must be rethought alongside the other, individual and collective routines and sites of learning and interpretation shaken up by the "network society."

Online, "virtual" reading communities may or may not supplant the "real" ones. But they have been around for a while and are here to stay. If I attend below to a "classical" reading community, that is because this structure too evolves as others and their discourses make up growingly its self-perception "horizon." The evolution bears witness to the nature of the texts read and debated and in whose "margins" the readers' identity construction is thus undertaken. These are works ("nods") by geopolitically and culturally remote others; in this environment also reading means *reading of others* more than ever before. "Classical" as it may be, homogeneous or

at least perceiving itself so, largely stable or just caught in a moment of historical stability (accepted or imposed), "in-situ" when not roped off by isolationist regimes, this community has been opening up in order to come together *as such*, as an actual community vigorously springing from, and honoring, a concrete place and time. Authors like Dai Sijie, to whose work I turn momentarily, help us see how, more and more, members of such groups acknowledge and call on one another by answering the call of an other not with them there and then, an other whose call itself in turn calls for sustained, often sophisticated reading, and first and foremost for a special ability to hear this call over the chasms of geography, politics, and customs. Reading may take place in isolation—and Dai's case is quite apposite in this regard—but as it unfolds, as the other's texts are shared and negotiated, a relation with other worlds and worldviews begins to arise, and through it, a relation of the reading self to itself. The "here," "now," and "ours"—the inherited dimensions of this community—do not drop away. In fact, they only form fully and structure self-understanding once the "out there," "then," and "theirs," encrypted in the other's story, are absorbed by the perusing selves.

WEARING BALZAC

Published as *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* in 2000 and translated into English the year after, Chinese-French writer Dai Sijie's international bestseller *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* could have been titled—with a possible nod at Azar Nafisi's 2004 international bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*—*Reading Balzac in Mao's China* (cf. Dai, Balzac 62). Dai's and Nafisi's stories are similar not only because the Islamic revolution modeled itself, as Nafisi reminds us, on the Chinese "Cultural Revolution" or because Dai's protagonist too, a fairly transparent authorial alter-ego, was a victim of a brutal system. More striking still is the quasi-identical politics of reading: in both, reading the other becomes a way to build, and survive inside, an alternative community.

Survival here amounts to rescuing the individual, to holding onto that which dictatorial or, with Nafisi's term, "solipsist" regimes mean to take away from you. If *Lolita* can be read as "the confiscation of one individual life by another"—and Nafisi's underground group did read it along these lines—then, as she puts it, "Nabokov had taken revenge on the Ayatollah Khomeini" and all the "solipsists" eager to "take over other people's lives" (Nafisi 33). The self, the Iranian-American author underscores, is unthinkable outside "individual life," outside culture as individuation practice and repertoire of alternatives. For it is alternative itself, that *other* to what one has been or is expected to become by tradition, education, religion, birthplace, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, that sets in train the narrative of selfhood. The authentic self, the self as instance of "individual life," is essentially heterogenic, "impure" by origin, brought

into being by the play of alterity, so it is "in its nature" to seek out opportunities to further alter, "edit," and creolize itself.

Individualist *absolutely*—the only individuals there are and ought to be—solipsists like Naifisi's Khomeini or Dai's Mao abhor the individual's heterogenic matrix, that other which founds the self as *another* presence in, hence as a threat to, the solipsist's world. As political solipsism, autocracy turns against the individual for similar reasons. The autocrat tolerates no individuality except his own, which feeds off all others', sets itself up as their hecatomb. In this sense, the tyrant is fundamentally alone, *solus ipse*. Yet his solitude is not just political but also cultural and deliberately so given the other's role in the birth of the individual self. This explains why autocracy is usually isolated culturally, aggressively "allergic" (from the Ancient Greek *állos*, "other," "foreign," "different"), and decidedly nationalistic or ethnocentric underneath the occasional internationalist veneer. Autocrats like Stalin and Mao were proponents not only of a one-leader society but also of a "one-culture" world, a fictional monolith produced and reproduced ceaselessly under strictly formalized and monitored conditions. This production-reproduction cycle was autarchic; it suspended the world and its others. Autocracy was, and historically has been, an autarchy, for it was only as such that its taking over the individual and the private could hold.

In Stalinist Eastern Europe and USSR, in Khomeini's Iran, and in Mao's China, this takeover was systematically and characteristically enacted as control of the cultural consumer. To confiscate the individual, totalitarianisms of various stripes laid an especially brutal siege to the individual reader. They set out to kill off the individual as reader by keeping in check reading as individuating practice. Totalitarian regimes strived to rein in the free play of reading, to make sure interpretation bore out reigning ideology. Since this ideology revolved quite overtly around the suppression of the individual self and since literature both represents "individual life" and enkindles it through reading in the readers themselves, solipsist rulers have characteristically banned either individualizing readings or individualizing texts, or both—when they have not outlawed literature altogether. In this respect, the difference between Nafisi's Iran and Dai's China is of degree rather than structure. Underlying the Iranian and Chinese regimes is the same censorious mindset for which some works prove more suspicious than others given their origin ("Western" or simply "foreign"), theme, style, vocabulary, or—and this is the case in both authors—because they foreground individual dramas and require a reading that acknowledges these dramas and by the same token the reader's own predicament as an individual. It is this kind of literature that draws the heroes and heroines in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*; it is this kind of literature that the reading self in Nafisi and Dai appropriates as it struggles to resist its expropriation and thus save itself. Like Nafisi's readers, while reading somebody else, strange and remote as this somebody else may be, Dai's connect with one another, and as they do so, they reach a better self-understanding, learn fundamental things about themselves and their world. Undoubtedly, in a different world Dumas père, Dostoevsky, and Joyce would have

taught Dai's characters different things, but in the world of political solipsism what they teach their readers first and foremost is the ways of the self. Reading the other's forbidden writing becomes a compensatory exercise in selfhood, a stage where the self can go on by performing the vital routines of soul and mind, empathizing and sympathizing, suffering, rejoicing, and ultimately growing an identity in response to the passions, crises, joys, and similar displays of inner life in the other's mesmerizing fiction. After reading to the Little Seamstress from Balzac's "scene of private life" *Ursule Mirouët*, an awe-struck Luo tells his friend, Dai's narrating protagonist, that "This fellow Balzac is a wizard... He touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream. It took a while for her to come down to earth. She ended up putting your wretched coat on... She said having Balzac's words next to her skin made her feel good, and also more intelligent" (*Balzac* 58-59).²

The girl literally wears Balzac. She wraps herself up symbolically in the text of his 1841 novel, *Ursule Mirouët*, or at least in the fragments Luo's friend was able to copy on the inside of a sheepskin coat. "I copied out," the friend reveals, "the chapter where Ursule somnambulates. I longed to be like her: to be able, while I lay asleep in my bed, to see what my mother was doing in our apartment five hundred kilometers away, to watch my parents having supper, to observe their gestures, the dishes on the table, the color of the crockery, to sniff the aroma of their food, to hear their conversation... Better still, like Ursule, I would visit, in my dreams, places I had never set eyes on before" (*Balzac* 7). "Longing" here unfolds as cross-cultural identity mimesis at equal distance, on one side, from René Girard's "I covet what the other covets" paradigm of confrontational desire first sketched out in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* and, on the other side, from Lacan's "I desire as the Other" substitutive scenario. In the former, the other is what the self aspires to become, but also a competitor. In the latter, the self is a detour "in the trajectory of the desire of the Other" (Fenves 188). Therefore neither model fully applies. In Dai the other and the self do not compete but cooperate from a distance on the self's project, with the other providing a necessary *other* route, the desire apprenticeship the self must complete. Dai's narrator does not want *what* the other does. Instead, he learns, or relearns to want *as* the other wants, to long, dream, and imagine as she does in Balzac's short story. He does not want to be Ursule much as Nafisi's University of Tehran students do not want to be Lolita. Similar to the Little Seamstress, he does not wish to give up his self. On the contrary, it is in order to be himself that he wants to be *like* her, to have a self as she does and to go through the same calisthenics of selfhood transaction: dreaming, daydreaming, the imagination—in brief, desire. Via Balzacian desire, Dai's narrator desires; across an other's images, he imagines himself elsewhere, not in Ursule's Nemours but back with his family, from which the "Cultural Revolution" wrenched him and sent him to a remote mountain village to be "reeducated."

Reeducation is central to the book as it was to China in the 1970s, when the writer himself was subjected to it for several years. Reflecting Mao's "hatred of intellectu-

als," the "revolutionary" method of fostering a "new generation" (*Balzac* 7) was, Dai notes, distinctively anti-intellectual. It sought, in actuality, to physically exterminate the whole intellectual class, which was deemed cosmopolite, vulnerable to noxious "outside" influences. *Balzac's* author stresses from the outset that "foreignness" was in principle suspicious (3), and so were intellectuals, more likely than other categories to catch its disease because, living mostly in cities, they had more contacts with "aliens." The intellectual cosmopolite, then, was or was presumed to be an urbanite. For that reason, reeducation was not only an anti-cosmopolitan but also an anti-urban campaign in rural setting, with millions of "young intellectuals" and high school graduates like Dai's heroes sent into rural exile and its combination of hard labor, interrogation under torture, and deprivation of all sorts.

128 The flip side of ideological indoctrination, cultural deprivation, in particular reading deprivation, does not work in Dai, for the narrator and his friend come upon a suitcase full of banned Western classics from Hugo and Stendhal to Balzac, Flaubert, Romain Rolland, Dickens, Emily Brontë, and Gogol. Not only does the "elegant" valise "g[ive] off a whiff of civilization" (*Balzac* 49); it is civilization itself, vestige of another culture now distant and forbidden yet capable of playing the role of the carpenter's case Robinson Crusoe manages to salvage. Cut off from the vital presence of others, the self still possesses their tools (Delamarre 4-5), and with them self-reconstruction can begin. With a nicely aimed irony, Dai's narrator calls this self-reconstruction "Balzacian reeducation" (*Balzac* 180). Where Mao's reeducation fetters and disables the self, Balzac's enables it, encouraging its growth, its morphing into the desired image of itself. This "metamorphosis" is, Luo acknowledges, reading's "ultimate pay-off" (180), and reading to his girlfriend from Balzac does pay off because she is magically "transformed" (100), no longer a "simple mountain girl" (100). *Père Goriot—Old Go*, in Chinese translation—"seduce[s]," "overwhelm[s]," and "spellb[inds]" as it "reveals" to its readers the "mystery of the outside world, especially the world of women, love and sex" (109).

But the outside leads inside. As it reveals itself, the other prompts self-revelation, helps the self rediscover himself and his world. By no means the most realistic piece of *La Comédie humaine*, *Ursule Mirouët* de-realizes contingent reality and refutes its rhetoric. "Picture, if you will," Luo invites us,

a boy of nineteen, still slumbering in the limbo of adolescence, having heard nothing but revolutionary blather about patriotism, Communism, ideology and propaganda all his life, falling headlong into a story of awakening desire, passion, impulsive action, love, of all the subjects that had, until then, been hidden from me.

In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France (I had heard Napoleon mentioned by my father a few times, that was all), Ursule's story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbors. The messy affair over inheritance and money that befell her made the story all the more convincing, thereby enhancing the power of the words. By the end of the day I was feeling quite at home in Nemours, imagining myself posted by the smoking hearth of her parlour in the company of doctors and curates...

Even the part about magnetism and somnambulism struck me as credible and riveting. (57)

"Wrapped up," like the Little Seamstress, in Balzac's "story of miracles" (57), the narrator is entranced by this fiction truer than life and cannot help notice that the "credible" fantasy gives the lie to a whole world that claimed to be "scientific." Balzac manages to "reeducate" where Mao fails because the Balzacian text takes its reader in the right direction—see the Latin *educere*, "lead forth"—not away from the self, nor does it take away the self from him in the process. Quite the opposite: Balzac is a good teacher; he teaches the ways of the self; the other's "story of awakening" helps the narrator awaken into selfhood. This happens because the narrator's perusal of *Ursule Mirouët* "naturalizes" the novel. In other words, the text does remain "distant" and "different," but at the same time it institutes a fictional continuum between the reader's and his reading's worlds. Ontologically distinct as these worlds may have been, they nonetheless become compatible in the reader's mind, so much so that Dai's hero feels that Ursule's story could have been about his "neighborhood" as much as he would have felt "at home" in her home and thus his own "story" could have taken place in the world of hers. Dai gives Ursule a home away from home in his hero's reading, and in turn Balzac gives his Chinese reader a home away from the one he left behind. Canceling out the squalor of the narrator's living quarters, this imaginary home can make the imagining self at home, accommodate and boost the individual, his desires and dreams.

Translating Balzac's language into the idiom of specifically Chinese situations, these projections, these "revelations" (110) are "salutary" (110), the narrator realizes, precisely because what they unveil is the dignity of the individual. Similarly, Romain Rolland's Jean-Christophe, we learn,

with his *fierce individualism* utterly untainted by malice, was a salutary revelation. Without him I would have never understood the *splendour of taking free and independent action as an individual*. Up until this stolen encounter with Romain Rolland's hero, my poor educated and re-educated brains had been incapable of grasping the notion of one man standing up against the whole world. The flirtation turned into a grand passion. Even the excessively emphatic style occasionally indulged in by the author did not detract from the beauty of this astonishing work of art. I was carried away, swept along by the mighty stream of words pouring from the hundreds of pages. To me it was the ultimate book: once you had read it, neither your own life nor the world you lived in would ever look the same. (110-111; emphasis added)

Dai's protagonist is "naturally drawn" to *Jean-Christophe* (110). Not only is he a musician, like Rolland's hero; they have the same kind of enemies and face comparable obstacles. Critics have pointed out that Jean-Christophe is based on Beethoven, on whom Rolland also did a biography, but also on Wagner's and Mozart's lives—incidentally, the Mozart violin piece Dai's character performs before the stunned villagers when he arrives at his place of reeducation is introduced as "Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao." But Rolland also put a lot of his own life into his character's,

whose trajectory speaks to the author's exiles of body and mind, to his antinationalist pathos. A self-declared "internationalist at heart" and "citizen of the world" (qtd. in Seymour-Smith & Kimmens 2222), Rolland writes the "ultimate book" because as Dai's hero reads the novel the novel itself in turn "reads" its reader, its other, as it were, sees through his misfortunes and helps him see himself and his place with new eyes. This very personal, very political exchange between individuals so unlike in so many respects reeducates Dai's passionate reader in the very best sense, teaching him the "notion of standing up against the whole world" and thus for himself. So does Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo* in whose hero he has even more reasons to see himself, what with his friend Four-Eyes completing his own reeducation but leaving behind a treasure, in this case a treasure of books, with which the narrator and his friend will indeed change their own lives and others'.

130 More importantly perhaps, both Jean-Christophe and the Count are romantic idealists, characters of bygone era. Nor is Dai unaware of the marked contrast between such stories and the world in which they devour them. At first blush, the disconnect between Dai's realistically limned China and Dumas's pseudohistorical France, as it has been called, is absolute. But the anachronistic insertion, the "mistranslation" of Balzac, Flaubert, Melville, let alone of Rolland and Dumas into the "Cultural Revolution" serves a rhetorical purpose. The more romantic, extraordinary, and "incredible" the heroes of the banned books, the more they behave like individuals, assert their freedom, and proclaim a value in painfully short supply in the reader's world, hence the more credible they become and speak to Dai's world, showing what his readers are not allowed to be, what dreams they are not allowed to dream. Somnambulism, dreams, oneiromancy (like in *Ursule Mirouët*) or psychoanalytically pursued *Traumdeutung* (like in Dai's second novel), "cloak-and-dagger" fantasies, romanticism—all these are in fact more palpable and make a greater impact than any nitty-gritty realism exactly because of their "excessive," "extravagant" psychologism, because of a display of individualism that declines to acknowledge a limit, a system of conventions, be those the conventions of verisimilitude. In Gogol and Flaubert no less than in Dumas and Rolland, Dai is looking for a psychological model—for an encoding of the individual—as far away as possible from conventionality, in particular from the psychological conventions ossifying inner life in Stalin's and Mao's infamous "soul engineering."

Two verisimilitude concepts clash here. "Realistic" as it may claim to be, one covers a narrow range of psychological "types" in turn pegged as either "progressive" or "reactionary" politically. This scheme renders the fictional and cinematic varieties of socialist realism Dai's heroes are treated with—Chinese, North Korean, and Albanian, with Enver Hoxha's "complete works" a stand-in for entire "Western Literature" (51)—ham-fisted as far as inner life goes. While not necessarily nonrealistic—after all, Balzac, Gogol, and Flaubert founded European realism—the other kind of verisimilitude does not rule out romantic, sentimental display of feelings, and derives its credibility from psychological representation unhampered by ideological

predetermination. This does not mean there is no ideology in Balzac or Flaubert. It simply means that this ideology does not set out to contain in advance psychological expression. Further, it means that, given the political and ideological background against which Dai's heroes read Balzac, Dumas, and Rolland, the writers' unconventional, high-flown, "outlandish" reports of inner life convey a sense of freedom, of individuality, putting forth exactly what the "Cultural Revolution" purports to quash. This makes their books "sacred objects" (62) and subversively so in a regime quite keen, like all solipsistic apparatuses of this sort, on not sharing its cult status with anybody and anything else. One more time, similarly to Nafisi's *Lolita*, *Lost Illusions* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* may not be political a priori, but this kind of reading ends up "politicizing" them.

WEARING FREUD

Translated into English as *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch* in 2005, Dai's 2003 novel, *Le complexe du Di*, is set in global-age China and therefore speaks to another context. The difference is by no means dramatic, though. A Chinese expatriate living in Paris since the early 1990s, Dai's Muo returns to his native country only to discover that censorship of readings and readers is still alive and well. Alongside other forms of authority, it has become both sloppier and more focused. Recycling Balzac's Dumasian treasure chest theme, the city of Kunming's "Department of Clandestine Anti-publications" has amassed a whole "treasure house" of "forbidden books" featuring two main categories of texts (196). The first includes the memoirs of Mao's personal physician, books on the 1989 Tiananmen Square student uprising, the power struggle within the Chinese Communist Party, the "Cultural Revolution's" "reeducation camps," and the bizarre "cases of revolutionary cannibalism" (197). These chronicle China's recent past, tell stories the current regime does not want told because they are incriminating chapters in its own biography. In brief, they expose the authoritarian heritage, the political unconscious of "free-market" China. This explains the Department's interest in a second class of publications, which includes "erotic novels," "licentious writings by libertine monks," Sade, ancient pornography, the Chinese Kama Sutra, "Taoist treatises on ejaculation," Freud, and psychoanalysis generally. Unorthodox accounts of the Chinese collective self and its troubled history, on the one hand; on the other, a no less provocative understanding—a disturbing reading—of the private self, Freudianism: both worry a regime that has shaped the former by repressing the latter. A psychoanalyst apprentice of Freudian and Lacanian persuasion, Muo reads the "new" China through his masters' lenses, and what he discerns from the vantage point of radical otherness provided by Freud and Lacan is the "revenant" past, the uncanny survival of the world described in *Balzac*. Muo's return—a psychoanalyst's—bears out, through the analysis he does, in the "observations" he cannot help making, yet another return, of the repressed, of old pains

and wrongs whose public acknowledgment the Department is set to preempt. As it becomes clear, psychoanalysis and authoritarianism are at loggerheads. The former's "truth," Muo asserts, "no one can escape...not even an official representative of law and order" (Muo 123). Etched in dreams, fantasies, slips of tongue, and the like, this truth invariably unsettles the official truths, either complicates or render them partial, more or less than whatever they claims.

Tearing down this pseudo-rational discourse, psychoanalysis had been either banished or treated with a great deal of suspicion throughout the communist world. After 1989, this status has changed dramatically everywhere—less so in China. While otherwise advertising itself as globalization-friendly, the regime insists on keeping the country outside what Derrida describes as psychoanalysis' "becoming-a-world," its "ongoing worldification." In "liberalized," "cosmopolitan" China, Freud remains an "ostracized foreign body" (Derrida 66, 68) because it offers up a definition of the self *other* than abovementioned discourse's crude determinism and more generally because it simply acknowledges this self, its uniqueness, and its needs. Noteworthy is also that recent Freudians have not hesitated to look into Chinese politics and especially Mao's legacy, scan the system's self-styled progressive rationalism for symbolic, phallocratic-autocratic drives carrying on under new codes, languages, and institutions (210). Not unlike Balzac and Flaubert, Freud and Lacan warrant in Dai feelings and emotions, algorithms of private life and ultimately privacy, the rights of the individual. Their psychoanalysis thus provides a psychological and political—no less than cultural—other to the regime, an other whose texts he inserts between himself and this regime's rhetoric to institute a "methodological" distance, a *discerning* interval. Via Freud, Muo sees how much of the "Cultural Revolution" is still lingering in the public or private unconscious. As in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the other helps the self make out his self-alienation, the asymmetry between self-representation and actual self. Balzac and Freud afford this revelation by inserting themselves between Dai's characters and the context in which they read the *Ursule Mirouët* and *The Pleasure Principle*. Self-awareness arises in the resulting fertile rift, as an effect of a reading that distances the readers from an evening-up, serializing environment. But as they secure this protective distance, Luo, his friend, the Little Seamstress, and her father—who starts making clothes resembling those of Dumas's characters—come to share a passion, learn a secret language, bind together.

Notably, "Western literature" opens up a gap at the same time that it closes those keeping apart the readers drawn to taboo texts, as well as the vaster gap between these texts' authors and their Asian audience. The other brings them together as they pull him into their midst, a dynamic the 2003 novel spells out perceptively. In a letter to his beloved Volcano of the Old Moon, now in a Chinese prison, Muo ponders his reasons for writing to her in French, a language "of which the dearly addressed understands scarcely a word" (215):

It is a small enigma, resonant with the sweet sound of happiness... From now on, my dear Old Moon, my splendid Volcano, *we can look to this foreign tongue to unite us,*

reunite us, bind us together in a magical knot that blossoms into the wings of an exotic butterfly—an alphabetic language from the other side of the world, whose orthography, complete with apostrophes and diacriticals, lends it the heady, impenetrable air of esotericism. Your fellow prisoners, I can well imagine, will envy you your passing the time poring over love letters, to extract even the slightest triumphant particle of meaning from them. Do you remember those wonderful times we sat together listening to our favorite poets: Eliot, Frost, Pound, Borges? Their voices, each with its own personality and sonorous beauty, enveloped us, uplifted us, and made us dream, even though neither of us understood much English, much less Spanish. Those accents, those incomprehensible phrases, remain for me, even today, the loveliest music in the world. Music for the elect few, filled with the spirit of romance and melancholy. Our music. (215-216; emphasis added)

If he could, Muo insists, he would learn not only English and Spanish, but also Vietnamese, Catalan, Tibetan, Mongolian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, then the language of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the less "common," the more "recherché" (216) and unyielding the better. These are highly "complicated" idioms of prayer and scholarly pursuit. Like Mukherjee's heroine, he wants them all, for they open a window onto sacred and secular truths as much as they shield those truths, create a sodality of study and worship while protecting this circle from intruders. Muo suspects, however, that these languages' "inner sanctum" can be "penetrated," moreover, that he can "pray" for his beloved and himself in those languages on the altars of their unyielding grammars. Thus, in Muo's imagination the alien, exotic idiom suddenly becomes exoteric. It opens up to include the studious lover and linguist and his beloved, to become a language of intimacy, available to them yet still impenetrable to this other language's others. Remarkably, it is the very "esotericism" and foreignness of French or any *other* language for that matter that "unite" and "bind," which means that the otherness ensconced in the other's "incomprehensible" tongue is never absolutely exclusive. This linguistic and cultural restrictiveness cannot be done away with completely either. But Muo draws exactly from the *other* tongue's reserve of secrecy to develop a language of privacy, an idiolect in which he and his former girlfriend can be together as long as the likes of Judge Di cannot "translate" it. The language of the other marks off a space, "translates" or take the lovers to a place where they can "talk" to each other, can "communicate" and understand each other in a language ultimately "incomprehensible" because only this language allows for both self-expression and privacy. As Muo relives a Dantesque, Francesca da Rimini-like episode, the music of Eliot's poetry—the *other's* music—becomes *their* music, again. In appropriating it one more time, they appropriate themselves and in so doing, according to *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress's* narrator, they "take" the ultimate "action" an individual can take. The "mesmerizing, voluptuous overtones" of the "foreign word" (157) from "the other side of the world" (215) conjure up an intimate "here and now" in which Muo and his girlfriend, separated out by time and space as they are, can nonetheless be "reunited" and bask in each other's company.

The unknown, the unheard, the unfamiliar bewitch. Little Sister Wang, another female acquaintance, finds Muo's impenetrable rote recitations from Hugo, Baudelaire, and Verlaine entrancing, mysteriously erotic (213). Not even the Lolos can resist the magic of the "foreign word." The tribesmen are so intrigued by Muo's francophone skills (239) and overall show of "Frenchness" that they feel prompted to show off their own "chivalrous" ways (240). Muo discovers with surprise that the Lolos are not so uncouth as they seem, for they appear capable to sense in his deportment a defining French value, the "spirit of chivalry" (193). Ironically enough, the "savages" prove more sophisticated—and more "empathic," one could say—in recognizing the "essence" of Muo's Frenchness and accepting it as part of who he is, whereas the local authorities take a similar cultural display (peppered with quotes from Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida) as symptoms of mental illness and commit him to the Chengdu Psychiatric Institute (66-67). They diagnose Muo's French "foreignness" as pathological. To the supposedly uncultured, isolated mountain villages, however,

134 Muo's strangeness is a matter of course. Identity, they suspect, presupposes it, and so does communication between different identities. Muo and his attackers understand each other, come *closer* as soon as he starts performing the foreignness setting him *apart* from the Lolos, that is, as soon as he acts out his Frenchness by speaking French, producing his Carte Orange, and lecturing (in Chinese) his audience on the unlikely topic of the Parisian metro. His linguistic and cultural otherness bridges a seemingly unbridgeable gap by helping the psychoanalyst and the Lolos see each other as culturally structured entities, not "aberrations" or "anomalies."

In Dai's "translational" imaginary, the strange—the other as strange—does not estrange. On the contrary, it is a go-between. It mediates a mutual recognition, a rapprochement between Muo and the natives, who acknowledge and accept his French and Chinese identity simultaneously. Or, we saw above, it "reunites" Muo and his former—and current—women acquaintances, brings the Volcano of the Old moon's magically into being despite—or perhaps precisely due to—its "foreign tongue." In turn, this presence is best seized as co-presence, intimate aggregate of selves—Muo's and the Volcano's—both alike and unlike at same time, brought together by what they know and are no less than by what they do not know and are not yet prove able to imagine. Imagining the other, fantasizing about the meanings of the other's language and books, the self both leaps into a markedly different world and links up to other selves inside its own.

Notably, the former world is a prerequisite to the latter. We connect to our kin and kind, Dai implies, relate authentically to our relatives and our familiar universe insofar the unfamiliar and the offbeat are already written into the formula of our being and as such shape our worldview. Our cultural identity is predicated on this "impurity," and this debt must be recognized. It does not matter that this recognition is imperfect, that we cannot "recognize" French or Tibetan. Nor is the self required to be an expert on otherness, fully conversant with its strange language. The other's idiom, style, or text need not be completely "comprehensible," or, more

exactly, this comprehension or proficiency does not have to be philological. Dai's point is not this sort of competency and the comprehension derived from it but a more elementary recognition, an intuition of, or "feel" for, what the other means in the overall economy of selfhood. To feel this way—to honor the original debt—all the self must do is reach the level of a certain empathy, of a certain propinquity or rapport between itself and other, a relation on which it can then build its own fantasies and play its own games. Stemming from these games, Dai suggests, the individual is always intersubjective, intertextual, and intercultural. Ever "derived" and "second-order," profoundly unoriginal at its very origin, it rests on a matrix of otherness.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Schweickart and Flynn, *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* and *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*.
2. Critics who have focused on Balzac's presence in Sijie's novel include: Dorothée Fritz-Ababneh; Ian McCall, who zeroes in on the role Balzac plays in the little seamstress's *education sentimentale* in "French Literature and Film in the USSR and Mao's China," among others. Michelle E. Bloom deals with similar issues apropos of the movie Dai himself made after his novel in 2002.