

NOTES & REVIEWS

SOME BOOKS NEED PICTURES:

TEJU COLE'S BLIND SPOT

REVIEWED BY MATT TURNER

Blind Spot, Teju Cole.

New York: Random House, 2017. 333 pages.

It's hard for me not to like Teju Cole. In his novels and essays he personally comes across as a genuinely interesting, even nice guy. He writes about cities, art, poetry, travel — all things I myself am interested in — and looks with one eye at their aesthetic composition while with the other for their politics. His new book, *Blind Spot*, is a collection of photos accompanied by prose poems. (And, hey, that's something else I'm interested in!) The fact that he's followed his popular fiction and essays with the unpopular genre of the prose poem is just another reason to think that the guy's alright.

The photos in *Blind Spot* are mostly snapshot-variety, but his eye for unusual composition gives nearly every photo unusual force. He states that he has tried to capture everyday scenes, and in a way he has — the reflection of a building on glass, a pile of gravel on a hill, things like that. The photos hit home-runs. And then we get to the poetry.

Each prose poem is paired with a photo, titled after a place that Cole has traveled, and responds in some manner to the photo. Sometimes that means simple description of the photo, and sometimes it means social commentary on the place in question. Many of the poems slip between the two, only to drift away from the original impulse — the sort of *dérive* that his novels are known for. The following example illustrates the dominant style of the book.

SÃO PAULO

Something with bars, like a cage. Something like a fox, something like a wolf, but scientifically neither, a chimera. It was all attention, at least it was honest that it was in an in-between state, unlike we foolish ones who take ourselves for finished things or, worse, for final states. I took other photos that day, for example of the giraffe in its enclosure with an informational sign of a picture of a giraffe in the foreground. But it didn't really work as a photograph, nor did my image of flamingos behind a sign with a photo of flamingos. But this large canid (scientific name:

Chrysocyon brachyurus) had tension, mystery, the unhappiness of looming extinction. Alert, with slightly too long legs.

It was a Tuesday. Only school groups were at the zoo, school groups and one strange solitary visitor with a camera. Bright sun to begin with, but then it rained. I was in São Paulo on a mission to find an old photograph, but the new ones kept coming, like tropical rain through a roof gutter's spout, including this "maned wolf," a sign for itself.



The poem gives us a sideways description. But imagine no photo and no title, and the text as a whole isn't necessarily tied to a particular image or location. On the surface, what Cole is writing sounds to me like a cross between diary and abstraction. Isolate the different aspects of the poem (title, image, text) and you can more clearly see the poles that energize it: place, objects, and personal description all pulling in different directions.

So I can't help but wonder how the poems would come across if they lacked titles and photos. The closest comparison might be something like haiku — brief suggestive descriptions that riff off the physical world yet don't hew too close. The power of haiku lies in its suggestiveness as well as in its propulsive language, which has been mangled or enabled by translators who either want to suggest a clichéd "haiku moment" or a language whose ties

to the world are quickly fraying. Do the poems in *Blind Spot* achieve either of these states?

In another of Cole's poems he loosely riffs off of a photo in order to do what so many ancient poets did: call to the gods.

CHICAGO

I pray to Tarkovsky, Marker, and Hitchcock. I acknowledge the dumb skull, the verso of the face, the local globe from which all thinking originates. I pray to Ojeikere and Richter, in whose works someone is always turning away. In certain pictures, we can verify a character's presence, but, without the clues of the confessional face, not what the character thinks. What has turned away contains itself. A stone contemplates a stone. Stalker, The Mirror, Sans Soleil, Vertigo. Multa pinxit, hic Brugelius, quae pingi non possunt, wrote Ortelius. He painted many things, this Bruegel, which cannot be painted. What cannot be painted?

Alfred Hitchcock and Chris Marker are examples of nearly opposite aesthetic tendencies. Hitchcock's famous psychological dramas often depend on the unseen or suggested presence or link, requiring a leap of faith from the viewer in order to make fuller sense of his films. Marker, on the other hand, is a filmmaker of commentary, contrast and comparison, where little goes unsaid and the commentary often delivers what sound like profundities. These two directors point to what can and can't be understood in the world. *Blind Spot* writes through Marker's sensibility, and — like so many clunky haiku — will probably only excite people who are interested in something other than writing.

Some of the questions *Blind Spot* asks — namely how does text depend upon its title, and what does the combination of text and photograph produce exactly — are interesting questions. But much of the poems' actual language is pedestrian, and plodding. Although Cole is often compared to Italo Calvino, and sometimes to John Berger, nowhere does he attack his topics with either the incisiveness of a Berger or the pizzazz of a Calvino. So if the book asks questions about the prose poem and its relationship to the visual arts, it also begs the question of the relationship of an author who takes personal risks to a work that doesn't.

THE OTHER EDITOR

MATT TURNER

Pei Pei the Monkey King, by Wawa.

Translated by Henry Wei Leung.

Tinfish Press, 2016. 84 pages.

Zero Distance: New Poetry from China.

Edited and translated by Jiang Yujing.

Tinfish Press, 2017. 126 pages.

Translations are approximations.

They cannot express an author's ideas.

Translations are compromises.

You need to read work in the original language.

You should talk to the author about it.

These statements are, in an incomplete way, true.

The reason these commonplaces are incomplete is because they take the author and the text to be beyond question — as if the author were in complete control, aware of every implication, and the text simple description. And these assumptions about the inadequacy of translation can be used to describe realist work as well as work that foregrounds the materiality and historicity of language.

For example, the belief that language is owned by a particular place or culture. For an outsider to transform that language into something else can be seen as an aggressive act, akin to uprooting a people from their particular material context or appropriating their means of expression. Translation by an outsider is seen as recklessly political and possibly racist, as in this statement:

When I taught Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" to my Asian American Poetry class, my students summed it up pretty quickly: "that's fucked up." When I asked why it was fucked up, we talked about the privilege of persona, of orientalism, of yellowface, of white supremacy.¹

Of course, authors and languages are steeped in cultures and histories. And that's why translation often appears like a purposeful statement about cultural preferences. Which makes it especially difficult for translators coming from and working within different languages and contexts — how to translate without turning one's translation into an editorial position.

Pei Pei the Monkey King, by the Hong Kong poet Wawa, is translated by Henry Wei Leung. *Zero Distance: New Poetry from China*, an anthology of new online poetry from Mainland China, is edited and translated by Jiang Yujing. Both translators can be considered insiders to the cultures and languages they translate, so one might assume their translations sidestep or even solve commonplaces.

In the Wawa collection, a single translator (who is married to the author) offers a selection representative of the author's works. In *Zero Distance*, a single translator translates works by 29 poets, not all of whom have the same aesthetic vision or even proficiency in Chinese. Both are a good test for any translator, but the books reveal more about the translators' political positions and aesthetic tendencies than they do their translation skill. Both also engage in editorializing.

The "Translator's Introduction" to *Pei Pei* explains what Leung believes to be Wawa's project. Like Sun Wukong, the mythical monkey king who rebelled against the Jade Emperor, Wawa is rebelling against Beijing's hegemony over Hong Kong. Wawa writes in the Cantonese topolect, which can be contrasted with a more general Chinese, "not a language but an imperial project." Leung calls her poems "very Hong Kong," which is "a very Cantonese city-state ... and consciousness," and quotes from an essay of hers: "We Hongkongers are becoming forced-Chinese."

1 Jane Wong, in After Yi-Fen Chou: A Forum. Asian American Writers Workshop, Sep 12, 2015. <http://aaww.org/after-yi-fen-chou/#jane-wong>

Leung also says that “the poems in *Pei Pei* are not political poems in the strict sense.” But given the evidence of her positions it would be difficult to think of them otherwise. It was very difficult for me to read the poems as anything else, as I bracketed out incongruous passages and focused on possible political selections. Will more imaginative readers have better luck?

KINGDOM OF THE ROOFTOP

He likes a mountaintop siesta
He likes a cartop siesta
He likes a booktop siesta
He likes a housetop siesta
He likes siestas on everybody’s heads

I’m on the city’s highest, dirtiest rooftop
Tracing a few fingernail clippings
Until at last I find him napping in a broken garden
“Hey! I have returned!”
“Wake up!”
A kick to the face

I ask him how’s Confucius been
He says he saw a sky of white clouds
I ask him is Mencius still in good shape
He says the mountain roads are not quite right
I ask him does the city still have people
He says even the wind has strayed
But he also says
My city is arriving soon
My kingdom is arising soon

This is one of the more literal translations in the book. But literal translation — translation that sticks as close as possible to dictionary meanings in favor of an almost mechanical reading of the text — is both an aesthetic decision and a political decision. By first framing the poems as political, and then stripping the translation down to bare bones, Leung ironically attempts to communicate a meaning beyond language. It’s something akin to expressing a

“consciousness” that communicates through implication, and not linguistic specifics.

Yet because Leung frames Wawa’s poetry and Cantonese as resistance to Mandarin bullying, which he calls, quoting scholar Rey Chow, “white man’s Chinese,” he opens his translation methods up to criticism. From the perspective of presumably hostile Mainland forces, translating Cantonese into English (instead of into Mandarin) is capitulating to a history of colonization. No amount of implication can rescind the legacy of colonialism.

But *Zero Distance* is less politically difficult, though it may be the odder book. The oldest poet is in his 60s, and the youngest is around 11. And Jiang had the difficult task of rendering into English different sensibilities that nevertheless represent what he sees as a contemporary trend in Mainland China towards personal self-expression. If only because no one’s looking, “poetry has become the freest form of literature in China. As no one cares, the poets can write about anything they want under a pseudonym.”

This new sense of free expression comes with the awareness that it’s conditional, hence the use of pseudonyms. But the pseudonyms are easily unmasked. At their most effective, they are personas which express what Jiang seems to believe is poetry’s dominant tone, personal voice. Only a few poets in the collection dare be oblique — nearly all are very straightforward about their lives, emotions, and observations.

Jiang privileges this style of writing, and seems to be unaware of what else is out there. Chun Sue’s poem “Labia,” about her labia, is cited by Jiang in his introduction as a work that pushes boundaries. And in a Mainland context it does — well, a little. More difficult work, that pushes against ideas of the self, is absent from the anthology. The implication is that either because it pushes against “free expression,” or because “no one cares,” poets would rather not write that way.

But I don’t mean to harp on about this. Many of the poems are enjoyable (including Chun Sue’s poems). The real problem is that Jiang’s translations often sound similar, demonstrating the editor’s preference for a very particular personal voice. The title poem, by veteran poet Ouyang Yu, is more meditative than many of the others — but compare it with Ai Hao’s tongue-in-cheek “Toilet Love.”

ZERO DISTANCE

Human relationship
Never reaches zero distance.

Up close,
It's the standard thickness of a condom.

At their closest, there are two
Beings separated by a skin.

TOILET LOVE

Several times I saw
a man outside the toilet
discuss something
in all seriousness
with his girlfriend in it.
Later I learned
as there was no lamp in the toilet
his girlfriend felt scared.
I kind of found there was a sweetness
in their stinky love.

Why Ai Hao's poem is enjambed when Ouyang Yu's is end-stopped was a decision of the translator, and not the author. Yet the different tones each method suggests are strangely similar-sounding — why? It's no insult to say that the Chinese is more interesting, and more varied than the English, and Jiang even says as much in his introduction. He prefers literal translations because the words "will lose their vividness if I translate them into a native English word." Well, it's a strategy.

The problem is that literal translation is never too literal. It uses a frame to superimpose or foreground another reading over a linguistically limited translation. Jiang privileges a literal reading because, like Leung, he has framed his translation in a certain way. The irony is that he emphasizes the personal voices of the poets he's translating — voices that end up

speaking for the position he himself advocates.

So I want to re-emphasize the role editing plays in his translation, as well as in the translation of *Pei Pei*. When words are selected, they're selected to reflect whatever their translator — their editor — thinks should be foregrounded: image, sound, usually meaning. In the case of *Zero Distance*, the editor wants to emphasize a writing style he believes dominant. In the case of *Pei Pei the Monkey King*, the editor wants to push a political vision. Whether that comes through or not of course depends on any number of factors, not least of which is the aesthetic and political disposition of the reader.

But lest anyone think otherwise, I should say that I enjoyed both of these books. I'm immensely pleased they are being published, especially in bilingual editions. What I question are editors who claim their own readings to be primary readings, and who treat particular styles of poetry as exemplary. This isn't a translator-author issue so much as it's an editing issue. Editing poetry, just like editing a newspaper, reinforces the editor's language.