

NOTES & REVIEWS

Arrivals and Departures: Poems, Memoir, and Chronology, Wai-lim Yip

Hong Kong: Musical Stone Publishing, 2017. 378 pages

Reviewed by Matt Turner

The poet, translator, and theorist Wai-lim Yip was born in 1937 in southern China. When he was a child, his family fled Japanese imperialism to Hong Kong, and Yip himself later ended up in Taiwan — which, in the 1950s, was embarking on experiments in democratic governance and society unlike those happening in communist China. As a young man he affiliated himself with writers in Taiwan and Hong Kong who were attempting to understand China's cultural past as well as its new directions in democratic governance and language. This required engaging more than traditional Chinese learning. They looked to their immediate forebears — the generation that included modernists Lu Xun, She Zhecun and Bing Xin — as well as to the European litterateurs like Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Eventually, they discovered Pound and Williams. These cross-currents of Chinese poetics, European symbolism, and American high modernism were decisive in shaping Yip.

Arrivals and Departures: Poems, Memoir, and Chronology is a major selection of Yip's English-language poetry spanning much of his life — poetry that is a refreshingly uncomfortable hybrid of dense French symbolism with a more laconic voice, the affected kind of verse Americans might expect when reading traditional Chinese verse in translation. The volume also includes a memoir of his experiences growing up outside of Mainland China, and as a Chinese poet studying and working in the United States. This serves to illustrate Yip's decision to write in English — a decision informed by his desire to better voice himself to an American audience, as well as part and parcel of a poetics project that is both Chinese and international, traditional as well as modern.

The “chronology” or timeline of the book is a clarification of Yip's life: when and where exactly did he get his first teaching job, what was the name of the magazine he published, how he ended up in the United States (for doctoral studies) and other questions of that nature. After the generous selection of poetry (more than half of the book) and an at times abstract memoir, the chronology gives the reader concrete details to fill in the gaps. This is necessary: it is easy to get lost in the details of his poetics as well as the images his poetry creates.

One sees how Yip's work and life are in many ways inseparable, as a person who reimagined a tradition through foreign modernities as well as a foreign language. Like many of his

contemporaries in Taiwan, Yip received a thorough education in the Chinese classics, and an introduction to literary works of the Western world — “Western” being shorthand in the Sinosphere for pretty much anything deriving from European heritage — which he explored as an adult. And Yip has internalized these contrasting modalities.

For Yip appears to be skeptical that any single tradition or practice can continue without deliberate effort, and that it can exist without other traditions continuing to inform it. This skepticism was born by his own experiences as a war refugee at a time when both established and new political systems vied for legitimacy, and the question of Chinese culture was central to any such claims. Yip sees China’s continuing struggle for global representation as still a question of culture, and ultimately tied to its legacy in letters.

“[W]hat is at stake here is not a question of *inclusion*... but also a question of *representation*. Simply put, it is a question of whether the indigenous aesthetic horizon is allowed to represent itself *as it is* and *not as it is framed* within the hermeneutical habits and the poetic economy of the West.” (318)

If China and its culture (conceived as a tradition in letters or, more specifically, poetry) are to represent themselves to the world, then it needs to be able to speak on behalf of itself, and not simply in response to Western claims about China. As such, Chinese culture here is seen as a matter of aesthetics first. The claim — a claim that is not unique to Yip’s thought, and can be seen in many other Chinese thinkers, going all the way back to Confucius — is that the culture is an act of artifice to be shaped rather than received. The “aesthetic horizon” is an imagining of what is possible in the future, i.e: poetry gives, through its form, a model of what can and cannot be written or thought. That the “poetic economy of the West” has distinct habits which have not accommodated this is in contrast to Western modernism, which Yip believes is more pliable, and international.

But how exactly does this aesthetic horizon represent itself? For Yip, by superimposing an understanding of the Chinese language over what are considered Western modernist techniques. The Chinese tradition from the early shamanic songs all the way to the present day is framed by poets and the state alike as a tradition of the creation and control of language. In contrast to his contemporary François Cheng, the French structuralist who theorized that Chinese poetry was more or less symbolic of (Daoist) cosmic orders, leaving real-world relations unaffected, Yip sees verbalization as a decisive factor in poetry. Language performs actions in the world; it is decisive in shaping human relationships. And here he

borrowed from Ezra Pound, who theorized that the Chinese language, when properly used, was a demonstration of Confucian social values — a stance not far from Confucius, who saw the function of naming as giving correct proportion to human interactions. Incorrect naming would result in an inability to perform concrete tasks.

So it will not be surprising that Yip is not interested in the stereotypically Chinese features of poetry: moons, drinking, gauze curtains and so on. By incorporating English into his poetics, the “indigenous” is given a different, artificial voice. The slippery language of his poetry demonstrates that modernist techniques of verbal layering and oblique reference alongside the traditional Chinese techniques of figurative distance and subjective alienation are nearly the same techniques, but yield surprising effects. From “Beijing: August”:

Sky-reaching tombstones, The Transnational Commerce
Shadows over shadows over shadows of ghosts
Closes in and tightens in rings
A thousand, ten thousand pounds of memory
...
A young poet crippled by reality
Is about to speak only to
Find his throat
Stuffed with balls and balls
Of crumpled paper written all over with his poems (140-141)

The poet Yip writes of has his voice “blocked” by drafts of writing that are no doubt weighed down by “ten thousand pounds of memory” — cultural baggage. Although he is in Beijing, the cultural capital of Mainland China, modernity in the form of trans-national finance “shadows” him to the point that he is “crippled by reality.” But the poem is not mere commentary, because it describes the poet’s writing: his writing demonstrates an aesthetic horizon alongside larger facts of existence, like the late summer of the title. Through Yip’s poem, the imagined poet’s writings reach readers. And as Yip is writing the poem in English, the character of the Chinese poet ends up writing a trans-lingual poem. Together — the poet in the poem, Yip’s presentation of the poet in his English-language poem, the imagined trans-lingual poem and its community of readers — a poem is written.

Of And, Keith Waldrop.

Cornwall: Guillemot Press, 2018. unpaginated

Reviewed by Matt Turner

A small press from the quiet seaside area of Cornwall, England, has published an elegant, unobtrusive chapbook — a pamphlet, really, containing only 13 pages of poetry — bound by abstract, elliptical art from Tony Martin, enclosing poetry by Keith Waldrop — in my opinion one of the signal figures in American poetry for the last, well, fifty years, though “signal” isn’t quite the right word, since a signal acts as a beacon whereas Waldrop’s poetry is often quiet, anachronistic, elliptical, unobtrusive. In a word, contemplative.

The poems, largely without punctuation and capitalization, shimmer on the surface of the page, and their beacon glint misdirects the reader (I say misdirects instead of leads because the poems do not form narratives as much as they almost imperceptibly dislodge expectations). Stanzas, if they can be called that, retain little formal regularity, often breaking over several verses; verses break between words, sometimes; few verses are end-stopped, and most do not stand alone as conventional semantic units. But that’s not to say that there’s no sense to be made, or that sense need be created.

One of Waldrop’s themes, aging, was previously explored in his book *Transcendental Studies*, paired with notions of animateness, what it means to be alive.

Things age and, when old
enough, no longer able to resist,
become inanimate. Unable to stay
free of life.

(“Plurality of Worlds,” 95)

And in “Before Leaving,” in *Of And*, Waldrop continues:

if I sit in the dark I
remember or

sitting darkly
forget

there, my

Soul, among local
motions

*

above-mentioned
sky, high
ceiling

scrim

nose
visible be-
yond bonnet

Two views in “Before Leaving”: one of contemplation, where the “Soul” is subject to both outward perception and memory; the other, maybe, the view of a baby in a carriage. Presumably the speaker in the poem is objectifying himself, “unable to stay free of life” and so detaching himself from it. But it’s difficult to say exactly *where* the speaker is — as he puts it in “By Cold Starlight,” “I decline my soul in / writing.”

This kind of self-reflexivity makes it difficult to summarize or point to positive tendencies. Yet that’s what I mean by a signal beacon of indirection. There aren’t many writers — poets or otherwise — who write with this degree of subtlety, where meaning is pressed through form as well as semantic units. For the stanza-verse structure of the poems does not so much open the poems up to multiple meanings (the way many experimental poems do) as much as it deflates meaning, unmooring it from the things it refers to. Nevertheless a strong sensibility and even urgency is present in the poems. But this calls into question what we mean when we talk about obscurity or quietness or subtlety, as these are present in all senses.

A CONVULSIVE BEAUTY

The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire

Bilingual Edition, Translated by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman

Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2017. 962 pages.

Reviewed by John Olson

There is no evident way to speak of this book. It's extraordinary. Extraordinary in its strengths and complications, extraordinary in its depths and invocations. Open it at any point and sparks of sacred fire fly across the page. One is in the realm of ghosts and shadows. There are fiery rages and volcanic epiphanies, voodoo enchantments and torrents of words tied into knots of radiant energy. There are ferocious ragouts of hot chili and squid, the fragrances of hibiscus and frangipani, the sting of the plantation whip.

This is a book that teems. Swarms, pullulates, boils. The glands under the mantle of a cephalopod swarming with luminous bacteria send a glow into the ocean water of unparalleled beauty, and is the kind of image I need to describe the phenomenality of this work; the effects of its verbal conjurations confer - and are the product of - the phantasmagoric marvels of surrealism, but the rawness and brutal candor of its experiences and observations are, in fact, quite real. The beating heart at the core of this book is an actuality, a rhythmic muscle circulating tremors of beauty and passion. And it is precisely that combination of the marvelous correlated with living, breathing actualities that so distinguishes the work in this book.

In his meditations on the material world, *Earth and Reveries of Repose: an Essay on Images of Interiority*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard observed that profusion and turmoil are parallel occurrences, each symptomatic of struggle, each emblematic of a powerful life energy: "Notice in the first place," he writes,

...that a static disorder is imagined as an agitated whole: the stars are so numerous that they appear, in the beautiful summer nights, to swarm. *Multiplicity is agitation*. There does not exist, in all of literature, a single immobile chaos. At the most one finds, as with Huysmans, an immobilized chaos, a petrified chaos...But here is the reciprocal paradox. Just look - or imagine - a multitude of bodies going in all directions so that one must attribute to them a number that surpasses reality: *agitation is multiplicity*.

This formula is pertinent to Césaire; from beginning to end his poetry teems with volatile, white-hot intensities, a continuous pullulation of untethered, fecund transmutations engendering and perplexing one another in what André Breton referred to in *L'Amour fou* as a “fixed explosion:” “convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosion, magic-circumstantial or it will not be.” Images crowd together in a furious surge of animus and incantation, mutating, tumbling, convulsing, all of it engendered by huge emotion, not a single emotion, but thousands of hungry, contradictory, entangled emotions. There are rages, and there are raptures; there is resignation and defiance, sometimes fused together in a non-dualistic dynamic of transcendent symbiosis; great sympathies and horrendous cruelties, the “docility of ticks” and “hearts of iron.” Take, for example, these lines from *And The Dogs Were Silent*, a book-length, dialectically structured poem of antiphonal voices lamenting and lambasting the barbarities of colonization:

a rumble of chains of carcans rises from the sea...
a gurgling of the drowned from the green belly of the sea...a crackling
of fire a whip cracking, screams of the murdered...
...the sea is burning
or it is the tow of my blood that is burning
Oh the scream...always the scream bursting from the mornes...and
the drums rutting and wind swells vainly with the tender odor
of the musty ravine
with breadfruit trees with sugar mills with bagasse harassed by fruit flies...
Earth my mother I have understood your cloak and dagger language

One is reminded of Rimbaud and the fantastic deliriums of “The Drunken Boat” in a dizzying, psychically liberating leave-taking of industrialization, capitalism and the oppressions of a culture obsessed with scientific rationalism. There, too, in the violent splendor of the imagery are obvious echoes of Lautreamont and *The Songs of Maldoror*.

All of which is quite deliberate, and no small irony. Césaire, a black man living in Paris in the 30s of the 20th century where he attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure and turned to poetry for release and therapy after the exhausting, intellectual cramming required of the students. Two key developments occurred in these formative years: he became hugely influenced by surrealism and met and became close, life-long friends with the Senegalese poet, cultural theorist and politician (the first President of Senegal) Leopold Sédar Senghor. Together, they would establish a literary and cultural movement called negritude, which

might be best described as an affirmation of Pan-African racial identity as a dynamic, oppositional force to the Euro-American values that had enslaved and degraded them. Negritude is a highly plastic and generative term emphasizing different values and different strategies at different times. In its early manifestations it was unabashedly Marxist and fiercely anti-colonial.

It makes total sense to me that surrealism would play a part in this. The irony that a European literary movement of the early twentieth-century might inspire an anti-colonial movement becomes significantly less ironic when you realize the fact that surrealism began as an oppositional alternative to scientific rationalism and provided means for psychic liberation and a medium by which to tap into the sources of the collective unconscious and alter the leaden realities of the mundane, workaday world through the divine madness of poetry and its athanor of alchemical transmutation.

Read anything by, or about, Aimé Césaire and you find the name Leo Frobenius pops up a lot. The name sounded familiar to me, and then I remembered that I first encountered his name reading Ezra Pound, who refers to him in *Guide to Kulchur* with admiration: “The value of Leo Frobenius to civilization is not for the rightness or wrongness of this opinion or that opinion but for the kind of thinking he does.”

That thinking went deep into the collective unconscious of culture, for which Frobenius used a term: Paideuma. “To escape a word or a set of words loaded up with dead association,” Pound observed, “Frobenius uses the term Paideuma for the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period.”

In his preface to *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art and Culture*, Léopold Sédar Senghor takes it further: his reading of Frobenius suggest something deeper, broader, more universal than a cultural substrate of mythic resonances. He identifies it as the “essence of life,” “that spiritual energy in the Other which causes emotion...It is this ‘possession’ of the ego by the Other and the reaction of the ego to the Other which explains the differences in style between different artists – and this is what interests us here – between different races...For every race possesses its own Paideuma, that is its own peculiar capacity for and manner of being moved: of being ‘possessed’...the artist, whether sculptor, dancer, or poet, is not content to relive the Other; he recreates it in order the better to live it, and make it live. He recreates it by rhythm and thus makes of it a higher, truer reality, one that is more real than the factual reality.”

In his monograph on the work of Aimé Césaire, *Modernism & Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*, A. James Arnold (who is also a cotranslator, with Clayton Eshleman, of this collection), sees the influence of Frobenius on Senghor and Césaire in their formation of the negritude movement as a conjoining dynamic, “a link between negritude and surrealism.” “Surrealism,” he writes, “was a necessary steppingstone for Césaire between the first exploratory efforts to define negritude in prewar Paris and the resolute commitment, artistic and political, to destroy the edifice of colonialism after the war.”

In “At the Locks of the Void: Cotranslating Aimé Césaire,” from a collection of essays titled *Companion Spider*, Eshleman elaborates further on Césaire’s singular ability to combine the marvelous and strange with an unflinching, down-to-earth social realism. As someone who has been long influenced by the psychic liberation and phantasmagoria that is surrealism, but frustrated by an equal compulsion to bring the real world into the mix, I find this of great interest.

How did he do it?

Césaire, Eshleman writes, “commits himself to a sacred, whirling, primordial paradise of language, open to his subconscious depths and destructive of ‘the reality principle,’ or as he himself puts it, ‘the vitelline membrane that separates me from myself.’ On the other hand, his quest for authenticity will also include confronting the colonial brutality in his own overpopulated and defeated Martinique...” “This is a vision of Eden,” Eshleman continues,

...that also includes its night side, a dyad that is incredibly difficult to maintain, because a vision of paradisaical wholeness and existent human suffering in the present negate each other. A significant part of the energy in Césaire’s language is generated by his attempt to transform the language of the slave masters of yesterday and the colonial administrators of his own day into a kind of *surfrançais*, as in *surreal*, a supercharged French that in its own fashion is as transformational as surrealism attempted to be of bourgeois, patriarchal, French mentality.

The collection is divided into eight sections, each section representing a previously published book: The original 1939 *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, *The Miraculous Weapons*, *Solar Throat Slashed*, *Lost Body*, *Ferraments*, *i, laminaria*, *Noria*, and *Like a Misunderstanding*

of Salvation. It also includes ample notes on the poems, a glossary (Césaire loves seeding his poetry with the names of plants, figures from world history, biblical and religious references, neologisms, deities and phenomena unique to African, Martinican or Caribbean mythology), a chronology (Césaire lived a long, full life), an introduction by A. James Arnold, and essays introducing each section.

In addition to his work as a poet, Césaire led a vigorous and important life in politics. In 1945, he was elected mayor of Fort-de-France, during which time he co-sponsored a law that transformed France's Old Colonies (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, and Réunion) into overseas *départements*. Later, as a member of the Communist Party, Césaire was elected deputy for the first district of Martinique to the Constituent Assembly in France.

I remember being rather stunned to discover that Césaire was still alive when, circa 2005, there was a news story on Le Journal de France2, a French cable station we'd begun watching, about Césaire's refusal to receive Nicolas Sarkozy whose government had recently passed a law that called for the recognition of the positive aspects of colonialism. I took delight in this, mainly because I saw Sarkozy in the same light as Clinton, Bush, and Obama, predatory capitalists pushing a scheme of neoliberal economics that seemed taken out of a playbook written by Ayn Rand, brutal "austerity" measures that eviscerated Greece, created horrendous income inequalities globally and destroyed the middle-class in the United States. I continue to hold it responsible for a litany of many other social ills, including depression, loneliness, eating disorders, crushed labor unions, deregulation, privatization, massive tax cuts for the rich and an opioid addiction crisis. I felt peculiarly represented by the old man and poet in Martinique.

I also find it amazing that anyone can write poetry and lead a high profile political life at the same time. And why might that be, I ask myself. Do poetry and politics conflict? Well, yes, they do. But that would require a whole other essay.

An immersion in Aimé Césaire can have startling consequences. Tropical shadows bejeweled with hallucination. The liquid moonlight of surrealism. Mad invention. The liberating energy of a spider singing karaoke in a Tokyo bar. Each word comes out like a juicy cyst, intricate mineral skeletons tapdancing on a numb arm. Cymbals crashed together. A hidden blue-green waterfall behind the eyes.

A washrag draped over a kitchen faucet.

The mind finds quick release in surrealism. Why is that? Why does surrealism continue to work its magic after all these years? And so many wars.

It's like getting slapped by a sonnet, pulled into life by a powerful shaman splicing images alloyed with rage and frustration.

You can sing your head off with an electric guitar like Buddy Guy and almost obtain the same result, but poetry doesn't leave you with ringing in your ears, or a hangover.

Some energies die instantly if you harness them. Each molecule is a world. The palm of a hand can be soft as a mushroom. And the next instant make a fist and punch a hole in the wall.

Poems are extraordinary messages from outer space, torrents of words flashing in spurts of erotic energy in a Singapore discotheque.

There's always something creepy about too much harmony.

You need dissonance. Some poetry is very careful the way it steps around on the page. Césaire isn't like that. Not at all.

It's the opposite: fixed explosion. A continual combustion. The rain of ash empearled with tiny fires. Hummingbirds rocketing out of a blind man's rancor. Blast furnaces on onionskin paper. Thoughts penetrating as X-rays. The glow of bones on a black background. The feeling of sand trickling through the fingers on a Martinique beach.

Some women look great with tattoos. Others not so much. Why is that?

The world is the movie of everything that is. The flowers of a hibiscus used to clean somebody's shoes.

A laundry basket vibrating on the top of a washing machine as it goes into spin cycle.

If words could burn this book would burn down.

TRIPLE TONGUE COCOON IN TUBE SAUCE

Words on Edge, poetry by Michael Leong

New York: Black Square Editions, 2018.

Reviewed by John Olson

Can you feel it? There's something out there. It could be anything. It could be an obelisk, a cosmic blooper, an amalgam of pillow ticking and infinite space. It could be nothing at all. But it doesn't feel that way. Whatever it is, it feels huge. It feels like the sublime, like the shine of the ineffable. Which probably doesn't shine. Because it's ineffable, and ineffability eludes all category, no matter how many words I throw at it. It stays ineffable. Incommunicable

This is the kind of mess that words get us into. They lure us into communicability, and then drop us. Flat.

They lead us to an edge and dare us to leap. "Writing," observed Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*, "is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence, and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, and it is intimidating."

The book is called (aptly) *Words on Edge*, and I'm intimidated. Michael Leong's poetry is exquisite. We say something is exquisite when it is alluring and elegant, but also when it is razor-fine, when it has an edge, and that edge might be used to slice open a section of air and pull something out of it that hadn't existed before, something that we did not know existed, something that existed outside of language and was conjured into being by an unorthodox employment of that very same language. This is called invention, and can lead to great and wonderful things, what André Breton would call the marvelous. "Let us not mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful," he proclaimed famously in the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, "anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful."

Words on Edge is chock-a-block with keen, subtly elaborated lines that combine a euphoric semiotic arc - signifiers liberated from referential content - with an intellectual aura. Lines like "...the explosion of the mind / into a cryptic lace of radiant thinking," or "how a descending tone / implied the mysterious solace of chiffon."

A better example might be the poem dated "April 13, 2013," which is part of a sequence

titled “Fruits and Flowers and Animals and Seas and Lands Do Open” that grew out of the 2013 National Poetry Month initiative sponsored by the *Found Poetry Review*. Here is how Leong describes the project in the appendix:

Entitled “Pulitzer Remix,” this online and ephemeral project entailed eighty-five poets posting new poems every day based on the language of the eighty-five books which have won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. After volunteering to participate, I was assigned Booth Tarkington’s *Alice Adams* (1921), a comedic novel of manners set in the Midwest. All of the words in this thirty-part long poem, with no exception, were derived from Tarkington’s text, and all of the thirty sections of this poem were composed daily throughout the thirty days of April. This is, in essence, a document of my life as I lived it in April 2013 through the obsessive reading, rereading, and remixing of a single book, an experiment of what happens when a life makes poetry, at least the writing of it, a priority of thirty continuous days despite all else.

I like the phrase “despite all else.” I know what that means. I think anyone that devoted to the writing of poetry knows what “all else” is all about. Jobs, chores, kids, noise, intrusions, etc. Ah, world, go away! And take your tedium with you.

Rock musicians need garages to practice. Concert pianists need fingers. Tuba players need a large lung capacity. Dancers need to maintain high energy levels, strong bones, and flexible joints. Poets need solitude. Leading a normal life as a poet can be a son-of-a-bitch.

It also helps to have a language lying around.

Leong’s commitment to the work of converting Booth Tarkington’s text to distillates of weldable alloy has resulted in a work that is characterized by a haunting, oneiric beauty. He leads us well outside the parameters of socialized discourse and presents us with (to quote Barthes again) “a Pandora’s box from which fly out all the potentialities of language.” Here is “April 13, 2013” in full:

The earth was swallowing our words,
stamping out our solemn breath
with its footsteps.

Overhead, a Chinese silhouette
appeared in God's
abandoned factory.

A new generation
continued an endless divination,
which, they said,
could make presentable
the black bones of the absolute.

Going to the movies,
we sometimes discover the rarest woodcut.

I'll go. I thought you'd forgotten.

It was a protracted promise, a figure of speech.

The evening had already begun
deteriorating into Sunday.

Leong likes using “found language.” Found language can be anything, overheard conversation, social media, snippets of code, movie dialogue, essays, articles, stories, ad copy, instruction manuals, science projects, quite literally anything. It's all about collage, fusing, mingling, combining. The more disparate the sources, so much the better. But what about originality? If originality is an issue then language is the wrong medium for you. The entire language is a collage. “Good morning” is plagiarism.

T.S. Eliot, who famously proclaimed “good poets borrow, great poets steal,” said something pertinent in his essay “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality... It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.”

What happens is catalysis. According to Eliot's description:

When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more completely separate in in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

Is the chemistry here correct? I don't know. I'm not a chemist, and I don't have any platinum or sulfuric acid lying around (thank goodness). I can pour some baking soda and vinegar in the bathtub drain and show you what happens (it's actually pretty cool, the baking soda come bubbling out in a jubilant fizz), but I'm not sure I can derive an appropriate metaphor from that.

What Eliot is getting at here with all this fancy chemistry is the idea that a poet's mind is a "receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." In alchemy, that receptacle was called a "philosophical egg," or (in Latin) an "*ovum philosophicum*." The concoctions the alchemists were looking for was gold, which was a metaphor for spiritual transformation. Not everybody who collages scraps of found text may be looking for spiritual transformation, but any time disparate elements are brought together in a literary or artistic medium some very powerful magic takes place. "In Alan Yentob's 1975 documentary *Cracked Actor*, David Bowie describes how he used Burroughs's cut-up technique to "ignite the imagination," and in an interview from 2008, Bowie further elaborates "I use it for igniting anything that may be in my imagination...You write down a paragraph or two describing several different subjects, creating a kind of 'story ingredients' list, I suppose, and then cut the sentences into four or five word sections; mix 'em up and reconnect them... You can get some pretty interesting idea combinations like this...You can use them as is or, if you have a craven need to not lose control, bounce off these ideas and write whole new sections."

Leong takes this principle to an extreme in a major section of the book titled "The Philosophy of Decomposition / Recomposition as Explanation: A Poe and Stein Mash-Up," in which

Leong brings together texts primarily from Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” and Stein’s “Composition as Explanation.” The melding is virtually seamless. It flows together nicely. I’m guessing that Leong put a lot more work into this apart from just bringing the texts together; the overall effect works as a single voice. Stein’s energy and exuberant prolixity somehow manages to flow with Poe’s considerable density and rhetorical elegance. Here is a sample paragraph:

I now have to rapidly combine all that has been previously narrated into a concentrated solution – from the first act to the ending description – before the poem soon demands a moral and turns into prose. In a fantastic tone of the most profound seriousness, it spoke to me of a certain beast remaining in the syllable that was forming an elaborate window within the general arrangement, that was inventing a different time-sense, that was throwing open the very being of the inevitable.

I sense a little more Poe in this sample than Stein, but the fluidity of the piece belies any obvious engineering; the line “In a fantastic tone of the most profound seriousness” contains both a feeling of creative excitement and a tinge of nineteenth-century loftiness of purpose. It’s significant, as well, that both texts are concerned with the philosophy of composition. This is a dynamic that goes much deeper than technique, it takes a phenomenological approach and explores how writing affects us on a perceptual and ontological level.

Leong uses other source material in this collection to produce some remarkable results, such as “Menu in Chinglish,” dedicated to poet John Yau. As Leong describes its genesis in the appendix, “This poem was inspired by the phrase ‘monolithic tree mushroom stem squid’ which occurs in the New York Times article ‘Shanghai Is Trying to Untangle the Mangled English of Chinglish (May 2, 2010).’” I will leave you with the poem in full; you can order anything you want:

monolithic tree mushroom stem squid
braised rainbow mangrove maw
double pronged rhizome berry pig sniper
shepherd’s sponge spigot
beef cheek ricochet
preserved duck eggplant implosion
pungent heliotrope of oyster pouch

salted forehead belly blossom
chicken web monad broth
silver fin swimming membrane flavor
retinal eel matrix
bamboo vertigo
triple tongue cocoon in tube sauce
gluteal libidinal shrimps