
Luo Yijun's Fourth Person Singular Writing: A Cartography of Time

Kailin Yang

Abstract

Building on my previous essay “Luo Yijun’s Fourth Person Singular Writing: An Archeology of Space,” this essay analyzes the temporality and its related “horizons” in Luo Yijun’s novels. First of all, the “I” which recurs in his novels, acting as the narrative voice or persona which links up disparate stories, is actually a “fourth person” or an “impersonal.” Because of the extreme fragmentation and delocalization of the narration, the “I” does not refer to any actual, particular individual; on the contrary, it is a patchwork of all kinds of gossips, memories, events, dreams, etc. Secondly, memory becomes a material with which Luo Yijun manipulates temporality in his novels. The reminiscence of memory and the forgetting of memory constitute in time a complicated series of difference and repetition. His novels body forth an “I-city” built with memories (or their remembering), a huge virtual city chartered by writing. Thirdly, time is regarded as equivalent to damage, life as a process of breaking down. After having suffered all kinds of injuries, the “I” writes to dispel grief in order to get through the remaining life. Fourthly, death forms the boundary of Luo Yijun’s writing; however, he attempts constantly to transgress it or to redraw it. His works teem with extraordinary deaths. It seems that only at the frontier of life and death is the virtuality of writing opened up. What sustains such a singular writing, which dares to jam on mortality and grapple with death, is nevertheless the intensity of life, which gushes over the charged verbal plane. Writing, thus viewed, is a “prologue to transgression.”

KEYWORDS temporality, virtuality, I, the fourth person singular, memory, death

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Kailin YANG, Professor, Graduate Institute of Trans-disciplinary Arts, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan // Article translated from the Chinese by Henry CHANG

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The Cartography of Time

Luo Yijun's novels, with their characteristic blend of lasciviousness, gossip, and a pathos deepening with age, allow the readers to peruse Taipei through the singular lenses of the novelist's craft. In "The Archeology of Space,"¹ I attempted to outline the ingenious *topos* of Luo's oeuvre by delving into the movements, dispersive forms, and discontinuous narratives of the novels. Yet, deep in this virtual space, which grows ever more labyrinthine as the oeuvre expands, lies a riddle that calls for further investigation. In fact, we can say that Luo's entire oeuvre is this riddle, whose answer is time. Paradoxically, references to time are ubiquitous in the novels, prompting the question: Why, seeing how the riddle and its answer are not supposed to appear on the same plane, does Luo's riddle so frequently invoke its own answer? Doesn't it—as Luo himself would put it—give the game away? In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Jorges Luis Borges forges a novel manuscript that is "an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time." The riddle is described as a "recondite cause [which] prohibits its mention," for "[t]o omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it" (27-28).² Here, the total absence of the word "time" constitutes the riddle of which "time" is the answer. The banished term, however, haunts the riddle with its perennial presence *in absentia*. By contrast, what Luo's riddle embodies is not the kind of textbook paradox Borges's story presents. Rather than ringing changes on conspicuous absence, Luo's paradox exploits the improbable co-presence of the riddle and its answer: the word that should be banished from the riddle is folded into the riddle by the great tension writing produces, whereby the fringe is pressed into the core. In such folding, time is both

Editor's Note: This essay was first published in *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, in 2005. Republication is authorized by *Tsing Hua Journal* and the author. This is a long piece. We try to present it here in its entirety with only a few notes and sentences omitted. Where the author cited French sources, we provide the English edition whenever available. All the translations of Luo Yijun's texts are by our translator.

¹ For the spatiality in Luo Yijun's works, see my essay "Archeology of Space." There, I analyzed the spatiality in Luo Yijun's fiction, which is transformed by a singular form of light into various planes of dreams or events. Through a close examination of Luo Yijun's rhizomatic writing, I tried to give an in-depth account of the multi-tonic space which spanned eight of Luo's novels and shed light on the multiplicity of writing: its singular dynamic, stasis, speeds, and slownesses. With fragmented storyline, misconnected narration, rhizomatic correlation, labyrinthine texture, and light between folds, Luo Yijun's writing compels the revelation of a spatiality which is visible only under a specific regime of light, or an invisible space made perceptible by an exocentric verbal movement. Reading Luo Yijun's fiction is akin to conducting a particular archaeology of space, an inquiry into the virtual space: Taipei or the fiction's setting—maybe they are the same thing.

² "In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word? I thought for a moment and then replied: 'The word is chess'" (Borges 27).

the riddle and the answer; riddle-solving doubles as riddle-spinning; the riddle solved doth a riddle make. This double configuration (and dis-configuration) of time—as both the riddle and its answer—shows Luo Yijun out-Borgesing Borges. Not only do his works present time as more than just a labyrinth or conundrum, under the stories' topological movements, but time also becomes a giant fold: intricate, non-linear, non-chronological, prone to dissolution, aberrance, and self-contradiction. Like the serpent devouring its own tail in the ouroboros symbol, the fold of time reveals the solving (unfolding) and spinning (refolding) of riddles to be one and the same. All of this is made possible (or impossible) by virtue of being “in time. . . .”³

How can the riddle, over which Luo mulls and ruminates obsessively, be understood? What singular features of time does his rhizomatic writing, which unfurls through myriad light-flooded scenes, manifest?⁴ What temporal involution does the writing effect? What intensity of life does involuted temporality exact from the characters and plots? To what extent does time turn up the most stunning or stirring facets of existence? Luo's writing, which inflects clock-time with its untiring time-sculpting, testifies to the inadequacy of presenting time as objective, mechanical, and rectilinear. For him, time is a congealed mass of remembered things, susceptible to dilution, elongation, flattening, compression, sectioning, analysis, sensitization, lens adjustment, distortion, over-exposure . . . , etc. If fragmented space constitutes the rhizome-labyrinth of Luo's novels, non-linear time makes up the labyrinth inside the labyrinth. Rather than rendering time the material or vehicle of memory, Luo's novels reveal memory to be the concrete form of time, wherewith time can be acted on, forged, and molded. In “When the Word-Cluster Opens,” Luo writes: “Of all techniques, forgetting is the best for creating confusion or uncanny plots” (*Red* 25). If we look more closely, however, we see that the so-called forgetting in Luo's works is still a form of remembering: a remembrance acted on or molded, wittingly or unwittingly. Real forgetting, as Heidegger said, is the forgetting of forgetting. What lies at the heart of Luo's fiction is thus remembering, not forgetting: a remembering that tilts, warps, derails, ruins, or dislodges that which is remembered.

Time, in this picture, is equivalent to the memory of mutation and decay. Yet, mutation and decay share a common source, a point from which memory (time) springs: the “I” in Luo's novels. What exactly is this person that appears over and over, triggering gushing remembrance? Perhaps the question is not so much who

³ These are the final words which conclude and (re)launch *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

⁴ About Luo's rhizomatic writing and the lightbox-like scenes that make up his stories, see the “Light of the City” section of “Archeology of Space.”

“I” is, for the present Luo, the childhood Luo, and the adolescent Luo all elude that designation. Instead, the question should be: What functions does the “I” serve in the text? What power relations accrue on it or are split from it? What effects does the designation achieve? In short, what is the *cogito* in Luo’s novels? What singular *sum* does the *cogito* entail?

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The Fourth Person Singular Eye

Without question, the “I” is the hub of all the heterogeneous forces in Luo’s novels, a textual effect produced by being provoked, pulled, collided with, or thwarted by variegated stories. In other words, the “I” is not (or not only) the first person in grammar, nor is it the knowing subject in classical philosophy. Rather, the “I” is a nexus of the novelistic forces that whisk words and guide narratives: textual energies that rush among the gossips, anecdotes, family hearsays, urban experiences, childhood memories, video game scenarios, TV shows . . . , etc. that the plots encompass. The “I” is where disparate blocs of stories and lightboxes (scenes) converge. At the intersections and transversal edges of crisscrossing forces, the “I” is not so much the teller of the stories as what the stories relay, an effect of story-telling. In other words, there is not any unitary first person that autonomously marshals and maneuvers the narratives. Instead, the “I” is an “it” all the way, a virtual person dispersed among disparate blocs of stories: “K is me I am G am Cheng-lin am Zhang Su-zhen”; “I am K; K is you” (*Red* 59). These characters, be they designated by single English alphabets or proper names (Lu Zi-yu, Ling-zi, Bugger Girl, Shen Chang-sheng, Naipaul, Marquez . . .), are but “rubble persons” (and their memories) limned by remembrance, set wandering among the bizarre spectacles of time. This “I” can hence be “you,” “he,” “we,” or anyone. Ultimately, however, it is no one—just a trace in time. More precisely, there is not so much an “I” in time as there is a temporality that is this “I,” this “we.” Perhaps it is through the guise of this first person—this ostensibly integral person—that a hypostatized speaking subject rises like an inflatable doll, pumped and propped up by writing. I am Luo Yijun am Lu Zi-yu am Shun-zi am C, H, G, I, J . . . I am never me; I am (an) other—or rather, the “I” is a position, a mouthpiece, which channels things passing through time. The “I” is not an integral, coherent subject that knows and thinks but an unselfing eye trained on serendipity. “For you [I? he? we? . . .] are the interface that would make whole the broken stories” (*Moon* 292). In the “I” dwells all that is resurrected by “I think/speak”: bygone headlines (Shen Chang-sheng and the Hong-yuan scandal; Hou You-yi and the Jiankang Kindergarten fire; the China Airlines plane breaking apart midair), bygone TV shows (*TV Champion* and *Out of Poverty*) and video games (*Street Fight* and *Pac-Man*), bygone life (military instructors clubbing students in the dark; sex-ridden

virgin boy; melees at school; dismal cram schools for students retaking the Joint College Entrance Exam; drills at military barracks) and urban experiences (the giant construction site of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall; the long line outside Din Tai Fung), bygone literary fads (Murakami; García Márquez; Eco . . .) and pornography, etc. The “I” is an eye trained on time, a kind of singular mad eye as propounded by Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

And he is the mad eye of the fourth person singular
Of which nobody speaks
And he is the voice of the fourth person singular
In which nobody speaks
And which yet exists
With a long head and a foolscap face
And the long mad hair of death
Of which nobody speaks (“He” 26)

It seems that at some point in life all writers have to merge their “I” with this “eye of the fourth person singular,” to go beyond “I,” “you,” or “he”—beyond “my story” pertaining to some particular individual or particular things, and become an eye for singularities, a fourth person singular eye that takes in the pure events in life. Here, points of view circumscribed by the antinomy of subject and object are replaced by points of view or points of hearing attuned to multiple singularities. More specifically, what emerges out of the dramaturgical maneuvering of the light in each scene is just such a point of view or point of hearing. Time freezes up before the arrival of the event (time = 0); all tensions in the lightbox (scene), with this freezing of time, crescendo (intensity = ∞). In this predetermined space-time, the free will of the subject is substituted for the preordained series of event; the “I” disappears, in whose place springs an inappropriable fourth person. In the rhizomatic writing that unfolds through the disruption and realignment of lightboxes, the speaking “I” that recurs is ultimately not the subjective “I,” not a first person point of view. Instead, it is an out and out “non-I”: a scission of “I” in time and a displacement of “I” in space. From this perspective, the reason the “I” is not “I” is because the “I” is just a nodal point of poetic resonance in the singular space-time, a position where intensity is concentrated and dispersed. Here, in this field of force ostensibly affected by the “I,” as Deleuze tries to articulate in his philosophy, the insubstantiality of event is borne by the impersonality of writing.⁵

⁵ See René Schérer’s excellent analysis of Deleuze’s *homo natura*, *homo tantum*, and *eventum tantum* in “Le démon

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According to Ferlinghetti, the poet's voice is "the voice of the fourth person singular," which "Give[s] us new myths to live by" ("To the Oracle at Delphi"). This fourth person point of view (the "I" that is not I, nor you, nor he, nor we), I suggest, allows Luo to compose poetry consisting of story-atoms. Story after story, Luo the novelist measures characters and actions the way a poet weighs the combination of words. This is poetry composed of singular heterogeneous scenes, the kind where causality and chronological order are replaced by a logic of sense. Here, it becomes possible for what is ruptured or discontinuous (phenomenologically speaking) in the narrative to cohere again, though such coherence—facilitated by the impersonal, fourth-person-singular writing—would necessarily be a kind of inverted, aberrant, and divergent communication among the stories.⁶ To say that the rhizomatic space brought about by the "I" in Luo's novels (an "I-city"?) points to an impersonal, non-I, unselfing writing (the insubstantiality of event), however, is not to imply that the novels are therefore vapid or bloodless like cold objective technical documents. In fact, it is precisely on account of the removal of the subjectivist stranglehold on thinking (with its demands for homogeneity and consistency), that writing gets to be the fertile field where heterogeneous stories sprout: "The story is like a fine, magnificent body that rises—Splash!—out of time's insouciant currents, holding our reverent, grateful gaze with its immaculate, exuberant being" (*Us* 214). The being of the story (or event) replaces the being of the subject. Here, the paraphernalia of the story (lighting, timing, camera movements, lens adjustments, prompts, change of actors) work in the fourth person singular mode: not because the novelist wishes to accentuate the greatness or meanness of Man, or to achieve some exaggerated dramatic effects or the apotheosis of heroic (or anti-heroic) subjectivity, but because the impersonality of events has permeated the temporal and spatial multiplicities. If a subjective agent can be identified in the lightboxes arranged by Luo, it would not be an "I," nor any action-leading characters, but the Event itself. The Event, though, is necessarily impersonal and desubjectivizing.

In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze writes: "But literature . . . exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal—which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point" (3). In other words, the

de Gilles Deleuze: L'impersonnel I" and "Homo tantum: L'impersonnel II," collected in *Regards sur Deleuze*. An in-depth discussion of the impersonality in Deleuze's philosophy is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ I would like to thank my students for pointing out the poeticity of Luo's works in their enthusiastic discussion in class, without which, especially Zongyuan's contribution, I might have overlooked this important feature. The readers can also refer to Weng Wenxian's interview with Luo, where Luo claims that "it took some daring to allow poetry to permeate my novels" (See Ng 340).

point is not whether a particular literary work is written in the first, second, or third person, nor whether the author favors any particular narrative point of view.⁷ Where the focus is on the “person,” all narrative points of view end up stuck in the subjective groove. Here, the third person is no more evolved than the first person, for it exudes subjectivism and anthropocentrism just as much, stalled and constrained by the molar, holistic, universalist, and majoritarian narrative mode. This is why Deleuze goes on to say: “Literature begins only when a third [fourth] person is born in us that strips us of the power to say ‘I.’ . . . [I]ndividual traits elevate [literary characters] to a vision that carries them off in an indefinite, like a becoming that is too powerful for them” (3). To tap into the impersonality literature illuminates, though, does not mean to shift from writing about humans to writing about animals. The so-called animal writing is still personified writing, populated by Oedipalized dogs, anthropomorphized lions, or subjectivized cats. These characters walk in animal shapes but speak human tongues, obstinately clinging to their power to say “I.” Each “I” uttered inducts the animal-speaker further into anthropologism. Impersonal literature (fourth person singular writing), on the contrary, is an adamantly anti-Oedipal operation. No animal mouthpiece is required, nor is the grammatical “I” shirked unwarrantedly. When animals (like Melville’s white whale) or insects (like Kafka’s cockroach) do appear, the appearances operate as lines of flight from Man or Subject. In other words, the point is never whether the writer uses “I” or other grammatical persons, but whether (s)he is subservient to “the power to say ‘I,’” to the unitary power of the subject. Here, it is necessary that the impersonality of event replace the anthropologism of the subject. The “I” (whether or not the narrative unfolds in the first person) breaks up in time, becoming an “other” or some form of “indeterminacy.” In other words, the “I” designates an indiscernibility, an equivocation between two states, which is ultimately revealed as the effect (not the cause) of this or that event. To put it in Luo’s own words, writing is a mere “sketching exercise between the two shilly-shallying parties in a false relationship” (*Wife* 220). Caught between the two shilly-shallying parties in a false relationship, all $I = non-I = x$. A becoming marked by the fourth person singular penetrates every will that says “I.” The “I” breaks up. What is left to say is only the time and place of the event’s occurrence. All is in flux.

Since the beginning of his career, save for very few exceptions, Luo Yijun has rarely written in any persons other than “I.” Yet, as his career progresses, the perennially present “I” takes on a paradoxical unselfing force, becoming a repudiation

⁷ “A senior colleague once reminded me: Beware! Without knowing when it begins, you’d lose the ability to tell a story in any persons other than the ‘I’” (*Us* 224).

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of the power to say “I.” In the kind of writing Luo practices, where every episode (story-fragment) grounds itself on “I,” I is deterritorialized into an other. In other words, if Luo’s works can be characterized by impersonality in any way, it is not because he chooses to cast a cold, mechanical eye upon the world in them, nor because he tries to avoid grammatical persons. On the contrary, and paradoxically, it is because the subjective “I” collapses into an overabundance and overflow of “I” in his works. Each novel is populated with a plethora of “I’s”; an “I” speaks from each of the numerous episodes that make a novel, and yet neither logical sequence nor chronological order seems necessary in them. In an early work, “Dipian” (“A Roll of Film”), Luo interlaces a number of incommensurate “I’s” on the same narrative plane, forming a *mise en abîme*. The piece goes: “I” (n° 1) is assigned a short story by his fiction-writing teacher. The story turns out to be about “the person I was (n° 2) in the third year of junior high school.” Yet, as the assignment gets underway, “I” (it could be n° 1 or the virtual author/narrator of “A Roll of Film,” n° 3) repeatedly interrupts this story-within-a-story or memory-within-a-story (maybe they mean the same thing to Luo) with parenthetical remarks emphasizing how everything being said is subject to revision. This *mise en abîme*, spelt out in its most convoluted form, reads something like this: “I” (n° 3) is writing a story about “I” (n° 1) remembering or writing about the person “I” was (n° 2) in junior high; meanwhile, “I” (n° 3 or n° 1) keeps interrupting the writing of “I” (n° 1) about “I” (n° 2) with parenthetical remarks (*Red* 59-111). A family of “I’s” is scattered in this labyrinth. Strictly speaking, though, what we observe in “A Roll of Film” is not quite the same as the impersonality in question. The fourth person impersonality under present discussion rises out of the irrational series made up of multiple “I’s.” Though “A Roll of Film” also presents multiple “I’s,” which overlap and converge on different levels of the narrative, collapsing or blurring the boundaries of fiction, these “I’s” are still too beholden to narrative conventions and the identity of the subject. And yet, in the same collection, immediately following “A Roll of Film,” we see the story “Tuoniao” (“Ostrich”), which seems to posit a way of surmounting the “I.” The narrator says: “Once an extendable file is in place, no conduct going forward will pass without being given meaning. But I have to say, I am a creature of the two-dimensional world: my previous move and my next move are unrelated.” “Hence, when I choose to act a certain way, the meaning it instantly generates surpasses all judgment. No one can pin me down with their opinions” (*Red* 125-26). This is where the “I” begins to disintegrate, unitary writing bows out, and an event-tuned literary form that “surpasses all judgment” begins to materialize: an impersonal writing bearing Luo’s stylistic hallmarks finally takes shape! The “I,” from the vantage of writing,

is now depthless, “a creature of the two-dimensional world,” a lice skimming the surface from story to story or nestling in the fold of language. Like patchwork, writing as such is a surface growing flatter and more medleyed as it progresses. This does not mean, however, that the characters Luo creates are thus flat or faceless. Instead, as we have seen, each given episode (lightbox) is adjusted till a certain maximum strength is hit. That is the moment of truth before the event’s arrival. Here, surface or plane has less to do with individual or story than with the momentum by which stories-events are strung together. What connects one episode to another is an approximate or contrapuntal relation within a narrative series: both episodes are narrated by an “I” without any causal or diachronic connection. If they are juxtaposed or sequentialized, it is only because both point to the moment of truth of a certain event. As such, the “I’s” are dispersed upon this plane of rhizomatic writing, becoming perennially disjunctive notional persons concomitant with heterogeneous events. To put it another way, the fact that a number of stories-events in a novel are all narrated by an “I” does not give us enough reason to link them up and read a certain meaning or depth into the linkage. On the contrary, the stories-events are so harrowingly dispersed in Luo’s works that the “I’s” in them are scrambled beyond re-ordering (this is not to say that order is necessary); they become impersonal.

The “I” in Luo’s works is fragmented and disperse. As such, the writing does not become an organic whole just by having an “I” at its helm. It is true that the “I” is often the only site where the episodes-events in one novel converge; the only principle of conjunction that connects one fragment to another. And yet, such repetition or segue is pivoted on difference. The “I” does not point to any identity that signifies subjectivity; rather, it is the corporealization of differing episodes-events, a pseudo-person that facilitates the rhizomatic writing. Here, the protagonist (subject) is never the “I,” but the events that warrant its invocation. This is an event-oriented writing. So written, Luo’s novels mark the “non-relation” among differing heterogeneous events, with the “I” bobbing and flickering in between and the world “growing ever more tenuous, more like a plane” (*Dispelling* 211). More precisely, Luo’s novels bring into being a virtual world covariant with multiple “I’s” rather than one premised upon macrocosmic or molar persons or subjects. These fragmented, displaced, time-bending “micro-I’s” radiate from the stories-events, neither deepening the “I” nor augmenting the power to say “I” as the episodes-events unfold. Rather, the “I” and what it betokens become attenuated and levelled. Neither a subject nor the first person signifying subjectivity, the “I”—disunited and non-identitarian—is more like a membrane “growing ever more tenuous, more like a plane” with myriad heterogeneous episodes-events coming at it. The

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“I” is ripped and rubbed unto the plane of writing, repeatedly spread, whittled down, and flattened by heterogeneous episodes-events upon the transcendental plane—what Christine Buci-Glucksmann calls “pluriperspectivism of the surface” (“pluriperspectivisme de la surface”) (197)—signed by Luo. In these novels composed of non-relations among different and heterogeneous episodes-events, whatever depth we find would be an illusion projected by the elaborate folding on this transcendental plane. To put it more clearly, this rhizomatic, event-oriented, impersonal or fourth personal singular, depthless writing makes for a kind of novelistic mannerism. In the case of Luo, we may borrow the term used by the late Foucault and call it a “technique of the self” launched with writing. This technique is exercised in Luo’s works primarily through the various invoking, kneading, plucking, and twisting of memory. Hence, to further understand the “I” in Luo Yijun’s works, this “I-machine” or impersonal *cogito* signified by the fourth person singular, we must confront memory, which—repeatedly manipulated by it—constitutes the transcendental plane of Luo’s writing.

Remembering Memory, or the Difference and Repetition of Remembrance

If time undergirds Luo Yijun’s riddle, memory supplies the bricks for the immense city time builds. The problem is, memory is not equivalent to the present that has passed; it is never simply an inventory of the mechanical accumulation of *temps perdu*. As Bergson says, if memory is dependent on the passage of the present, there will be no memory.⁸ Without an exhaustive review of the massive literature on memory, this essay hopes to show how the investigations of memory in the humanities alone highlight a unique feature of twentieth-century thought, putting into alignment Freud, Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Blanchot, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Derrida; and also those who approach the virality of memory through words and images, figures like Proust, Joyce, Borges, Welles, Resnais, Fellini, Duras, Godard. . . . The list goes on. As a study of Luo Yijun’s works, this essay will content itself with delineating the memory constructed in them, with occasional references to related works. The questions that concern us here are: What operation of memory does Luo’s writing perform? What new grounds does it break? What singular temporality does this memory apparatus limn?

To begin with, memory does not involve simple captures of what is past; it is not the present in the past tense, but the present tense of the (pure) past. The temporality of memory is not a chronology that flows from *now* to *then*; it does not denote what is bygone relative to what is happening, nor is it inscribed in linear

⁸ See Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* 110-12.

history. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel Proust offers an excellent illustration of this. The narrator's childhood in Combray is not accessed through the proverbial trip-down-memory-lane, for remembrance is not a period drama staged among the relics of the past. It is neither "present recollection" nor "I remember . . ." Remembrance, operating in/as the virtual, resists overt retrieval. "And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die" (Proust 60). Not only is remembrance not tantamount to recalling the past in the present, it is predicated upon an involuntariness that can only be explained by serendipity. Here "all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile." Remembrance as such opens up a virtual transcendental field that is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract." For Proust, the vast city of memory is insinuated within the "material object," activated by the object's association with a long forgotten smell (*odeur*) and taste (*savoir*): "And as soon as I had recognised the taste of the piece of Madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me . . . immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage . . ." (64). I have compared elsewhere the taste in Proust with the vision (light) in Luo: both set up a memory theater instantly.⁹ More precisely, remembrance is the irruption of the pure past (as opposed to "the past of the present") into now. At some points in life, by dint of what Proust calls a "material object" or what Luo calls a "password," the gate of memory bursts open. In *Yueqiu xingshi* (*The Family Name of the Moon*), Luo writes:

And so we lived unsuspectingly in that virtual city. My brother and I, I mean. Perhaps my sister, too, but I suspect my sister was also fictional. There you have it—our family background. It was in that town that we learned how to read and write, were taught history and geography (for which they made a map of our city and the neighboring towns; it was hazily taught alongside a world map that was far off the scale), some peculiar rituals (such as raising the national flag every day), and the laws (like the traffic rules or the fines for violating the sanitary code). . . . It was there that we finished six years of elementary school and completed high school. It was there that we had our first erections, shed tears at the movies, cheated on tests, struck our first big win at the arcade and

⁹ For the comparison of "taste" with "sight," see "Archeology of Space."

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lugged home pockets of coins; the florist's on the street corner was where we bought our first bouquet of Easter Lilies for the girl who was our first crush during puberty. . . . In the years to come, when I compared my memories with those of my brother's, the fact that we had retained those details in our memories would often put me in a greater panic. Later, due to some reasons that would never be known to us, they gave up on this huge memory-engineering project of chartering a new city. Maybe the speed of decline exceeded their own imagination; maybe they refused to take responsibilities for someone else's mess. They cleared out overnight, deserting this city fashioned out of thin air. Every one of them went away: those school principals, police officers, basket-toting aunts, girls in the fast food chain's pin-striped uniforms, even those shady lanes with blinking neon lights and heavily made-up hookers . . . they were all gone. My brother and I were the only ones who stayed. We learned overnight that the town we grew up in had been a far-fetched experiment aborted due to some bankroll issues. Sometimes, oppressed by loneliness, we would run out to the empty streets shouting, "Son of a bitch!" (52; ellipses in orig.)

Virtuality does not result from simply remembering, but from the alignment, displacement, or "derangement" of memories. It also results from entering and departing. In the passage quoted above, the "I" chooses to stay, to remain among the forlorn abundance of memories. This generative memory-city is "I" himself, an "I-city" which is the product of a bizarre, absurd, unspecified agenda to bring a city into being. Reading the above description of "memory engineering" closely, it is hard not to compare it with the quintessential moment in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, where the childhood town of the narrator "I" finally came together and emerged from its previously nebular, latent state:

And as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the waterlilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (64-65)

The “virtual city,” be it Combray or Taipei (Yonghe), is bound to undergo the enigmatic ruptures or fatal catastrophes time has in store in its linear dimension. Combray has long sunk into the pure past, becoming the virtual memory inert to the interpellation of the intellect. The childhood town of Luo’s narrator, on the other hand, was evacuated overnight. Not only will it not be remembered, its erstwhile hustle and bustle, impossible to bring back, is frozen into a *tableau vivant* of the past. A sibylline fault opened up between the present and the past. The past is thus no longer the past remembered in the present—“I remember” becomes an impossibility. Or, rather, some form of “I remember” marked by remembrance at the level of the intellect must remain only in the present, or on the diachronic grid of the present (what I remember must be the present, must belong to the present, not the past). Pure past or virtual memory is another matter.

What account can we give of the pure past conjured up by Luo’s writing? Is it the virtual city whose “speed of decline exceeds imagination”? More specifically, through what mechanism, operation, and topological torsion on the surface of writing is memory summoned in forms that shed light on its virtuality (emerging out of a bowl of tea, TV, video games, novels, gossips . . .)? On some levels, it appears that Luo’s novels have contributed a seminal chapter to our collective Book of Memory. Nonetheless, his novels have never been about remembrance in any simple sense: the novels do not fit the bill of any kind of memoir. Memoirs, real or fictional, are too much tethered to the memory of some subjective “I,” the genre being formally predicated upon the remembrance of “the past of the present” from the standpoint of the present. As Luo writes in *The Family Name of the Moon*: “None of the scenes I remember now are ‘being remembered now’ by me; they were instead recalled at some earlier instant, which is like the transfer station or electrical substation of memory. . . . I remember the scenes remembered then . . .” (17; ellipses in orig.). In other words, Luo’s version of *La Recherche* will never be simply remembering the things past (we may go further and say that for Proust as it is for Luo, the search reveals the impossibility of simply remembering), but the infinite processing of the materials of memory—the reminiscence of memory and the forgetting of memory. Memory is not necessarily the obverse of forgetting, nor forgetting necessarily a lapse in memory, as Samuel Beckett writes about Proust: “the man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything” (Auster 138). Memory is never a matter of simply remembering, nor is it tantamount to not forgetting; pure memory indicates a state far more profound than remembering or forgetting. As captured perceptively by Proust: “What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind [*esprit*] feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking

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and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual, which it alone can bring into the light of day” (61). In other words, the point lies not in remembering, but in the intervention of creative forces. Pure memory has little to do with remembering or forgetting, as it is not any form of reminiscence; it is rather an overheated factory (as Artaud says), churning out multifarious scenes or backdrops. Memory as such is a creative affair, where the concern is not with forgetting but with the technique of creation, as if everything is always already some kind of memory, and all memory is always already some kind of creation.

The huge mnemonic structure raised by Luo’s novels is a kind of (invisible) virtual city: a rhizomatic story city outlandishly composed of mnemonic objects (material objects). Neither diachronically arrayed nor synchronically assembled, these objects are like “a busload of people tumbling helter-skelter unto the foam of the driver’s seat as the bus jerks to a stop, making a print the shape of a Thousand-Hand Bodhisattva” (*Moon* 17). Yet, to say that memory forms the virtual city in Luo’s works is not the same as claiming that the works amount to no more than the memoir of a certain city; rather, what it suggests is that the city itself (its buildings, streets, traffic, shops, schools . . .) is memory. It is not an old city, cannot be an old city. It is a new city, one promised by remembrance. Novel-writing undertakes the daunting task of chartering this city: to fashion it anew, to open its remembering gate with a password, a magic key.

Memory assembles a “virtual city” in Luo’s works, which moves and shape-shifts as—with the finesse and swiftness of an illusionist—Luo revamps the various settings and signs and adjusts the lighting cast upon them. Undoubtedly, in this “tightly knit, airlessly embroidered” enclosure of memory, all writing is remembering; all remembering is the reminiscence of memory. A “real past (past present)” to which writing refers, against which what is written can be verified, does not exist. The reminiscent writing does not index the original scenes where the events take place: it is not a historiography, nor are there any original scenes. We might say that all writing aspires to leaving such scenes blank, of letting the lacunae be. When “mnemonics” is brought up, in *Disange wuzhe* (*The Third Dancer*), the narrator says, “When his father described those scenes, it was no longer the actual scene ten years ago he was describing. He was describing the memory he had described last time. A memory of memory— endless retakes, endless developments, with the film long lost” (120). Paradoxically, this memory which is always already twice removed does not thus lapse into an infinite regress (memory of a memory of a memory . . .), nor does time turn rudderless and start

drifting along an asymptotic line toward the past. Rather, time flows on the back of this twofold reminiscence. Each memory of a memory gives time the forward thrust that carries its flow onward within the space-time tunnel. Pushed, time progresses—but with its face turned backward paradoxically. In other words, the memory of a memory is only possible because life is ceaselessly pushed toward the other side of the space-time tunnel. But this possibility is always already trapped in a delusory, dislocating virtual realm. “The refracted light of memory is corrected in distant time” (*Dispelling* 58). It is through this “correction,” this “delusion,” this “dislocation” that the most extraordinary temporal texture of Luo’s novels is revealed, becoming a subjective visceral sensation produced by memory, “the extension of a tilted inner street scene” (*Dispelling* 212).

Memory is thus always doubled: each memory seems intended for some future memory of the memory. The memory remembers its remembering: one memory stems from another memory. Remembrance taps the repository of memories and is in turn tapped by it: each remembrance becomes at once the fodder for future remembrance and the part to be reassembled with old memories. There seems to be a perpetual impetus for mutual folding among memories as they crumple one over another, “making a print the shape of a Thousand-Hand Bodhisattva.” There seems here not to be any room for interstices or lacunae, for, aside from this mass of memory continually folding in upon itself (the remembering of remembering), there are no blanks (missing links) waiting to be filled in or reminded of. Memory points only to memory itself, outside of which there is nothing, no real past to draw or fall back on, nor is there any integral memory with the assumption of wholeness attached. Memory seems only to be a cancerous cell that keeps perpetuating itself through schizogenesis; writing becomes an agoraphobic anti-memory. Luo’s works are thus completed through memory continually being folded and heaped by writing. And what memory references in its perpetual fold is not any corresponding “reality” or “truth,” but a pure past produced by the complicated overlap, the virtuality of memories distorted by repeated retrieval. Here, writing acts as the pure becoming of memory. The stories by Luo arrive not simply in the gesture of facts or events, but as a particular remembrance of such facts or events, or the remembrance of remembrance. It can be said that that writing enacts the deep dialectic of difference and repetition by dint of remembrance. Each re-memorialization puts difference and repetition back in the game: the repetition is intended solely for the difference it produces, so that each repeated call to remember is meant not so much to offer a version of the event (or story) remembered that is closer to the truth, as to fold outward and bring about a virtual space-time, a forking of the viewpoint. Difference thus results from repetition, for

the recollection of a recollection (double recollection) has never proved the unity of memories. On the contrary, it evinces the difference that manifests the multiplicity of memory. Virtuality emanates from this multivalent duality (at once difference and repetition; at once memory and the memory of remembrance; at once the pure past and the recreation of the present . . .). This is where time gradually loses its gravity, where space bends abruptly, and “I walk, one step after another, into the fiction of my own making” (*Red* 23).

Time Disqualified: Those Humiliated and Damaged in Time

In Luo’s works, writing acts as the complex plaiting of memory’s repetition and difference, out of which the moving images of time spring. It is through these two singular operations (the repetition of difference and the differing of repetition) that the virtual force of language is exercised. Yet, where does it originate—the will that enables difference to be continually repeated and repetition to be continually differing? As mentioned above, Luo’s writing is centered around time as the Baroque movement of riddle-solving and riddle-spinning. This immense fabrication of time bodies forth Memory, a city of pure virtuality. Nevertheless, this city “chartered” by the novels also grips us with the harrowing force coursing through it. The force rubs our noses in the impossibility of writing, on the one hand; on the other hand, it makes clear the equal impossibility of not writing. Writing is impossible, because in a society where sycophantism, conformism, and sensationalism are the norm, serious and original effort at verbal expression and communication is often deemed obsolescent. In its place rush in volumes of vacuous locutions and talks-of-the-town. Yet, it is equally impossible not to write, for to live in Taiwan and not write is tantamount to allowing oneself to be swallowed up by the angry tides of vulgarity or join the ranks of the puppets controlled by commercial mechanisms. In other words, it has become both impossible to write (the literary dream is killed) and impossible not to write (line of flight for singular individuals). It is in this double impossibility, this faltering oscillation, that the writing machine of Luo produces the impossible possibility, a verbal spectacle proffered by time (memory). What propels this harrowing spectacle are the harms catching up to each individual life in time—time translates into harms, in which one writes to dispel one’s grief and get through the remaining life.

Time is equivalent to damage; thus, whether in the narrative efflorescence or the spread of recursive, entangled memories, “the mournful sense of time behind the virtuoso stories” is felt (*Us* 223). The wounds of time lie, dormant or active, beneath the surface of the narratives-memories, where the same voice seems to dictate every word. However lewd, festive, jarring, hilarious, cynical, or mad the

stories, the readers are saddened, as if all that transpires in the tales is but a front, a shaky *papier-mâché* façade towering athwart “the mournful sense of time.” Life itself becomes “a tremendous spectacle of injury” (*Dispelling* 101). As writing unfolds, the episodes—headless, tailless—take their positions. The episodes-events (intensity = ∞) flow fantastically into some kind of narrative continuum: “A sea of story-rubble, bountiful and desolate, come into being all by itself” (*Us* 223). The reader has no choice but to stand by the sea, and, amid the roar—obscure and distinct, as in Leibniz’s famous metaphor—of the waves, murmur to himself: sad, sad, sad.

Yet, what “sense of time” is strong enough to raise the sorrow in words with the pull of its gravity? Or rather, what “sense of time” can be distilled from the writing that sees the continuous overlapping of the spectacles of time and the spectacles of injury? To what extent, through what mediating textuality, is time forced into consciousness in the form of sorrow? How does the perpetual sorrow underlying the virtuoso stories marshal language and ultimately develop into the “grammatology of time” that, as a principle of composition, pivots the novels upon “the sense of time”? As is mentioned earlier, in Luo’s works, memory is time materialized, where the elaborate manipulation of memory produces stylistically a distinct temporal texture. Yet, this is probably only the first dimension of the treatment of time in Luo’s texts: a distinct temporal tonality embodied by memory is created out of the mutual implication of difference and repetition. However, a darkening dependency runs through this sense of time, pulling on words, interfering with the tempo of each story. Under the tremendous force exerted by sorrow, time (perception) is disjointed, unraveling the rhythm of the narrative. The episodes-events constantly become the agglomeration of various aberrant and devious movements, “rewound or fast-forwarded” (among other playback options like fast and slow motions and freeze-framing) amid the reticulated flux of emotions. This is perhaps the second dimension of temporality in Luo’s works, where time, profoundly shaken by the perpetually contracting and infinitely expanding sorrow, becomes unhinged, upending all movements!

F. Scott Fitzgerald began his posthumously published *The Crack-Up* with these poignant lines:

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effects all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don’t feel until it’s

too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed. (39)

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Of course, life is a process of disintegration. The blows from the outside are always right on target. But the “effect” never comes until, one day, the soul is suddenly snatched from the battered life, whereupon all that is left implodes, collapses, and contracts into the caved-in darkness. What sad scene is this? One as stunning and saddening as the apocalyptic vision in the *Book of Revelation*? What courage is required to face it head-on, to accept it? As if responding to the desperate note Fitzgerald sounded, Luo, in the preface to *Women (Us)*, “Buyiyang de rensheng” (“A Different Life”), undertakes the Herculean task of sailing upstream the flow of time and reversing the entire “process of breaking down”: “In this alternate world, I have never had a wife or children, have not supersized myself to dodge the draft; the dogs buried one by one have not died; age and decline have not found my most beloved family . . . those tangled and irretrievable grudges and hurt either haven’t taken place yet or are reconfigured with a simplicity that leaves me wordless” (*Us* 9; ellipsis in orig.). This preface will no doubt hold the key to understanding Luo’s future works. We may well say that the colossal energy built up across Luo’s previous eight works is condensed into these pages. At some level, what has been said in my essay so far is but a meager footnote to this preface, an inadequate elucidation of it.

In a life bound for ineluctable and irreversible disintegration, memory and dream loom as two poles of time. At one end, memory operates as the constant rueful replay of disintegration, growing dimmer and grimmer with each repetition till a “thick darkness the imagination cannot penetrate” is reached (*Moon* 330). At the other end, dream acts as the “incarnation of time stilled in tranquility” (*Us* 91), which is nevertheless “the complete reversal and reconfiguration” of present life (*Us* 7). Time seems to have lost its meaning at both extremes, with one eternally looping sorrow, hoping to turn the wheel of time back and regain, in “the town where time travels backward,” what is lost (*Afar* 217), and the other constantly asking time to tarry awhile in its yearning to defy its gravity and float “in the boundless wilderness where time is frozen” (*Dispelling* 95), for in this wilderness everything is pristine and tranquil; none of the devastating destruction has ever happened.¹⁰ The novels thus swing between the two disorienting poles of time,

¹⁰ Luo’s novels roll out countless fresh images of time going backward or stopping. Here are some examples:

sometimes backtracking, recoiling into a virtual memory-city, sometimes freezing, tarrying, tumbling into life's inverted mirror/dream image. To live is to muck about in this temporal disorientation, between a memory always going backward and a dream always stalling, "a sooty toil in a fanciful 'present' identity" (*Afar* 61). Compared with dream and memory, the present seems a gray limbo, the remaining life one cannot afford to lose.

Such is the business called living: entering the toilsome grind only to be humiliated and damaged in time, a mere "cruelty play about the collapse of the body" (*Afar* 250). Be that as it may, the Fitzgerald in *The Crack-Up* still strives to hold on to dignity among the embers of life. His despondent words: "I only wanted absolute quiet to think out why I had developed a sad attitude toward sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy, and a tragic attitude toward tragedy—why I had become identified with the objects of my horror or compassion." (51-52). Yet even such a humble wish may be too much for those slated for humiliation and damage in time, for whom everything seems helpless in the prospect of the final blow.

What, caught between these two poles of time, does writing imply? What can writing do? At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that as a riddle-solving and riddle-spinning movement centered on time, what Luo's writing reveals is neither what time is (time as the answer to the riddle) nor what time changes (time as riddle), but the "intrigue of time" itself (*Tavern* 93). If time is damage and life is disintegration, for Luo, what writing endeavors amid the smarting bustle of grief, dejection, and tragedy is eventually to make the invisible time visible. The novels thus become the "time-image" or "timescape" produced by heightened poeicity (*Moon* 83). Writing becomes a movement that traces the operation of time. Instead of simply delineating a bygone deed or the past of an individual, or offering a simple copy of memory and stories, it is necessarily a "cartography of time" (*Us* 70), the production of a "street map pregnant with time" that mirrors a certain virtual city (*Us* 59). Luo is an original cartographer.

The novel is the mournful map of time; it neither simply chronicles time nor shuttles unscathed among disparate space-times. The novelist crawls inside the machine of time, arduously searching for "a way to resist the storm of time" (*Us* 238). Under the tension of words, the time-images appear at once translucent and

"illusion of time's backward erosion" (*Wife* 276); "Later I learnt that you'd think that time oozes forward; the truth is it wends backward" (*Moon* 87); "Could I have opened the crease of time and slipped into that finest temporal segment, where the clock hands ticked backward within the frozen frame?" (*Dispelling* 52); "If allowed, if possible, if we could find a way to thread backward through time" (*Dispelling* 119); "Like an inversion of time" (*Dispelling* 194); "the vertigo caused by having the law of time's irreversibility broken or reversed" (*Dispelling* 277); "I am stuck here, like being in a city where time goes backward" (*Afar* 217); "a cavern where time no longer has meaning, just doddering down senescence" (*Us* 91).

grainy; at once “the enigmatic moment where it seems possible to scale light the way we peel an onion” (*Dispelling* 72) and “the fantastic spectacle where all watches and clocks tremble and chime in lament” (*Dispelling* 63); at once “the closeup of a freeze-framed faceoff” (*Moon* 334) and “bouncing off a creaky narrative poem full of counterpoints, variations, ensembles, cadenzas, and restatements, floating like a weightless tilting mist in time” (*Moon* 319); at once “those huge gaps among details that trick memory by playing the events in fast motion” (*Moon* 212) and “like a dislodged jaw; like spinal cords hollowed by osteoporosis” (*Moon* 207); sometimes “time distends as the postponement wears on; its membrane unimaginably stretchy, it swells and swells but would never burst” (*Moon* 199); sometimes “it is a temporal landscape that looked as if a curse had removed whatever support on which the scene had been propped up” (*Moon* 44); sometimes “time is stretched out indefinitely” (*Wife* 276); sometimes “time stops there” (*Moon* 24).

Life becomes “the illusion of the backward erosion of time” (*Wife* 276). Yet this illusion cuts close to the bone, for it is the reality we breathe. The novel is a portrait of this reality. By the time the story is finished, the novelist looks up to discover his head bald, his teeth loose, his sideburns frosty white: he is Urashima Taro, for whom the way back to the Dragon Palace is lost. Time can no longer be objectively chronicled, for it is charged with our sentiments: our sorrow, grief, dependency, merriment, and madness are all inscribed in it; it is our “inbound streets,” our “moment of pristine introversion” (*Us* 173). More precisely, the time-image the novels amount to is “us.”

As is suggested earlier, this time-image can be enormously complex and extraordinarily capricious; it can be both translucent and muddled. What runs through and holds the image together is not the chronicling of time, nor the ordering of memory, nor the imposition of any causal concatenation, but (only) a logic of the sense of time. Therefore, despite their disjointed and fragmented forms, the novels’ component episodes would not be incomplete even when left without a beginning or an end, nor would any abrupt insertion of new elements be out of place. For in the story-rhizome constituted by breaks, surges, forks, or meshes, the only continuum is not plot but affect! The stories need not be finished, for the sensations they seek to evoke are inherent in their telling; nor need they be told from the beginning, if the beginning does not have stronger affective intensity to contribute. In other words, the movement of the novels becomes an intensive continuum induced and generated by the logic of sense. Having provoked the intensity of a certain “sense of time,” an episode flares into a perceptual “bloc of intensity,” complete though devoid of a beginning or an end. Such a fragment can

then be grafted to a different story (zone of intensity) to form an anti-narrative plane. Here, all conventions regarding unity or organization (the three unities, Freytag's Pyramid . . .) give way to a logic that explicates and connects by the intensity of sensation. More precisely, the only coherence to be found is in the sensation evoked (not plot). Moved by words continually, this intensity of sensation causes quotidian time to derail and pause and the movement of episodes (space) to accelerate, decelerate, and even stall or backtrack. Under the influence of the intensity of sensation, time and movement become unmoored and deranged. It is in this bloc of space-time, upended and maddened by heightened intensity of sensation, that we see the most heartfelt and touching time-image Luo has given. The image embodies a transcendental plane marked by a certain sensory continuum. Inscribed upon its centermost is (the damage that is) time.

Ultimately, the problem is not that I am doomed to slide into decrepitude and death because I am in time, but rather that time is *a priori* equivalent to damage, just as life is *naturally* a process of breaking down. Time and damage are not different terms, just as life and breaking down are synonymous. This is why French writer Joë Bousquet wrote, after a bullet penetrated his spine, these agonizing words: "My wound existed before me; I was born to embody it" (Deleuze, *Logic* 148). Rendered the humiliated and damaged without a choice, these writers hew their works out of their life experiences: writing becomes corporeal inscription. In the face of these heightened intensities, time is disqualified, disjointed, rediscovered in another form and contexture. In front of this unique and rare spectacle of life, as Luo has repeatedly glimpsed and delineated, "Time suddenly stills as a silvery light cast down; linear historiography takes on the shape of a crescent, a helix, or even a branch stood upside-down on the ground" (*Us* 229). These works are traces of singular life passing through time (damage), with the blows, pathos, and sadness gradually cleansed and purified by words. At the conclusion of *Yuanfang* (*Afar*), at the moment when Father is clinging to his last breath and the "hour of death" looms in the room, Luo Yijun suddenly shifts the tone of his narration and writes, with minimalist economy: "In fact, this last scene of the whole event between Father and me should be a long horizon drawn with a ruling pen. Above and below the horizon, there was nothing except a bench. Father and I were sitting on that bench" (*Afar* 247). Father is dying; yet, with time stretched, the torturous hour of death becomes so simple and pellucid: the "absolute quiet" Fitzgerald aspired to in life—that quiet which can penetrate the fog of time right into the meaning of life—is finally, with astounding minimalist grace, in bloom.¹¹

¹¹ In an earlier passage in the book, Luo writes with a dejected tone similar to Fitzgerald's: "I've always wanted

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The Cynic and Tragedy

Life disintegrates; feelings rush upon the flood of time past story flotsams. On the surface of writing, where plural blocs of intensity imbricate, time is disjointed; movements are derailed; an aberrant space-time spills like a torrential river out of the works. The bloc of space-time charged with heightened tension props up “I” and “we,” only “I” has long ceased to be me. Impersonality (or the fourth person singular) replaces the “I” or the power to say “I” through the overflowing and suffusion of memories and dreams. I become the crinkling whereby my other and subjectlessness are folded into each other.

Such is the wordscape Luo conjures. The ensorcelled landscape with its blithe swish and mottled disarray looms across the loose pages of space-time. Nevertheless, as has been emphasized in this essay, a persistent and obstinate will runs through this landscape or surface of writing, seeping into every word, (anarchically) galvanizing the silent yet deafening internal resonances emanating from the vibrating sentences. As Luo might say, we splice open a word and find that it is filled with “emotions so absurd they border on sadness” (*Dancer* 86). In a way, this is the oft quoted challenge he once posed: “Why isn’t anyone in your work harder at being sad?” (*Tavern* 107).

In the story “Women zi ye an de jiuguan likai” (“We Left the Tavern That Went Dark at Night”), the consequence of having no one “harder at being sad” is the absolute erasure of difference: “each wears a smiley grimace”; “Ninja, intelligence director, dean, Chen Song-yong, the female sausage-maker”; “There’s only one facial expression left now” (*Tavern* 105-07). This is a “devastating grimace world”; “the things ‘seen’ no longer carry the thrill of privacy and sin; one can do nothing except put up a *blasé* attitude in revenge or make oneself funnier” (*Tavern* 103, 107). Without the sorrow of life, life is deprived of difference. The grimace-world is a faceless, differenceless ghostly domain, an inert, ghoulish existence, or the “final terror” of life (*Tavern* 190). If there is any *telos* to writing, it would be to bash in the head of this lifeless zombie and draw out a line of escape from the *blasé*, univocal “grimace world.”

If time is equivalent to damage, life a process of disintegration, writing’s representation or demand on those who are “harder at being sad” is illustrated in Luo’s

to find a pristine mathematical structure that would capture perfectly the two worlds divided at the level of light and shadow: one where I am a father and my mother’s son; the other where I am the husband to my wife and the son-in-law of my wife’s family. But I realize that the flower of my manhood has been spent prowling the crowded market in search of some street scenes in other people’s memories, some ‘places that once were’ which others alleged and described to me so vividly. The days were whiled away like that” (*Afar* 28).

works by different states of life with obliqueness, abruptness, absurdity, or even obscenity. Sometimes we are even left to think, paradoxically, that the harder we are at being sad, the more awry, abrupt, absurd, and obscene things get, or vice versa. Life becomes a little *mo lei tau* tragedy, or even “the absurd predicament” where “the demand [for this type of tragedy] outpaces its supply” (*Red* 133).

In contrast to the *mo lei tau* (nonsensical) comedy *à la* Stephen Chow, what Luo manages to create with words is a type of *mo lei tau* tragedy which, full of sound and fury, is neither Sophoclean nor Shakespearean. It smacks rather of Marx, who began his *Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with this famous proposition: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (15). Marx seems to have forgotten to add that when an event suddenly flips from tragedy to farce, what changes is not the event itself, but the mind grown older on the axis of history, which sees the event occur a second time. In other words, the event that occurs a second time brings about a certain decisive change irreversibly. The tragedy does not become more tragic because an event takes place a second time, nor does whatever “lesson of history” it contains become therefore more profound. Contrarily and paradoxically, the same event that recurs is destined to degenerate into farce the moment it arrives on the scene. Such is the unbearable lightness of being framed on the eternal return. In the Marxian-Hegelian “tragedy of the second time,” in the mutability and disruptiveness where tragedy and farce are locked in rapid mutual back-and-forth switches, we catch sight of the faint silhouette of some cynic, of a certain merciless scorn born of sophistication, a certain chastened sobriety engendered by frenzy. Here, tragedy and farce can be two sides of the same coin—tragedy seems destined to be the memorandum of the farce in the wings, and the ante of farce is upped by the tragedy it subtends. Shuttling between the tragedy and farce of events, stuck indefinitely in the interstices between derision and dejection, Luo’s novels add a significant, brutal but funny highlight to the cynicism latent in the Taiwanese psyche (*Us* 151).

“Likai” (“Leave-taking”) in *Hongzi tuan* (*The Red Character Group*) rehearses this “tragedy of the second time.” Only in early works like this do we get such a clear and straightforward example of second-time tragedy, for in the works that follow, this kind of cynical movement that rushes freely between tragedy and farce eats into the fabrics of the novels, becoming one of the invisible forces that propel the narrative. In “Leave-taking,” the father of “I” twice demands that every student and teacher of his school shave their heads in defense of some extinct dignity or pride, “like an insane gambler placing his bet between dignity and pride”

(*Red* 150). The first time around, “there were four thousand students in the audience—a sea of gleaming skinheads, not a hair in sight” (*Red* 150). The second time “Father came home with his shaved head, looking funny. As expected, no one at school had followed suit. At each recess, students caused a riot outside the faculty lounge as they jostled to see Father’s shaved head” (*Red* 155). Head-shaving as a repeated event seems to resonate with Marx’s famous line. Luo offers this brilliant comment: “In fact, we were all just gambling. When we realized that the original tragic stature had been switched into quenchless and irrepressible laughter, we saw both Father and Gao-jun betting heroically on the only situation that could yield a glorious triumph—a higher form of tragedy. They stuck it out stubbornly. Their self-esteem in tatters, they made the moves anticipated by their mockers” (*Red* 157). Yet, in this grand tragic-farcical wager, the hand never needs to be shown (or, rather, the hand is shown at the beginning): the gambler is bound to lose. It is here, in the tragic-farcical contingency and caprice, “the last act of Father’s life may be the sole tragic act.” The expected “higher form of tragedy” arrives unexpectedly as sheer farce, and it is from here that life begins to crack and unravel: “What first appeared as anomalies to be brushed off with a gasping laugh turned out to be luridly, brutally ridiculous. Your mouth opened in a rictus as you laughed your coerced laugh, unable to stop though tears streamed down your face” (*Red* 148).

In fact, tragedy is never truly separable from farce; tragedy does not even need to precede farce the way Marx posited. The disjunctive sequences of farce have been dipped in the solution of tragedy, as if everything is always already the second time (or the *n*th iteration) of itself. Even memory cannot simply be memory, for each reminiscence is necessarily the remembering of a certain remembrance (memory squared); “I” is that cynic who is always already a witness to the “second-time-ness” of events. On the one hand, this is tragic events doubled down to the power of infinity along the axis of time (a game of tragic Show Hand). On the other hand, the doubling-down of tragedy does not make for deeper tragedy. Instead, the straining causes tragedy to burst, suddenly, into shrieking cynical laughter. At their extremes, tragedy and farce are two sides of the same coin of fate. Luo writes: “There is only the giant, unimaginable absurdity and displacement: if you don’t crawl your hardest toward the farthest end of farce, you would drop to its unlivable tragic opposite” (*Red* 138). Farce is tragedy doubled down. The cynic, skating on the farcical end, lives with the fear of sliding toward tragedy. And yet, worse than sliding toward tragedy is to become someone “without an ounce of tragedy inside—completely, absolutely tragedy-free” (*Red* 139). At the end of the day, the cynics shuttling between tragedy and farce have never really left tragedy. Quite the opposite. As Luo points out in “Leave-Taking,” the angst this dangling

produces eventually becomes “a fascination with and a defense of tragedy”; “I scoff and jeer, but it turns out I’ve been piously awaiting the genuine tragedy, the last tragedy. How mundane tragedies like this kill me!” (*Red* 158). This is the tragedy to which the cynic is tied, a form that tosses and wrinkles among laughter, forgetting, sorrows, and memories, becoming a complicated logic and a *modus operandi* for confronting the events: the grand wager (or lousy bet) of life. “I have always thought Father’s tragedy lies in his indifference to the audience’s expectations when he forced lofty matters onto the stage meant for the burlesque. As Mother recalls, however, he was apparently not unaware of the fiasco. He seemed to have anticipated the miserable farce at the end. Perhaps he was hoping against hope. But I know he had decided that what he was to bet on would not be so-called dignity or humiliation but absolute dignity and absolute humiliation. When an actor, who has lost his voice and is past his prime, steps on stage for the last scene of his farewell performance, what he faces was not the audience out there but the indubitable cheers and applause garnered by all his former selves. What Father cast was the dice of eternity” (*Red* 153). Where chance, contingency, and accidents prevail, life is but a dice-throw. Still, the father of “I” tried to leap into the waves of time in the classical gesture of “the tragedy of an era” (*Moon* 334), inevitably subjecting himself and his era to the dismantling, overturning, and farcicalization of his sophisticated, cynical son, for “he did not have that higher mind which would allow him to see through our shenanigans, which would subject the circumstances of their tragedies to derealization” (*Red* 142).

The same event can, like a page turned in the soul, exhibit both the heroic and the ludicrous *en passant*. The wager which begins with the event is not about tragedy or farce, but about whether the gambler places his bet or not. Once the bet is placed, the gambler is doomed to become the tragic figure of this timeless wager. The cynic contents himself with looking on, for he has seen through the absurdity of the wager and preemptively “derealized the circumstances of tragedy with his shenanigans.” The interdynamic between absolute tragedy and absolute farce, between the gambler and the cynic, recalls the strife between two ideologies, a battle between Nietzsche and Diogène Laërce: “One tries to force the other to accept the touching effects he expects by foisting upon the other acts beyond the limits of his endurance; the other flees the prescribed feeling with indifference, rebellion, or mockery” (*Red* 155). In this zero-sum game, the gambler of life has placed his bet and sat back, while the cynic “I” “has his principal intact, but cannot escape the banal tugs of petty joys and petty woes” (*Red* 157).

From this perspective, the tragic quality of the cynic (supposing he has a tragic quality) does not hail from cataclysmic rises and falls, but in the way everything is

eroded into “banal” melodrama as he “laughed his coerced laugh.” But the point is that the slapsticks, non-sequiturs, drollery, and eccentricities of farce are not original. Being the same event’s second appearance on the axis of time, farce comes with tragic awareness attached and thus embodies the “enchanted moment” where the “absurd panorama of catastrophe” is taken in with perspicacity (*Afar* 118; *We* 240). Through the eyes of the cynic, Luo abandons himself to the flood of time, and unrolls with words and sentences the panopticism that encompasses sorrow, hurt, humiliation, abruptness, predicaments, trials, drollery, and grotesqueries. This is also the fourth person singular mad eye *à la* Ferlinghetti, which, roving up and down the axis of time, holds time in its gaze. Here, every event is on the scene for the second time, and is thus already farce. Upon encountering such an event, there is really not much to do except “laugh one’s coerced laugh.”

Time has been dragged out too far; “the injuries had already been there long before you came on the scene” (*Dispelling* 91). Inhabiting such “second-time” temporality, everything “grows, like those sheep or monkeys cloned from themselves, into a squished lopsided story” (*Us* 140). The same event is folded into two halves on the axis of time: the first (tragic) occurrence and the second (facial) occurrence, the latter a squished, lopsided clone of the first. Farce and tragedy are thus the same thing: two landing spots of the same event on the axis of time (they are “adjacent to time” (*Wife* 180), are “fellows who are only able to face each other because memory is folded in half in the origami time plays” (*Moon* 67). The greatest difference between farce and tragedy is therefore not inhered in the substance of the event itself, but in its reversibility. Tragedy happens in its catastrophic, irreversible manner, necessarily testifying to the dawn of absolute difference.¹² Farce, by contrast, is the first occurrence reiterated; it is the *encore* of tragedy, necessarily indexing the inversion of the first in time (even though the first is usually absent). Furthermore, the so-called farce here involves some form of repetition (repetition of tragedy), on the one hand; on the other hand, it is ineluctably bound to a differing of difference (difference emerges at least twice in farce: the first time as tragedy, the second time as the flipping of tragedy). Whatever is the case, cynical farce only occurs within a time long drawn out. It is a theatrical temporality of the “second time,” neither “cliff-hanger” nor “shark-jumping,” but, as mentioned before, an absurd, displaced *encore* obscenely shouted at the end of a tragedy.

In the temporality of the cynic, time is rendered out of joint by self-duplication

¹² In “Remarks on Oedipus,” Hölderlin writes: “time, because it is reversed categorically at such a moment, no longer fitting beginning and end” (108).

and multiplication; events arrive in doubles (the first as tragedy, the second as farce). The “second time” jinx becomes the ineluctable destiny of the cynics. What confronts the cynic is never “the tragedy of an era” but “the tragedy of time”: the injuries in time score the eyes of the cynic; the derision, caprice, slapsticks, abruptness, and grotesqueries are like the “seven injuries blow” in martial art fiction, which cannot injure the opponent without hurting the self. Life disintegrates and collapses under each blow, until it finally ceases to be. On the other hand, in twice-over time things are destined either to repeat or to trigger *déjà-vu*. The stories, torn between the past and the future, exist in a quaint state of “temporal zero gravity,” where “the plot floats up and down between memory and prophecy” (Red 121). In this zero-gravity state every sentence is simultaneously every other sentence; the sentences of every story herald the past and future of every other story! “Two acts taking place on the same track of time are folded in the same plot progressing linearly” (Red 122).

It is under the gaze of this cynical eye (fourth person singular mad eye) that Luo’s stories rain like showers of flower petals, permeating any given juncture of time, be it adjacent to or the reversal of time. Meanwhile, different temporalities interlace, overlap, and unfold synchronically like Borges’s garden of forking paths or Leibniz’s cosmos of monadological series; it is here that the “house of time,” so adored by Luo, comes into its majestic being.¹³

Conclusion: Death Scenes in Heterogeneous Space-Time

Time rewound, fast-forwarded; space twisted, ruptured, grafted—the novels where these play out constitute a polyphonic operation in heterogeneous space-time. “I” in its peregrination becomes the fourth person singular mad eye penetrating the heterogeneous space-time with its gaze. Here, the story fissions, the space splinters in an upheaval due to the intensity of words. Events emerge from the pitch-dark backdrop like lightboxes, assembling into labyrinth-rhizomes without clear presiding causalities. Meanwhile life disintegrates; time is disqualified by the buildup and outburst of heightened emotions. People are humiliated and damaged in time, a tragedy reduced to farce because of the reiterative, second-time structure of its occurrence. The cynical “I” is, on the one hand, eager to point out the abruptness, absurdity, and hilarity of the flip between tragedy and farce. On the other hand, there was despondency, accompanied by unstoppable tears.

¹³ Luo mentions “house of time” in various places, for instance in *Dispelling* 219. A piece collected in *Qi meng go* (*Wife Dreaming of Dogs*) is titled “House of Time.”

Ex-position
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This is the unique landscape signified by the proper name, Luo Yijun.

Luo's fiction scripts the past (the bottled pure memory), yet what materializes from the words are things that have never happened in the past. Death is the limit of the things that have never happened in the past: the boundary where all languages are silenced and imagination grinds to a halt. Because of this, it is necessarily also the limit of this writing. If writing involves the chartering of the whole virtual city, death is the boundary of this "I-city," the ultimate outside that surrounds its territory. Death draws the borders of this virtual city, vis-à-vis which writing is an endeavor to preserve life and ensure its continuation ("I'm afraid that if I stop, she'd stop breathing forever" [*Dispelling* 111]). Nevertheless, each added word confirms the reality of bereavement and grief. The novel thus signifies the power to care for the living and send off the dead. In Luo's novels, we are faced with multifarious death scenes or moments of death: my father, my mother, my wife, Grandma Dongwen, my scum bros, the brother of a friend, the girlfriend of a friend, the female writer called by the honorific "you" . . . ; even the named dogs, Jadie, Whitey, Radish, Buck, Hidie . . . , or all kinds of animals: elephants, giraffes, Formosan pit vipers, zebras, rhinos, Taiwan black bears, lobsters . . . ; all manners of death: self-stabbing, hanging, being run over by a backing bus, myocardial infarction, being hit by a pig heart, electrocution, plane crash, collapsed building, jumping over the platform . . . accompanied by the serial drama of the deaths of dogs: from cancer, from a heart packed with parasites, from the weakness from chemotherapy. . . . It was like a tapestry spun from Moira's loom! *The Family Name of the Moon* begins with the cremation of Jadie and oddly ends with the death of Father, with the death fantasy in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* blended in (*Moon* 333). *Qian beihuai* (*Dispelling Grief*) opens with the death of Mother and the pall-bearer on the subway; after 300 pages of death-stalked episodes, the narrative jump-cuts to the night of Grandma's death and ends there. *Afar* is a book about Father in his deathbed.

From the interstices of deaths erupt Luo's torrential stories. The writer holds in his hand the charm that protects the living and sends off the dead. Yet, "those stories meant to stave off death grow ever more macabre. Each hidden story behind the present narrative points to an 'off with the king's head' theme. Weirdly, to prevent the king listening to the stories from nodding off, they're willing to resort to stories that are abhorrent and cockamamie" (*Us* 168). No doubt, as in *A Thousand and One Nights*, each story (or story within story) is told under duress. The cockamamie plots are concocted to please the sultan in exchange for survival. The stories and death are pressed so close to each other it is as if each story (no matter how plain or outlandish) bears the responsibility of negotiating between

life and death, each turn of phrase an arbitration between the life world and the nether realm.

Death is the absolute outside to all games and rules (*Dispelling* 62), forming a point of irreversibility where “the hour-glass cannot be overturned” beyond the limits of maneuverability in heterogeneous space-time (277). Writing segments the “time difference” that opposes the time of the living to the time of the dead (169) while struggling to close the gap between life and death, to stave off the actual arrival of death. Yet, in the face of “time, which rages like a pack of hungry wolves,” despite the outpour of all kinds of stories about resurrection and immortality, where time and space are frantically plucked, reversed, freeze-framed, or twisted, the storyteller remains “an aging deathwatch” (301), proving with words that “‘death’ and ‘time’ can, in their fugue-like rapport, go on locked in the throes of passion” (61).

Under these terms, it would seem that only through the intertwinement of space and time at the border of life and death can the virtuality of writing be opened up. Yet, what undergirds this singular writing, which dares to jam on mortality and grapple with death, is no other than the intensity of life erupting from the charged verbal plane. This explains the confession of Luo the death-writer in *Dispelling Grief*:

I'm accruing these in the fashion of an embroiderer trying to master certain stitches through repeated practice: the instant of death replayed in slow motion, congealed into some agar-jelly specimen; scent; dazzling over-exposed white light I've embraced. . . . I've accrued too much (I've asked around too much), like natives trying to channel deities or drive away devils with golems or Brigid dolls. I've crossed the date line based on the rotation speed of life. Hence day and night switch roles, light and shadow encroach upon each other; time difference kicks in. Why am I always scripting the “future land” I have never traveled? In order to do it, I allow my mind and body to be thrown recklessly into the experimental field of unendurably condensed energy. How I am like some professional test subject stuffed into the pressure cabin built to test the tolerance of the human body! As the test runs the gamut of pressures, speeds, air densities, and temperatures, my gums begin to bleed, my hair grays, my bladder acts up, saggy bags pop under my eyes, my face ages and spoils terribly. . . . For I have crossed the line. It's like the contrapasso suffered by those who abandon themselves to whoring and drinking or by those who, having known the best of life, slide toward decrepitude before their time. (*Dispelling* 106; ellipses in orig.)

Life and death overstep their bounds; stories spread like rhizomes underground; time and space fork into a city of labyrinth; life is disqualified and cracks up as in the theater of cruelty; events are reduced to farce in their recurrence; death turns its gaze on us from the realm both innermost and farthest to us—at the critical juncture of all these, shouldn't writing be a kind of prologue to transgression?

Luo Yijun, a novel transgressor. . . .

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