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## “When China Meets China”: Sinéad Morrissey’s Figurations of the Orient, or the Function of Alterity in Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur

### ABSTRACT

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This article attempts to investigate the potential resonances between Paul Ricoeur’s and Julia Kristeva’s theories of otherness as applied to the study of poetry by the Northern-Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey. In all of her five poetry books she explores various forms of otherness and attempts to sketch them in verse. She confronts alterity in many ways, approaching such subjects as the relationship with the body and children, encounters with foreigners, and coming to terms with what is foreign within us. This article engages primarily with her experiences of China, which she recorded in the long poem “China” from her third collection, *The State of Prisons* (2005). Firstly, this article tackles the question of the body, which is interpreted on the basis of Morrissey’s “post-mortem” poems. Their reading prepares the ground for further explorations of otherness, which Morrissey locates at the very heart of human subjectivity. In this way, she also manages to establish a poetic framework for an ethical consideration of otherness. By investigating the working of the human psyche, Morrissey seems to go along the lines of Kristeva and Ricoeur, who claim that otherness is inextricably linked with the formation of human subjectivity. Taking a cue from their philosophical enquiries, the article also attempts to establish where Kristeva’s and Ricoeur’s philosophies overlap.

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**ABSTRACT**

If we were not all translators, if we did not unceasingly lay bare the foreignness of our inner lives . . . would we have a psychic life at all, would we be living beings? (Kristeva, "The Love of Another Language" 254)

Only a discourse other than itself, I will say . . . is suited to the metacategory of otherness, under penalty of otherness suppressing itself in becoming the same as itself. (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 356)

117

The Ming Dynasty, which ruled China in the years 1368–1644, fostered a spirit of reverence for all sorts of art, but among the various components of its rich legacy there is one special element which has been preserved for centuries within the English language—"china." Phonetically synonymous with the capitalized "China," the lower-case name for porcelain, which was eagerly imported and circulated by European art dealers, quickly became a recognized token of wealth and prosperity. After the Dutch captured Portuguese ships which were carrying the brittle cargo, a new fashion or even craze for Chinese ceramics caught on in the continental states, which were aflame with a new culture of curiosity. Commodification of the Orient, uncannily preserved in the gradual shift from the upper-case proper name "China" (not a native name, by the way) to the regular noun "china," is a process that has continued throughout the centuries, permeating deep into the collector's mind-set formed by the modern Western material culture. The apex of china-trade was reached in the eighteenth century, when European markets were flooded with earthenware that was decorated with Western motifs, satisfying the growing demand for properly Christian imagery. Soon, European factories were to change the tide by introducing local versions of mass-produced china. More recently, in 2011, one Chinese vase from the collection of Dai Run Zhai, a New York resident since 1950, was sold at a Sotheby's auction for £11 million to an anonymous telephone bidder, confirming the unique status of such ceramics in today's art market. Thus, even a brief sketch of the history of china can serve as a testimony to the dialectic between the Orient and the Occident, which has become the crux of later post-colonial criticism. The analysis of this dialectic, as has been lucidly shown by the likes of Edward Said, speaks volumes about the Western epistemological framework and surprisingly little about the real China, whose products we can admire in seventeenth-century still life paintings and in many royal collections. Chinese ceramics may be interpreted as yet another mirror in which modern European culture looks at itself and tenses its cognitive muscles.

When china rose to fame, inciting frenzy among the clientele of the Dutch East India Company's services, another important step was made in philosophy, which was duly reflected in the arts. The arrival of Descartes' theory of the subject, the cornerstone of modern philosophy, not only initiated an abstract meditation on the limits of our cognition, but also harmonized with the vigorous spirit of the natural sciences, which were attempting to emancipate themselves from the power of the church. The voice of *prima philosophia* can also be heard in the emerging discourse of anatomy, which was vividly portrayed by the Dutch painters throughout the seventeenth century. The opening of bodies, which was also done publicly as part of the popular *theatrum anatomicum*, has a distinct air of Descartes' search for certainty. Testing the physical boundaries and probing such basic parameters as thickness, resistance and substantiality of various body parts, constitutes a vivisection that runs parallel to the dissection of our mental capacities. Although the two run alongside the rift of dualism, which does not allow the body to conveniently converge with the soul, they share the same direction since their goal is to establish the proper image of a human being. This paradigm of self-confirmation is a marked trait in the seventeenth-century culture of introspection and its important offshoot—projection. Anxiety entailed in explorations of the self, be it a post-mortem discovery of the body or a philosophical investigation of subjectivity, is often approached from a psychoanalytical perspective. Freud has unmasked the production of such images as projected fantasies, which contain, just like a vase, the by-products of Cartesian "uncertainty." This process may be discussed both in synchronic and diachronic terms. On the one hand, it is a crystallization of an idealized image that masks our fear of disintegration and secures the structural stability of consciousness. On the other, however, we are dealing here with the historical formation of a relationship with that which is distant and, through its otherness, reminds us of how brittle we are.

Although the above two topics may initially seem far-off, I am yoking them together in order to form a potentially insightful dialectical image. The seventeenth century was a period when two powerful discoveries coincided, jointly contributing to the emergence of a mechanism that is still discernible and operative in Western civilization. Firstly, geographical discoveries opened up channels through which cultural otherness seeped inside the European mind. Secondly, the development of modern reflection along the lines of dualism introduced two more spheres where otherness was discovered: the human mind, haunted by the spectre of doubt, and the human body revealing its own incongruity. Looming over the two was of course the question of morality. The intellectual climate of the period did not allow a single strategy to prevail over the flux of new stimuli.

Therefore, the ensuing chaos guaranteed that the above-mentioned types of otherness floated freely and influenced each other before being appropriated by specialists in their narrow fields. The images offered for consideration at the outset of this article can thus serve here as metaphorical cues. Incidentally, however, Paul Ricoeur later reformulated them in philosophical terms in his seminal work *Oneself as Another*. This book tackles the question of subjectivity and the various facets of “passivity,” which are structurally inherent in human consciousness. In the tenth study Ricoeur provides a convenient summary of his investigations in this area:

First, there is the passivity represented by the experience of one’s own body—or better, as we shall say later, of the *flesh*—as the mediator between the self and a world which is itself taken in accordance with its variable degrees of practicability and so of foreignness. Next, we find the passivity implied by the relation of the self to the *foreign*, in the precise sense of the other (than) self, and so the otherness inherent in the relation of intersubjectivity. Finally, we have the most deeply hidden passivity, that of the relation of the self to itself, which is *conscience* in the sense of *Gewissen* rather than of *Bewusst*. (318; emphasis in the original)

The map sketched by Ricoeur serves here not only as a phenomenological guide to the three fundamental manifestations of otherness, but can also be appropriated to act as a companion to the poetry of Sinéad Morrissey, a Northern-Irish poet born in 1972. She has already earned the reputation of a writer who not only approaches a wide range of subjects, but also employs diverse and innovative forms, combining a strong ethical approach with a verbal skilfulness which can greatly surprise the reader. Moreover, as Annamay McKernan rightly observed, “her poems have been likened to journeys, not just from place to place but on a more spiritual level,” by virtue of which “she has been able to offer ‘fresh perspectives’ to the Northern Irish audience” (Morrissey, “Fast Movers”).

Most notably, however, Morrissey’s works touch upon all three above-mentioned aspects of otherness, offering unique poetical insight into human subjectivity. Thus, the aim of this article is to show how she picks up on the topic of the body in her “post-mortem poems,” to suggest what kind of reflection her travel poems offer in terms of confronting otherness, as well as to draw ethical conclusions from the attitude she assumes towards those incarnations of “the other.” Since her geographical explorations of alterity are focused on China, as in the long poem “China,” it is the Middle Kingdom that will be of chief interest here. Moreover, I shall attempt to tackle the question of otherness from the perspective of another woman who has paid a significant, intellectual visit to this country—Julia Kristeva. Her discussion of the Chinese writing system and social structures

in *About Chinese Women* remains puzzling and problematic, just as her stance on Maoism. However, her concept of writer-as-foreigner remains very fruitful. These themes resonate in many respects with Ricoeur's remarks on the nature of translation and the task of the translator. This, in turn, brings us back to the issue of a foreignness that necessarily resides within us all and can serve as the foundation of a broader ethical project.

In the poem "Bottom Drawer" from the cycle "Mercury," Sinéad Morrissey transforms the eponymous drawer into a vessel "filled with all her life: / . . . A testimony to . . . every moment when the light gave shape / To that precise outline of who she was" (*There was Fire in Vancouver* 33). "Intricate as a snowflake, intact as childhood," the material container emerges from this meditation as a "Chinese vase being painted in / By time, beautiful and brittle as a bone." This image metaphorically substitutes a bodily anxiety—the fear of losing one's boundaries and being emptied into nothingness—with an aestheticized object of foreign origin. Its geographical distancing becomes the yardstick with which it is possible to measure the repression resulting from the devastating self-knowledge regarding our transience. This function of "orientalization" would therefore strike an important note in the development of the body as an other, as has been suggested by Ricoeur.

Caspar Barlaeus, a seventeenth-century humanist and mayor of Amsterdam, made the following poetic remark with regard to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*: "Listener, learn yourself, and while you proceed through the individual [organs], believe that God lies hidden in even the smallest part" (qtd. in Schupbach 31). Curiously enough, the divine lesson on the composition of the body is delivered by way of dissecting the flesh of a criminal. It is another figure whose repression from society manifests itself through the devout and laborious opening of the "other" body in public. Its mutilation was meant to show that it was actually inhabited by the "Other"—God, or for that matter, the gaze of the spectators who fall into an anatomical reverie (Ziembra 141–46). The aim of this theatrical spectacle is Foucauldian "subjectification." Under the guise of attaining self-understanding, it installs the image of the body as another. Ricoeur interprets this phenomenon along the lines laid down by Edmund Husserl, arguing that prior to acquiring mastery over one's body one is forced "to make the flesh part of the world." In this way, "the otherness of others as foreign, other than me, seems to have to be, not only interconnected with the otherness of the flesh that I am, but held in its way to be prior to the reduction to ownness" (*Oneself as Another* 326). So, the *theatricum anatomicum* becomes a valid answer to the nagging question voiced by Ricoeur: "How am I to understand that my flesh is also a body?" (326). Husserl, we learn, does not provide us with a viable answer because

he considers the other as another me, whereas the key to solving this riddle lies in the reversal of this formula. Ricoeur's answer is that I am myself another through a component of otherness that is lodged in the very heart of my subjectivity. This aptly captures the meaning of the two poems in which Morrissey elaborates the theme of a post-mortem.

The poem "Post Mortem" from the collection *Between Here and There* seems to relate closely to the above claim already in the first line, as it declares: "We found ambition caked around *his* heart" (30; my emphasis). The juxtaposition of the first person plural with the third person singular establishes this paradigm. Interestingly though, Morrissey eagerly oversteps the traditional dualism. She locates discursive marks inside the body that is pried open with each subsequent line. "Both kidneys," we learn in the second stanza, "were filled with the by-product of not speaking." "Out of the throat," the voracious narrators continue, "we prised a throat stone— / . . . the stunning span of his vocabulary worn to a solid entity / by being understated." Is this to suggest that the victim's death was caused by "silencing"? "He had them fooled," the autopsy reveals. "They never guessed in all his airy silence / how tuned to the pulse of the world he was." Although muted, the other as a body—dissected during the "interpretation"—turns out to be a fully articulate being, whose voice had been muffled. The "doctor-reader" performing the post-mortem reports in the closing lines that the "overly gifted" deceased was in fact "burdened with experience, psychically aware." This diagnosis reveals a bodily self-consciousness whose "silence was the immovable object / the weight of all his talent solidified against." The last image suggests that the dead person examined in the poem was in fact a budding genius, who had been muffled and caged despite his synaesthetic, poetic sensibility. The discovery of a mute poem, or an unsung song, inside a corpse is a dazzling volte-face that Morrissey uses—as the poem says at the very end—"to prove what sense is." In this light, her ultimate aim would be to excavate what we have buried deep inside our bodies as part of the Cartesian revolution—the image of an otherness which stirs and thinks, but has too rarely been granted a voice of its own.

The second of her *autopsia post mortem* poems—"The Second Lesson of the Anatomists" from the book *The State of Prisons*—takes this subject even further. The anatomists are said to be "showing us how freakishly we split" (11). They evacuate from the feeble body one "wonder" after another: "lung-wonder held over the heart-wonder / and the heart-wonder bleeding" (11). Morrissey, however, counters the miraculous splitting with a broader, philosophical question: "Are all skins as effortlessly deceptive as this?" (11). At that point, the poem seems to "believe its skin," just as the anatomists have suggested, but it does not reveal the mechanism of

a wind-up divine toy. Instead, we are taken inside another story. Jumping from image to image, we find ourselves inside a “glass room” during an evening party. There is a womb-like, warm atmosphere (“darkness and a river / play mother and father”), which suggests security (11). However, the cosiness quickly breaks down as there suddenly occurs

this spillage

in the centre

from somewhere stranger and more extravagant  
which has drawn us all here. (11)

122

The dialectic seems clear at this point. On the one hand, there is a safe haven, where one can sip wine under “a light fixture being obedient unto itself” (11). On the other, however, there is an unknown leak, or an abrupt intrusion of something odd. The synthesis that follows suggests a breakdown of the traditional relationship between the inside and the outside: “I think of eggshells cracking open / from the inside” (11). The Cartesian “I think” hatches itself open and gives birth to a different reality—one in which “we have hallways to discover in one another like nerves” (11). What we find inside the body are other bodies, or passages from one to another and further on through “childhoods, and love affairs, and drownings, and faithfulness / by which language has occurred” (11). In these final lines Morrissey points toward a language that we discover when we answer to the call of the other. In order to communicate better—Morrissey seems to argue—our bodies need a “second lesson,” which greatly differs from the one given by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. It is a lesson about the otherness of the body and the fact that its worldly dimension precedes our own mastery of it. The opening onto the world, however, leads toward another dimension of discovery—the confrontation with foreignness, which makes possible not only language, but also literature and translation.

Sinéad Morrissey’s long poem “China” from *The State of Prisons* is a nine-part travelogue in verse, which was inspired by her 21-day-long visit to China. This work constitutes—as she put it herself in an interview with Mark Thwaite—“a document of that journey—nine windows on it if you like.” The train journey to six cities provided the inspiration to conjure nine diverse glimpses of China, “each window . . . written in a different form.” The sketchy form of the poem reflects the disjunctive experience of not being able to penetrate inside the fleeting exotic images. Thus, her method of composition also testifies to the ultimate inability to keep hold of otherness, emphasizing the defiance of the frames imposed by language. So, these poetic windows “are simultaneously windows, walls, and

mirrors.” Moreover, she recollects in the said interview that “I was being denied far more than I was being granted, but the glimpses were tantalising.” The “grant and deny” paradigm is a key concept explored in this poem. Morrissey offers a meditation on the boundaries of translating the foreign experience into a language that would avoid rendering the other as the same. “Trying to pin the experience down in language afterwards,” she recalls in the same conversation, “was almost as exciting as the journey itself.” The strategy she employs in the poem relies on the attempt to locate otherness not outside, beyond the window, but at home, in one’s own frame of language and mind.

The first part of “China” contains an open declaration that the China Morrissey is trying to describe perhaps does not really exist or rather it has not yet been properly invented. This is because the components have not been chosen in the right way for the experiment to succeed: “There is a country which does not exist and which must be shown. / Steady the ingredients” (*The State of Prisons* 22). The first ingredient that Morrissey uses to conjure China is her childhood. The second part of the poem begins with a transitory image of travelling through a tunnel of trees—perhaps through a kind of a “hallway” announced in “The Second Lesson of the Anatomists.” Indeed, we are taken back in time, as she is reminded of “my brother and I on the top / of an empty double-decker in Derbyshire” (22). To complete the dream-like recollection, there is an accompanying song—“In my head I was singing / *This is Happening This is Happening This is Happening*” (22)—whose meaning will become clearer only towards the end of the poem. The reverie is brought to an abrupt halt, according to the scenario outlined in the anatomy-poem, as the lyrical “I” is caught off guard and magically transformed. Like Alice in Wonderland, she grows and falls into a hole: “then I saw I was enormous / and in another kind of tunnel. That I was lost. That there was no going back” (22). It turns out that the first train tunnel, or hallway, leads to Yangtze, but only through the distant personal reminiscence which was essential to switch on the “flickering screen / Which is and is not a window” (23).

Such means of poetic transport, or *metaphors* to refer to the original Greek etymology of the word, rely on uncanny configurations of the familiar and the other. They facilitate shortcuts that allow jumping from one reality to another. Such means of travelling through the wormholes of our experience could be theoretically described as translations. Julia Kristeva discusses this dimension of literary creativity in an essay titled “The Love of Another Language,” where she praises Marcel Proust for making such connections with great skill and artfulness. She observes that “from these communicating vessels a strange speech emerges, foreign to itself, neither



from here nor there, a *monstrous intimacy*” (244; my emphasis). The alienated, diffuse kind of speech, I would claim, is poetry. As a translator of “his unveiled passions,” Kristeva continues, a poet revels in translating “the language of the sensory” (246). This completes the triangular itinerary of poetic navigation, whose vertices are: the subject, the other and the newly discovered otherness-in-myself, or myself-in-other. The movement of speech in search of the right word opens language to reveal before the poet its “true foreignness, more foreign than any already established idiom, that the writer hopes to formulate” (249). Such peregrinations turn the writer into an other, a foreigner and finally into a translator. Towards the end of this journey it thus becomes possible to approach alterity, because all figurations of mastery are shed, making space for an element of otherness to bloom within the writer.

The fifth part of “China” returns to the regular rhythm of “another station, another train, another city, another season” (24), albeit changing the pace of the narrative by considerably lengthening the line. It seems that Morrissey is trying different line lengths on for size, extending or contracting the poetic fingers with which she is attempting to feel the shape of China. The lines of the fifth poem wind down lazily, imitating the lulling tempo of a long-distance journey onboard a train. The steady pace blurs certain boundaries, as the “shunt and click of the carriages over the sidings” become indistinguishable from “the soporific tenderness of a language I do not recognise” (24). The mind plays tricks, mixing subject and object, jamming epistemological mechanisms:

... I see a boy and a woman  
lit up by the flare of a crop fire, but can no longer believe in them.  
Windows have turned into mirrors the length of the train.  
Hours pass, and there is only my white face, strained  
in its hopelessness, my failure to catch the day in my hands like a fish  
and have it always. (25)

The image that crops up in the mirror is the face of oneself seen as another, estranged and made foreign. The gestures of pulling the curtains back, found for example at the beginning of the next poem, number six, may be likened to nervous blinking. This reaction indicates the wish to shrug off the strangeness found at the heart of our precious self-image. In the book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva employs Freud’s category of the uncanny to show how the resistance to otherness ultimately guides us towards our own repressed insecurity. The revelation entailed in such moments of “hopelessness” stems from the fact that we are unable to give meaning to our own experience. The foreignness, which we have come to

understand as sensory novelty, ultimately reveals a “foreigner within us.” So, “when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—that improper facet of our impossible own and proper” (191; emphasis removed). Repressed material haunts the narrator in a myriad of skewed reflections, gnawing at her idealized self-image.

The intimate and symbolic images of the sixth part are delivered in regular and melodic quatrains. Among them we find the “semaphore of cranes // Gesticulating deftly to each other” and “a woman washing her waist-length hair” (25–26). Both evoke a need to get closer and come into contact with the alien reality. However, these are false invitations, as in the encounter with “a mother tugging a wayward child” who “pointed down its throat”—“I photographed it dumbly / Lost to what it meant” (26). Situations like these bring to our attention the untranslatable nature of encounters with the unknown, especially when economic alienation erects an impassable barrier. The protective lens of the camera is rendered powerless in the course of such meetings. Desolate and unable to bond with any real other, the narrator calmly coils back into herself, concluding that “I found myself re-caged / Staring through the filter / Of money’s privilege” (26). The almost material resistance manifests itself in the form of an obstacle that separates one from “the other.” This barrier resembles a prison in which all windows close before the eyes of a subject who sinks back into complacency. In a Lacanian detour, Rudi Visker pointedly remarks that this is yet another part of the mirror-stage, during which “the other is an obstacle that prevents it [subject] from reaching the unity that it aspires to.” As a result, it has to accept the fact that “identity will always bear the trace of an exteriority that it cannot fully interiorize” (Visker 433).

The seventh part of “China” continues to exploit the metaphor of a camera, referring to the popular belief that using it may turn people into ghosts. The lyrical persona admits to having caught “your watchful face” (27), implying through the use of the second person pronoun that it may be a direct address or at least an imagined one. Who participates in the conversation? It is possible to imagine a tourist talking to a local. Does this dialogue, however, assume reciprocity or is it just an internal debate held by someone who stands accused in front of his or her own tribunal, interrogated by one’s otherness? Kyoo Lee points out the strangeness of those encounters that do not benefit from the presence of a translating party. “The foreigner,” he concludes, is “the bringer of a dialogical scandal: the forever dumb . . . turn[ed] into a constant structural threat to the formal stability (mirror symmetry) of dialogue” (66). Indicating that the interpretations of silence may vary, he puts forward an important question: how to “read the silence of the other properly”? (67). A fair treatment of the silent other does not only boil down to the relationship with the

other as another person, with whom we may fail to communicate, but also with our own identity, because—as Visker remarks—“my ‘own’ness, what is proper to me, escapes me: I do not own it, it is not something for me or of me, it is rather something ‘about’ me” (438). So, the situation with the camera is indeed an awkward moment, because it does not finally touch upon one or another, but upon the relationship to the untranslatable and to the unbridgeable social gap.

Thus, as a question of translation, it can be read in terms of the methods employed to cope with the foreign and bring it under the rule of our language. The central issue is how to render otherness in a communicative manner while avoiding any unnecessary appropriations. This dilemma—an essentially writerly one—is what Kristeva and Morrissey seem to share with regard to their understanding of China. At the very beginning of her 1977 work *About Chinese Women*, Kristeva performatively reports a certain difficulty that Morrissey also seems to be anxious about. At the outset of the introductory chapter “Who is Speaking?” she records the experience of “Sitting here in front of the typewriter, trying to write about my experience of China . . .” (11). She is deeply aware that she has been caught up in the specific dialectics of “here” and “there.” Thus, she immediately rephrases her concern using the paradigm of “the same” and “the other,” observing that “the otherness of China is invisible if the man or woman who speaks here, in the West, does not position him/herself some place where our capitalist monotheistic fabric is shredding, crumbling, decaying” (13). In a sense, otherness can be approached only from the perspective of a subject who has put him- or herself—as Kristeva likes to say—“on trial,” or “in process.” A self-sufficient and stabilized subjectivity can know nothing of otherness, as it conveniently ignores its own unconscious. However, such a strategy freezes the subject in a tower of fixed identity and ossified national language. This could be the source of a psychosis, whose overcoming Kristeva identifies with the *Kulturarbeit*, the task of civilization (*Strangers to Ourselves* 189).

Extending the scope of the Chinese investigation, it should be recalled that in the 1970s the Tel Quel group took a special interest in Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Its members attempted to theoretically translate the Chinese revolution into a possible Western revolution in language—one that would especially accommodate the experience of alterity. In her work on Chinese women, Kristeva boldly states that the proper lesson we could learn from Mao is how to “introduce this breach (‘there are others’) into our universalist conceptions of man and history” (12). This naturally includes the experience of women, who have been the age-old victims of a monotheistic and patriarchal order, which is upheld by the current capitalist *status quo*. Taking inspiration from China, where Kristeva saw intact matriarchal structures,

she proposes to stage theatrical performances “that show and contain what divides each of us in ourselves” (Visker 439). This would also amount to the introduction of a commandment “not to reify the foreigner, not to petrify him as such, not to petrify us as such” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 192). Although *Tel Quel* was later heavily criticized for siding with Maoism, the aims of the French intellectual circle were not strictly political. Members of this group were not interested in a potential coup by way of which one political option would establish firm mastery over all others. On the contrary, taking a cue from Mao’s dictum that a revolution has to put a sword right through the heart of the symbolic, Kristeva argued that the reinvigoration of Western language should have its source in the repressed, maternal, pre-Oedipal, or “semiotic” sensibility that had been buried beneath the phallogocentric culture. She implies that the goal is to account for the otherness within us, which in many cases is synonymous with the feminine, or values associated with other repressed groups. After all, a better political future would be possible after overthrowing all limitations of rights, along the lines of a dictum that the “foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 192).

In her informative essay on Mao’s revolution and *Tel Quel*, Joan Brandt concludes that

Kristeva’s re-volte is designed to save us from this robotization of culture, and it attempts to do so not by merely pitting the revolutionary potential of the semiotic against the symbolic but by inscribing the symbolic into the notion of revolt as well and thus giving voice, perhaps more successfully than did *Revolution in Poetic Language*, to the contradictory, heterogeneous processes that lie within the most intimate reaches of the self. (35)

The task of the poet-cum-translator, the absolute foreigner, is to testify to the “highest contradiction” within subjectivity (Brandt 30). Morrissey incorporates many subtle images illustrating such experience in her poems and one particularly gentle image can be found in the eighth part of “China.” Reminiscing about once getting her finger burned after touching a heated cooker, she recollects her mother taking the finger to the cold tap, offering “an ironic remedy of extremes” (28). The contradictory sensations provoke an interesting conclusion that confirms the vitality of the contradictory states:

And it was oddly  
uplifting to be suspended  
there with your body peeled

back to the nerve all  
 over again in a matter  
 of seconds, so disarmingly

alive. (28)

Guided by this intimate, yet common childhood drama, Morrissey wonderfully prepares the ground for a similar experience of being washed by a crowd of people at a train station, “marooned / in the midst of them” (29). The otherness pressing forward on the narrator is described as a reverse of the gaze that previously revealed its impotence in establishing relationships: “time to stare back / at me the way I was staring / at them, an extravagance.” The excessiveness involved here is revealed several lines later, as the lyrical persona relates having been seized by an alien rhythm, a beating of another heart: “[I] saw myself / caught in the pulse of their striding” (30). This sudden splitting, a revelation of doubleness, stirred by the crowd, sends the narrator drowning and then allows her to resurface with a sense of having found hope, a chance for redemption:

my greenish skin hurled

under water and hammering *I am*  
*here you are real this*  
*is happening it is*  
*redeemable*—as though touching  
 them might be possible. (30)

The uncanny confrontation with the crowd triggers a relapse into a boundless, “underwater” state of subjectivity. The glimpse of that disorganized psyche is nevertheless redeeming, because—as Kristeva remarked about Freud’s psychoanalysis—it “brings us the courage to call ourselves disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners and even less so to hunt them down, but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 191–92). For a split second, this reverie sends the narrator back to the childhood song (“*This is Happening*”), which appeared in the second part of “China.” However, its re-emergence heralds no comforting or linearity. The lines are chopped and disjunctive, with enjambments dissecting the subject and putting it, as it were, “in process” or “on trial.” As a result, a new ethical knowledge emerges—a responsibility for the other, to put it in terms used by Emmanuel Levinas. He found similar gestures in works by Michel Leiris, emphasizing the importance of “that special moment when it [meaning] turns into something other than itself” (146). Sinéad Morrissey achieves

in this passage an important goal—by entrusting herself to language, she sinks in it in order to relinquish her mastery and control, opening herself up to otherness. In this way, she creates a rift where an ethical dimension is finally found. “To speak,” writes Levinas, “is to interrupt my existence as a subject and a master . . . I am simultaneously a subject and an object” (149).

The last, ninth, part of “China” provides a memorable image, which summarizes many of the above concerns, especially because it introduces *two* Chinas. It is worth quoting in full:

One day, China met China on the marketplace.  
 “How are you, China?” asked China, “we haven’t talked in so long.”  
 China answered: “The things we have to say to one another, laid end to  
 end, and side to side,  
 would connect the Great Wall with the Three Gorges Valley and stretch  
 nine miles up towards the sun.”  
 “It’s true,” replied China, “We have a lot to catch up on.” (30)

The split within China itself is pregnant with possible interpretations, facilitating several readings. First, it confronts the conventional, Western image of China with the real country in the East. Secondly, it introduces the concept of an internal splitting, or dualism, which needs to be mended through dialogue. Finally, however, it may be read as an instance of linguistic hospitality, which makes room for otherness to blossom within us. After encountering the barrier of untranslatability—of one’s own experience and of otherness—it is time to acknowledge the internal split and start “constructing comparables,” as Paul Ricoeur put it. In his short but significant book *On Translation*, he explores the title concept both in terms of intercultural communication and as an internal mechanism, which we use in order to think. The discovery that equivalence is problematic because there are always endless ways to put the same thing into words leads Ricoeur towards a conclusion that “the inexpressible is above all else the most entrenched incommunicable, initial untranslatable” (26). This enigma demands that we postulate the existence of an irreducible otherness, which we encounter both within ourselves and outside. Since we have to speak in order to sustain our own identities through some kind of a narrative, endlessly saying the same thing in different ways, we have to learn to cope with the otherness of the untranslatable. The only viable possibility, Ricoeur argues, is not to look for equivalents but to “construct comparables” (36–37) which would produce a certain “*linguistic hospitality*” (9–10). Such places would allow otherness to dwell without being reduced to nothing by the universalist machine of our mind, which would

eagerly “try to abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one’s own language” (9). Thus, the reconciliation of the two Chinas would be emblematic of acknowledging the internal dialectic of sameness and otherness.

Another reconciliation, or dialectical synthesis, found in Morrissey’s poetry concerns the way she further handles and closes off the figure of China. The poem “The Yellow Emperor’s Classic” opens with a declaration that “The body is China” (*The State of the Prisons* 46). Beginning from images lifted from traditional, feudal body politics, Morrissey moves towards the sexualization of that body, providing it with a prod of desire. “There is a highway / of sexual awakening,” we read, and later—“there must be sex” (47). The brittle vase of the body is thus transformed into a robust kingdom of unrepressed feminine energy derived from the maternal, or the semiotic, which has been postulated by Kristeva. Without reducing the bodily energy to any of its partial aspects, or confronting it with a spiritual life that would somehow float freely above the flesh, both Kristeva and Morrissey attempt to translate the experience of women, inscribing it in those discourses which have been traditionally the domain of men: philosophy and poetry, respectively. In this, Morrissey seems to be guided by Kristeva’s idea that the “elimination of the strange could lead to an elimination of the psyche” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 190). Consequently, she employs a reconciliatory politics of constructing comparables through which the two Chinas—her own, intellectual and Western, and the other, bodily and Oriental—can sit down and talk. In a sense, clinging tightly to one’s own geo-Cartesian fortress can be compared, as Morrissey does, to “trying to survive / without our opposite / inside us” whereas in fact “opposites equal life” (47). Acknowledging that painful yet necessary split, figured metaphorically as the Orient, can ultimately save us from disparaging life, whose precondition is radical alterity. Without the discovery of one’s own essential otherness, any dialogue between the two Chinas could never be successful. It would be like trying to speak in two different languages, waiting for them to magically negotiate a middle ground.

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