

Reading Tracks —from Babel

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Recommended Citation

Labella, John () "Reading Tracks —from Babel," *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*: Vol. 15: No. 3, Article 1.
Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol15/iss3/1>

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What I am about to essay is an account of reading. It meditates on “The Tracks of Babylon,” the title poem of Edith Tiempo’s first collection published in 1966.¹ The poem’s central figure is a reader. But problems of legibility arise: an old man in the countryside is struggling with an ancient, ever-youthful text. Stanza to stanza, from study room to rice field, Tiempo leads us through the desire for writing in the process of reading.

I used to think that “Babylon” was mainly an attempt to place Philippine nationalism within the “internationalism” of the Cold War era. Intellectuals then, in the Philippines and elsewhere, strove to construct their identities while trafficking in the call to globality.² Stumbling on the poem anew, I still find myself struggling (to borrow

I thank Dina Roma-Sianturo, Felisa Batacan, Connie Jan Maraan, Jonathan Chua, and E. J. Galang for their comments on revision.

¹ Edith L. Tiempo, *The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems* (Denver: Swallow Press, 1966). The title poem originally appeared in *Poetry*, published by the Modern Poetry Association in 1960.

² Reflecting on Latin American literature, John Beverly observes, “underlying the conflict between the so-called free world and communism in the Cold War was a deeper conflict between forces of globalizing capitalism, based in, but no longer strictly limited to, the nation-state, and *ethnic nationalisms*” (emphases added). John Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 13. Although Lucilla Hosillos offers no discussion of Cold War identity politics, a revaluation of that era’s imprint on Philippine literature ought to begin with her “Nationalism, Internationalism, Literature,” *Solidarity* 3.8 (Aug. 1968).

from Tiempo's second stanza) with the poet's "hand grown tentative," or with what I thought I knew of it. "Being aware of the history of literature is really a form of unbelieving, a form of skepticism," Borges says in *This Craft of Verse*.³ What indeed is the history of a poem?

"Babylon" suggests that in experiencing the poetic, to read and to write are inseparable processes. The eye moves across a field of inscription, to which I can only hope to respond as faithfully as I can. The hazards of reading, Tiempo suggests, are figured in writing. Writing cannot escape the imprint of prior reading. To begin then, let us recall the ending. It is in the final stanza where the figures I have described are gathered. Tiempo writes:

If this hand seared and seared by terrible beauty,
That bared the buried Babylon to his eyes,
Could menace the coiled destroyer in the rice,
If it could swing in hooks and whorls
Despising (or missing) the dull stance of protection,
Then he might wear shiny both switch and pen.
Large sun-shapes sprawl across the grains,
But it's his dark and tilted vision
Shuts him in, man fumbling the dropped pen,
Peering, tessellating a much-tracked Babylon.

Reaching terminal line, the reader of the poem arrives at a sense of belatedness shared with the reader in the text. The old man faces a text previously written, or more accurately, written out of other scenes of reading: "Peering, *tessellating* a much-tracked Babylon." There is a fabled city in need of reconstruction. There is a document in which a ruin is being conjured and re-tiled. There are landscapes that are being read and reread by someone about to write. Someone is on the way to an ancient city near what is now Baghdad, to a cenotaph of divided language ceding gnomic scatter to the drift of commentary.

The old man portrayed in "Babylon" struggles to remember immemorial sites and to clarify worn traces. He longs for an *ur*-text,

³ Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 114–15.

perhaps a new poem to be discovered in the image of joyous lovers. Meanwhile, between his studium and the open are the elisions of world and word, the interplay of more than one language and more than one place. The man is “lost on the runic slopes and peaks.” He reaches into the “furnace-hot heart” of a “bull and plowman, sandaled queen and lion.”

Writing on writing

But is there such a thing as a Babylonian *rune*? Nothing seems to come close to Mesopotamian script in Philippine landscape. These different spaces overlap nonetheless, stitched by “mysteries involuted,” generative but at times treacherous as “any coiled up in the grass.” Something recedes into the oblivion of linguistic time. In its wake, Babelic lovers thus can emerge as *genii loci* of a vista foreign to them, perhaps the rice paddies of Nueva Vizcaya.

I speculate that the trope of the Babelic rune rests on a graphematic image: green stalks rising like finely cut lines. Lighting up the landscape are processes withheld from reading. And yet the illegible here also points to kinds of inscription: cuneiform, Germanic traces in English or, rather, buried in the Latin alphabet now used for English and all the vernaculars Tiempo speaks and writes.

Textuality haunts topography, concealing itself in the naturalization of Anglophone Filipino and Latinized Philippine writing. My theme is not unfamiliar. Gémino Abad recounts it under a different heading: “writing *from* English.” Abad’s shorthand refers to the act of linguistic appropriation at the heart of Anglophone poetry in the Philippines.⁴

“The Tracks of Babylon” dreams about traversals encrypted in the Philippine poetic signature: the change from one writing system to another, the movement across languages. The trope of writing as reading, or reading/writing, brings to the fore the responsibilities that

⁴ Gémino Abad, *A Native Clearing: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English Since the '50s to the Present*: Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo F. Bautista (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1993). Abad’s key phrase is treated more extensively in *Man of Earth*, co-ed. Edna Z. Manlapaz (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1989), pp. 2–3; 8–9.

even the decrepit man in the text cannot refuse. The American poet Peter Cole expresses my attempt at paraphrase in a much better way, in his “Notes on Bewilderment”:

The song, another poet sang, *has gone out of me*, glossing—theatrically—his loss of innocence. I, innocent, thought it the height of profundity. Now I think his notion of song itself may have done him in.⁵

Cole frames his poetic youth with his elder poetic memory. He meditates on the difference between youthful innocence and old innocence. Being old without innocence is different from being old and perplexed. The latter entails a process of reflection, of bending back upon what the former takes for granted. Tiempo’s “Babylon” explores the same theme, by reflecting on the contradictory valences of an epigraph from Yeats:

Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant.

Does the poem’s history properly begin, then, with another poet’s gnomic statement? The great theorist of allegory Angus Fletcher writes that it is not necessarily the articulation of a maxim that counts in gnomics. Rather, “gnomicity resides in some virtually mysterious function or use or play, which something about their verbal construction permits them to work upon us as readers or listeners.”⁶

In Tiempo, the effect of gnomic scatter is simply felt, not exhibited. “*Sun-shapes*,” for example, may refer either to the play of clouds, harvest colors, the field’s rippling. But it also calls attention to the enigma of the

⁵ Peter Cole, “Notes on Bewilderment,” *Things on Which I’ve Stumbled* (New York: New Directions, 2008), p. 36. Emphases in the original.

⁶ Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 102. The succeeding Fletcher quotation is from the same page.

sign. When the word sun-shapes occurs, it marks more visibly the loss of light on the page. Words are mysterious because, as one philosopher says, “there is no such a thing as a word in nature.”⁷

The phrase “hooks and whorls” presents yet another mystery coiled in the extrusions of “Babylon.” Are they footnotes, the found objects of marginalia?⁸ Perhaps the old man is being led associatively to other pages, an outside within the text. For him as for Tiempo’s reader, what gives the landscape its aura is the memory of lost writing in the first stanza:

The hand grown tentative fumbles the pen.
He had been lost on the runic slopes and peaks,
He had whittled at the wedges strung out fence-like...

Beyond cuneiform, to what extent is “Babylon” an attempt to mourn the loss of native writing? After the Spanish conquest of the Philippines, textual production was not always conducted in Latin script. The early missionaries wrote much of their primers and catechism in *baybayin*. But over time, as Reinhard Wendt recalls, it fell to disuse. The priests “chose to use the familiar—to them—Latin alphabet at the end of the day.”⁹ Carrying this history back to Tiempo’s poem, I can proceed no further beyond the gap left by *baybayin*. To preclude any vertigo, let’s proceed from the top again:

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2001), p. 176. Another text demonstrates this theme more extensively: “Nature gives itself in metaphor,” Derrida writes in “White Mythologies.” If it were not for representation, especially a mimesis so apparently “natural” as the heliotrope, there would be no direct treatment of nature. “The literally, properly named sun, the sensory sun, does not furnish us poor knowledge solely because it furnishes poor metaphors, it is itself solely metaphorical.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 243–44.

⁸ For a Philippine instance of footnote poetry, see “Geography Lesson” in Conchitina Cruz’s excellent volume, *Dark Hours* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005), pp. 17–24.

⁹ Reinhard Wendt, “‘Talking’ and ‘Writing,’” in *Old and New Solidarities*, ed. Charles Macdonald and Guillermo Pesigan (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), pp. 210–211.

The hand grown tentative fumbles the pen.
 He had been lost on the runic slopes and peaks,
 He had whittled at the wedges strung out fence-like,
 He had tangled with the hooks and whorls
 Whipped into mysteries involuted
 And potent as any coiled up in the grass.

Unreadable shards: “hooks and whorls” as gnomic. In Fletcher’s illustrative list, the most interesting case of gnomicity is a passage from the Book of Jonah. God tells the prophet: “And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also so much cattle?”¹⁰ It is this question of confounded hands and perplexing cattle that strikes me as *Tiempo*esque. Note the haptic imagery in her second stanza:

Bull and plowman, sandaled queen and lion,
 Brooding of eyes, all set in profiled
 Stance and all dichotomized,
 Lift from the crackling sheet their possibility.
 In the leaning fixed bodies
 Clammy-Hand fumbles for the furnace-
 Hot heart, for the kinetic core
 Yellowly burning.

Reading-writing gives rise to clarity alongside bewilderment. The old man stalls his writing, groping for other traces. As with any gift from the muse, *Tiempo*’s cultural comparisons in her poem may have been prompted by chance. But her page also bears out the act of choosing. *Tiempo* opts to begin her poem—the poem whose names signs her first poetry collection—with the problem of origins. The old man in “Babylon” is always only about to write, always deciding. And propelled by the desire to generate a singular text, he becomes subject to citation.

¹⁰ Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind*, p. 102.

Transpacific Babel

The tension between citation and originality is not unique to any particular poet. Across the Pacific, in another of Spain's former colonies, a contemporaneous writer has expressed the same theme. Jose Emilio Pacheco of Mexico has a poem called "La Experiencia Vivida" or "Live Experience." Here are all five lines of it:

*Estas formas que veo al lado del mar
y engendran de inmediato
asociaciones metafóricas
¿son instrumentos de la Inspiración
o de falaces citas literarias?*

These forms I see at the edge of the ocean
which breed immediate
metaphoric association—
are they Inspiration and its agents,
or a trick of literary allusion?¹¹

It seems unlikely that Pacheco and Tiempo have met. And yet Pacheco's skeptical wonder of reading as writing is what Tiempo consistently has explored since *The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems*. If the limits of a nation's literary identity can fail to delineate the borders of a poem, where does anything at all begin? Interestingly, the book where Pacheco's lyric is found is called *Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By*, printed in 1969, three years after Tiempo's volume. *No Me Preguntas Como Pasa El Tiempo*, writes Pacheco.

Tiempo writes Pacheco? I believe it is no mere coincidence. It is, I would like to believe, the consequence of Babel. Poetry has installed its resonant emptiness in the tangible world. After Babel, it seems to be a poem's fate to draw its singularity from traits that do not belong to any one text because they participate in other languages and genres. This participation entails a resonance that defies equivalence.¹²

¹¹ Jose Emilio Pacheco, trans. George McWhirter, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 59.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 226–28.

In the Book of Genesis, the myth of Babel records a passage from unity to scatter, from a single idiom to linguistic division and exile. "Let us make us a name," the first peoples said, "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth." But seeing their project, God grew jealous. "Go to, let us go down," God said, "and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."¹³

The irony bears repeating: the first peoples wished only to commemorate the homogeneity of their idiom, to build an emblem for it and prevent discord among them. But God interpreted this emblem as hubris and crushed it, leaving only a name over its ruins. A blasphemous interpretation courts the idea that history's wars and tragic misprisions have all stemmed from God's linguistic possessiveness. But there is another, more generous reading: if God favors plurality, then what of its consequences—the alternative readings of scripture, impurity and translation, the questioning of religious orthodoxy?

Jack Spicer in the 1950s offers one remarkable case of translating the Babel narrative. Spicer is a poet identified with the Berkeley Renaissance in California (another former Spanish colony). And he calls his poem "Babel 3" as if to note the stages of displacement from ancient Hebrew through *gringo* speech to his truncated modern idiom—his version of "writing from English." Here's the beginning of his gloss on Genesis:

It wasn't the tower at all
It was our words he hated.
Once our words rose
Into God's willing mouth
Like bells sing into houses.¹⁴

"Our words" were not alien to God's lips. Was it a case of self-allergy then, when from human tongues God's own language surged back to him up the tower? "He called the words angels," Spicer writes further, "We called the words angels"—and the poem ends with this enigmatic bit: "Things were different then." An uncanny similarity emerges,

¹³ Genesis 11:1–7, in the King James Version.

¹⁴ Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 63. See the note on p. 444 of the book; the poem was written c. 1955–1956 and printed in 1975.

hence, between the scribes of Sefer Bereshit and the queer California poet reading Genesis. They both maintain that *difference* is a divine mandate. Proof is the myth itself, a self-fulfilling prophecy translated across several languages.

And yet it is a truism the poetic is what resists translation. A poem's singular music can resonate only in its own language. Reproduced in another language, the tune alters. Poetic languages belong to each other only by making perfect commensurability between them impossible. This mutual interference is what all languages share. It creates resistance to translation alongside—and in spite of—the dream of unity that poetry nurtures. Poetry, Giorgio Agamben says, is “the dream of language.”

This dream, Agamben continues, “is fully contemporary, is in fact dreamt again every time a text, restoring the bilingualism and discord implicit in every language, seeks to evoke the pure language that, while absent in every instrumental language, makes human speech possible.”¹⁵ A poem contains pure language, language that steps back from the ordinary conversations it enables. It is what Tiempo perceives in “Babylon,” in all its impurity. In the third stanza of Tiempo's poem, the old man reaches into the image of lovers in a book about an ancient civilization. The image brings to mind what Agamben says of *The Divine Comedy*:

Beatrice is the name of the amorous experience of the event of language at play in the poetic text itself the love of language, but of language understood not in its grammaticality but, rather in its radical primordially, as the emergence of verse from the pure Nothing... It is because of its absolute originarity that speech is the supreme cause and object of love and, at the same time ... perishable.

Pure language, the way by which words signify, lives beyond Babelic scatter. It is “fully contemporary.” It has survived through the resonance and the misunderstanding that has happened since Babel exploded.

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “The Dream of Language,” in *The End of the Poem*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 60. On Dante, see p. 58.

So much so that Pacheco and Tiempo can appear to have conversed without having met. Thanks to pure language, the reader-writer is caught up with an other, lodged telepathically in his or her written and unwritten texts.

It is in this space between, or what Tiempo calls “between-living,”¹⁶ where words ring true. A poem hails its recipient to read between the lines, to hear to other voices from other texts, other languages that make themselves audible through some forgetful linkage. In Pacheco’s same volume, the speaker of “Arte Poetica” seems uncannily similar to Tiempo’s old man. “Arte Poetica” is an instance of gnomics through and through, made up of only one sentence divided into four terse lines. The speaker in Pacheco’s poem takes up his pen. But his ink causes to emerge something else, something concealed by “meager words”:

*No tu mano:
la tinta
escribe a ciegas
estas pocas palabras*

Not your hand
but the ink
in its blind darkness
scratches out these few words.¹⁷

To conserve the tonality, Pacheco’s translator adds more *palabras* than the original holds. The reader before the reader appears in the translation. But the writer himself, as reader, undergoes a similar division, producing a different text in the spaces of the other’s work. He or she responds to the other inscribed in poetic address, the other who overhears the words without appearing in the text. (Those words, in the infinite suspension of the paradigmatic, vanish from the page.) He unwittingly writes another poet across the Pacific, whose poem about writing as reading he may or may not have read.

¹⁶ Edith Tiempo, “Between-Living,” in *Beyond, Extensions* (Manila: La Diane, 1993), p. 6.

¹⁷ Pacheco, trans. *Selected Poems*, p. 105.

According to Andrew Welsh, “the oldest riddles we have are from ancient Babylon, preserved in what was apparently a schoolbook (on a clay tablet, of course), which gives some riddles in Sumerian along with Assyrian translations.”¹⁸ This perhaps is the reason for the particular manner in which gnomics appears in *Tiempo*: “In the beginning was translation.”¹⁹

The reader in “Babylon” is met with recessive writing. *Tiempo* hints at translations of other words beside photographs translating the three-dimensional images of sculpture. The situation might be described as a problem of the boundary. As Harry Berger writes:

Where does one locate the genesis of Genesis? Does it begin at the beginning? From nothing? Does the genesis of the world precede the genesis of the book about the genesis of the world? Or is it the other way round? Does it begin after it is over? Before it starts?²⁰

There is a reading that writes. In “Babylon,” *Tiempo*’s reader-writer is about to take up the pen, but the text he produces is absent from the page. The reader outside the poem likewise goes no further than intuiting the riddling current that is not offered up for reading. To poeticize, *Tiempo* suggests, is to have already responded to another work—a singularity forbidding substitution—with which the act of writing tries to catch up. It is to negotiate the difference between the sign and the arrival of meaning. (See for yourself; walk with me back to the much-tracked poem, where there are others whom I cannot read.)

In *Spiritus Mundi* Northrop Frye says, “*Riddle* is from the same root as *read*: in fact ‘*read a riddle*’ was once practically a verb with a cognate object, like ‘tell a tale’ or ‘sing a song.’”²¹ But if riddles were already

¹⁸ Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 27.

¹⁹ Leevi Lehto, “In the Beginning Was Translation,” in *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 49.

²⁰ Harry Berger, Jr., “The Lie of the Land: The Text Beyond Canaan,” *Situated Utterances* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 303.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 123. Emphases in the original.

translations from the start, then “to read-write” also might mean “to translate.” And Tiempo offers a caveat. The world, bereft of its own words, is vulnerable to tampering. To read-write is to risk disturbing what should be left untouched.

In “Babylon,” touch and sight are the privileged senses for reading-writing. But they are also figured as points of distress.²² “Tilted vision” and “fumbling” hands translate the data of the other weakened senses. They speak for them without using their language, neglecting the warm air, the green rustling in the maze of the ear, the scents that wind has freed.

Desiring Tiempo

In the tropology of thinking, the senses are arranged in an order of priority. Foremost come seeing and hearing. Hear and then forget these dialectics—envision the eidos. The rest of the senses tend to fade into white noise. Only recently has Aristotle’s tact regained its prominence. The body, Aristotle says, is “the ongrown medium of the touch-faculty.”

²² Tiempo’s prosody ostensibly reproduces this tone. “Babylon” illustrates what Attridge and Carper call “stress verse.” The reader finds in it “very definite rhythms or varying meters which none of the common labels or descriptions seems to fit.” The closest “Babylon” comes to familiar metrics is the insinuation of tetrameter and pentameter, which generally begins here with a beat followed by a double offbeat and beat—forming a unit called “initial inversion.” The second stanza shows an obvious break in this purported stricture. These patterns, moreover, are hard to discern because of the many double and triple offbeats, demotions, and promotions, that speed up the lines and create a kind of murmuring. There are two exceptions to such irregularity. First, trochaic pentameter occurs in the line, “Bull and plowman, sandaled queen and lion.” The second instance is the sole iambic line, “Large sun-shapes sprawl across the grains.” (The line “If it could swing in hooks and whorls” is iambic, but its first four syllables can also be uttered as an initial inversion.) Yet irregularity occurs here, as well: “large sun-shapes” opens with demotion instead of a straightforward offbeat. The beat over “across” generates either promotion, or a triple offbeat between two beats. Two alternative recitations are hence possible: O B o B o b o B; or O B o B ~o~ B. The other thing worth noting about this line is the way it speaks, in sound and image, to the sole iambic verse in “Silence.” Yeats’s poem shows similar irregularity except in one line of iambic pentameter: “The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night.” For the scansion method used, see Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper, *Meter and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Considering the tongue as the most tactile organ, Aristotle even regrets, apparently, that flavor is not sensed by the whole body.²³ In desire, on the other hand, another order prevails. To hear or see is mere substitute for tasting the other. The beloved is unique, corporeal, and irreplaceable.

What happens when the poet, in her particular way, heeds the call of thinking: to love wisdom? The letters of *philosophia* take another route. In one Philippine language, reflection, instead of taking refuge in tropes of light, suggests a withdrawal from vision. I happen to speak Visaya and know that “to reflect” in that language is to say “to enter the shade.” And to mean “I understand it” is to say “I have stitched it together.”²⁴ Intellection in Visaya submits to something like blind excessive touch, something piercing.

This eroticization of thinking is what distinguishes Tiempo from the “any.” She is a metaphysical departing from metaphysics proper, because of her attunement to Babel. Her thinking auspiciously falls short, hence, of handing the other over to categories of knowledge. Her work responds to philosophy’s longing to smell, touch, and taste the otherness of knowing. Let us touch-hear the second stanza once more:

In the leaning fixed bodies
Clammy-Hand fumbles for the furnace-
Hot heart, for the kinetic core
Yellowly burning.

Adjectives and adverbs are not, it is said, the best words for a poem. But in the last line, an enigma recedes from the place where the adjective

²³ Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 184–85.

²⁴ Under *landung*, one finds this sentence: “*Ang átung pamalandungun gikutlù gikan sa salmus*, Our meditation is taken from the Psalms.” Under *túhug*, one could say: “*Way nakatuhug sa isturya niyang naglikùlikù*, Nobody could [pierce through] his [zigzagging] story.” On a similar tangent, George Steiner writes: “Work done with patients who have recovered eyesight after long periods of blindness or first acquire normal vision in mature age does suggest that we only see completely or accurately what we have touched.” *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 131.

shifts.²⁵ It does not attach solely to “large sun-shapes,” to feisty flesh, to the lost corpus of native script, or to the anxiety of nuclear *kaboom*. It drifts into the heart of language where sound resonates, without guarantee, on the way to signification. Touching no meaning it darts toward it, indirectly.²⁶

As the lines diminish in the second stanza, what obtains is a “one image poem” escutcheoned in the larger text. “In a poem of this sort,” Pound writes, the poet “is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.”²⁷ Tiempo’s one-image poem demonstrates the use of kinesthesia, anticipating a sort of postmodern styling in recent Philippine poetry workshops, despite attempts to partition a “new” poetics from Tiempo’s so-called geriatric school.

But let us return to the real intrigue here: Tiempo’s primal scene. The old man, a reader before the reader, is touching a found object. Just as he caresses what appears to be a photographic plate in a book, so the recipient of Tiempo’s poem gets implicated in what Stevens calls “the

²⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) notes that among the primary colors, yellow is “the most luminous.” It lists “gold” and “the yolk of an egg” as examples. But the OED countervails the idea of generation by referring to “the complexion in age or disease; also as the colour of faded leaves, ripe corn, old discoloured paper.” Tiempo’s phrase “mysteries involuted” bears a similar motility. To be “involuted” can mean “to be rolled in a spiral” as well as “to undergo involution.” Under involution, the fourth entry draws the ff. sentence from 1878 physiology: “The close of the period of fecundity and the arrest of menstruation are associated with certain bodily changes, especially of the generative apparatus, which are comprehended in the term ‘involution.’”

²⁶ Agamben, “Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice,” in *The End of the Poem*, pp. 62–63: “The experience of the dead word appears as the experience of a word uttered insofar as it is no longer mere sound, but not yet a signification.” Interestingly, in one account, the lovers recalled by Tiempo become the guardians of the dead: “Inanna, the ambitious goddess of love and war whom the shepherd Dumuzi had wooed and won for wife, decides to descend to the Nether World in order to make herself its mistress, and thus perhaps to raise the dead.” Samuel Noah Kramer, “Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 6 (20 Dec. 1963), p. 491.

²⁷ Ezra Pound, “Vorticism,” in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 89. Originally published in *Fortnightly Review*, NS 96 (1914), pp. 461–71.

act of finding what will suffice.”²⁸ Stevens and Tiempo seem to concur that invention takes place at the crossroads of citation or iterability.

Tiempo's one-image poem is about reproduction through and through. It points to a reproducible image. The photograph, in turn, also refers to a procreative scene depicted in another image. With clammy hand across my heart, I submit that the plowman here is about to pleasure the queen. “My wild bull,” Inanna tells Dumuzi, “delight me.”²⁹

The risk of translation implicit in reading-writing (or in amorously seizing part of a landscape) recurs in Tiempo's final stanza. Translating what should be left untranslated risks too much touch. Watching “large sun-shapes sprawl across the grains,” Tiempo calls attention to the way topographies and voices all bear traces. Citations are never entirely rid of the sites from which they have been wrested, so that even a “strong reading” must attend upon the materiality of found objects.

A poem is born out of petrifying magic. It arises in such a way that “wisdom” confronts the impossibility of scenic freshness. It lives out dead language, from the words of precursors and from active words dying upon being removed from the circulation of useful speech. I repeat an earlier theme: no innocence and wisdom save in the

²⁸ “Of Modern Poetry,” *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 174. Here is a metonymic list of texts where Stevens plays with the superficialities of the iteration or script as a motif for sensing the world: “Invective against Swans,” “Of the Surface of Things,” “The Ordinary Women,” and “The Reader.” It is no accident that Tiempo has included in her textbook a Stevens poem advertising its citationality, recalling *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its title, “Peter Quince.” See Tiempo, *Introduction to Poetry* (Quezon City: Rex Bookstore, 1993), pp. 235–36. Much of how “process writing” interpellates “Of Modern Poetry” hinges on the idea of constructing “a new stage” by using found text and collage. Frequently (but not as a rule) the result neglects the responsibilities of citation that Stevens himself proposes in his poem: to “repeat,/ Exactly” what has been set until invention is reached. Of course, this is only one way of poetic making, or for that matter, one way of hearing Stevens:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

²⁹ Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 322–23.

bewilderment and desire for these, knowing full well the futility of possession. "Let this ruin be under your hand," says Isaiah.³⁰

The motility of desiring wisdom entails peering at scabs. It is easy to mishear this statement as a diatribe against poetic youth, or worse, as an attempt to withhold from the old the desire for ignorant innocence. Once more it is Agamben, heard beside Tiempo conversing with Yeats (telepathized by a blind poet from Argentina), who clarifies the paradox of *experiencia vivida*. Poetry "is the love of a dead language," Agamben says, "a love that seeks to reanimate a desiccated flower by transplanting it into the living members of the vernacular."³¹

Another sign of such transfer in "Babylon" is the correspondence between its last two stanzas and the final lines of Yeats' "After Long Silence." Is she chiding her poetic precursor, then, while tessellating his text? Tiempo's joke is surely audible to reader-writers who do not mind picking at literal scabs to rest overworked minds. Hearing more capaciously than Yeats the wisdom found in his younger verse, Tiempo translates what he leaves unsaid.

"Babylon" renders in Tiempo's idiom the tonalities of the Irish poet. Sharing the legacies of the same colonial tongue, Tiempo holds vigil over the diminishment of sensuous experience that textual passions incur. And yet even in refusing tradition or the past, the contemporary poem—by making-strange demotic speech—is not exempt from desiccation, with its attendant compulsion to repeat. Where else but in Tiempo would one find an aging rice farmer contemplating fertility rites in the ancient world?

My Dumuzi my wild bull
delight me
let their words fall

³⁰ "When a person accustoms himself to study the Mystery of Creation and the Mystery of the Chariot, it is impossible that he not stumble. It is therefore written (Isaiah 3:6), 'Let this stumbling be under your hand.' This refers to things that a person cannot understand unless they cause him to stumble." *The Bahir*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1989), pp. 55–56. Quoted and slightly modified in Cole, "Notes on Bewilderment," p. 91; Cole echoes the King James Version.

³¹ Agamben, "The Dream of Language," p. 48.

from their mouths.
O singers
singing for their youth.

...

I who am Inanna,
give my vulva song to him
O star my vulva of the dipper.³²

The traversal of eros—from as well as to the sensuous—founds Tiempo's somatic understanding of *reading-writing*. To write is to translate the outside world into the exteriority that is language, vocalization as well as the movement of the writing hand. To read is to transform the mark into what is inmost to the reader: an embodied sonority, his or her *object voice*, disrupting the apparent unicity of the (iterated) speaking subject.

Reading the unreadable

The risk remains, nonetheless. Hinting at Cartesian isolation, Tiempo notes the old man's "dark and tilted vision." It "shuts him in." Writing as reading threatens to blunt the acuties of desiring thought. The *res extensa* breaks up, it seems, assimilated into a version of the *res cogitans* where in lieu of distinct identities, only wax works appear.

Tiempo seems to be casting doubt on Cold War interpellations, the construction of native identity as a call wound up with the asymmetrical interpellation of the global. If refusing other traditions is not an option for a Filipino writing to Babel, how might she counter the lure of the foreign with her *kalutang*?³³ Is literary wandering also not vulnerable to self-embargo? To echo blind Milton, the mind easily can become "its own place."

³² Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*.

³³ Resil Mojares who cities, and responds to, the work of a literary precursor: "The rhythm of Hanunoo walking sticks, the *kalutang*, is a metaphor N.V.M. Gonzelez used for our need to orient and keep body and soul together in a journey." See Resil Mojares, "The Haunting of the Filipino Writer," in *Waiting for Maria Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), p. 297; 1n311.

As for the old man in “Babylon,” he risks falling for the illusion of recuperating innocent substance. At work even in freshest contact is the unremembered overlay of invisible writing, as when physical terrain is framed by notions of landscape. Bereft of words in Tiempo’s third stanza, nature thus calls out to the reader distracted by morbid nostalgia:

Outside, the wind-blown rice harvest strains
 For this old man nursing a cold limb.
 The slaverling maggots of his memory assault him:
 When tiredness, like a blister, was mere fretting,
 And pain left a curious token unaware,
 A scab for wisdom to pick over.

Nature calls out for the bearer of language to displace the habitual *textus mundi*. But can I say that really? What does the word *sun-shape* conjure, for example, in a specific historical climate? For all I know, I have already slipped into the self-arrest that Tiempo critiques. And as “the coiled destroyer” increases threat by concealing itself, so the monomania of close reading puts to risk what is idiomatic and secret in “Babylon.”

These tensions belong to the singularity of the mark. “To think and to poeticize,” Agamben says, “is to experience the death of speech, to utter (and to resuscitate) the dead words.”³⁴ And how do dead words continue to thrive except through iteration? In her one-image poem, Tiempo foregrounds the distance between text and reader. The gap occurs not only with dead languages, but wherever the desire for contact ends up bruising the unsaid.

Pure language hails the reader from a place of dispersion. This estrangement has to be felt anew in the name *Babylon* itself. Its original inscription elicits another temporality on the page—not right to left as with English but the other way. The sensation of Babelic scatter can be reenacted simply by looking at the sign for *Babylon* in a language that to me is altogether unreadable. Here is a fragment from a website whose address I have misplaced:

³⁴ Agamben, “Pascoli,” p. 63.

בָּבֶל *Babel* (baw-bel') perhaps from *balal*

בָּלָל *balal* (baw-lal')

A footnote in the Bible indicates that the word *balal* means “confusion.”³⁵ The website, on the other hand, offers more than one translation for it, rehearsing the confusion it is meant to clarify. While *confound*, *mix self*, *fade*, and *mingle* are somehow as reconcilable as give, *provender* and *anoint*, it is hard to link these two subsets. Are they coherent in Hebrew?

Proposing and dispensing with meaning, this tiny god *balal* bothers me. I am going to ignore it. But by having perceived its secrecy, its “hooks and whorls,” I return to that other place of bewilderment I have touched earlier. My reading now hinges on sheer speculation. Is Tiempo’s desire to tessellate Yeats’s poem an attempt to respond to yet another name? In lieu of “Babylon,” shouldn’t Tiempo have written “Byzantium,” echoing the Irish poet?

If a poetic translation succeeds not by imitating another’s music but by welcoming its foreignizing silences, then Tiempo’s “Babylon” is an exemplary instance of reading-writing. In Yeats’ “After Long Silence,” an old man fumbles with his voice, correcting his speech in the first line but speaking in a sentence fragment, breaking thought and straining syntactical coordination, before finally gathering itself into elegant gnomicity. Yeats says:

³⁵ Cf. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 101. Derrida comments on the word *babel* in the Torah: “Already one can see that the conflict is a war between two proper names and the one that will carry the day is the one that either imposes its law or ... prevents the other from imposing its own. God says: Babel.” God, in destroying and naming Babel, institutes semantic dispersion. Elsewhere Derrida meditates on the way Babel, being a proper name, is untranslatable. When the name *Babel* occurs in translation, however, the untranslatability is not preserved. Difference is enacted each time “Babel,” in translations of Scripture, is paired with another word, “confusion,” which in turn is a common name turned into proper name. What names the site of confusion, in short, is itself a confounded name: the myth about divided language is also about the found of God’s divided name, “his name,” the name he imposes on the city but also the name of God which he proclaims over the ruin. See “Des Tours de Babel,” *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1 (Oakland: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 192–97.

Speech after long silence; it is right,
 All other lovers being estranged or dead,
 Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,
 The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,
 That we descant and yet again descant
 Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song:
 Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
 We loved each other and were ignorant.

What seems “right” initially is “*speech after long silence*.” Yeats suspends this tonality. The reader learns later that what Yeats means to say is: “Speech after *long silence*.” Compared to song, speech proves inadequate as a reprieve from willed muteness. After long silence, it is more proper to sing: to “descant and yet again descant” upon the theme of art. Music is better than speech, especially speech following vocal hiatus. The whole torsion of Yeats’s poem consists in *writing over* its opening sentence fragment.

After long silence ... speech is right? That sentence misses the text proper, where Yeats engages the reader in a grammatical ruse: the illegible or spectral antecedence of a pronoun. The nonexistent link between “it” and either “speech” or “silence” is dispelled soon as we read beyond the fragment. The sentence we can derive directly from the text is this: “After *long silence*, song is right,” something we have to work at hearing. Tone is all in *poesis* or making, in listening as in reading.

“Silence,” in this sense, demonstrates in advance the reading of it as a performance. It asks the recipient of his poem to listen for *song* (poetics), hearing past the parts of speech (grammar or rhetoric). It is quite likely that all this has not escaped Tiempo. And my endeavor here has always been to respond to both Tiempo and Yeats, more poetically than rhetorically.

Tiempo is famed for her memory. She is able to recite by heart modern long poems as well as innumerable lines from Keats, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare. During one writers’ workshop, the fellows prodded her to recite a poem of hers after lunch. She agreed, instead, to recite Yeats. Leaning on a chair, she spoke the entirety of “Among School Children” without faltering.

In a work published in 1969, the Yeats scholar Norman Jeffares recalls that “After Long Silence” was written during the winter of 1929. Jeffares

dates “Sailing to Byzantium” as well. “Byzantium” was written not after, but three years before he wrote “Bodily decrepitude is wisdom.” After lengthy song—brief “Silence.” The other text about decrepitude singing *Ars longa, vita brevis* emerged later: “Sailing to Byzantium” was written in September 1926.³⁶

Via Byzantium

I note the dates of Yeats’s poems because my account of reading in “Babylon” has become a story about reading in *time*—about changing one’s mind, doubleness, making decisions anew in the temporality of reading-writing. In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare talks about doubleness: “one voice, one habit, and two persons.” Tiempo in “Babylon,” likewise, overhears two Yeatses wavering between two poems about age and youth.

Regarding this theme, Borges seems to have held a telepathic conversation with Tiempo. On 20 March 1968 Borges delivered a lecture called “Thought and Poetry” at Harvard: “I have suspected many a time that meaning is really something added to verse. I know for a fact that we feel the beauty of a poem before we even begin to think of a meaning.”³⁷ Poetry is deferred signification, meaning catching up with sound.

Borges’s were to have vanished for decades after their utterance. As the editor of *This Craft of Verse* writes: “For more than thirty years the six lectures never made it into print, the tapes gathering dust in the quiet ever-after of a library vault. When they had gathered enough, they were found.”³⁸ The tapes were then transcribed. In the March 20th lecture Borges says of Yeats, quoting the poem from which Tiempo draws her epigraph: “Bodily decrepitude is wisdom.” This, of course, could be read ironically. Yeats knew quite well that we might attain bodily decrepitude without attaining wisdom. I suppose that wisdom is more important than love; love, than mere happiness. There is

³⁶ Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Oakland: Stanford University, 1969), p. 317. For the dating of “Sailing to Byzantium,” see p. 211. Cf. Hugh Kenner, “The Sacred Book of the Arts,” *The Sewanee Review* 64, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1956), p. 575.

³⁷ Borges, *The Craft of Verse*, p. 82.

³⁸ Calin-Andrei Mihailescu, “Of This and That Versatile Craft,” in Borges, *The Craft of Verse*, p. 143.

something trivial about happiness. We get a statement about happiness in the other part of the stanza. "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young/ We loved each other and were ignorant."³⁹

Contra Yeats the elder, Tiempo similarly allies her thought with Yeats the younger, who recognizes that decrepitude is not wisdom. Ageing love in "Byzantium," rather, insists on being without knowledge. It insists that even a learned scab of language is mere disguise for a youthful desire for wisdom.

Ferried across a transatlantic Babel this time, Tiempo overhears in the "Silence" of 1929 Yeats speaking in the earlier poem. "An aged man is but a paltry thing," Yeats says, nursing a cold limb in autumn, 1926. Paltriness occurs, however, only if an old man fails to hear

Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence.⁴⁰

Tiempo's "Babylon" overhears one poem interrupted by another, attuned to the variance between them. There is a sense in which gently, Tiempo appears to be telling the Irish poet that he seems to have misheard himself.

"Byzantium," Tiempo suggests, is a poem he need not have translated into "Silence." Reading the two Yeats poems side by side marks an odd reversal. The last two lines of "Silence" are similar to the first two lines of "Byzantium." The earlier-written poem begins:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

³⁹ Borges, *The Craft of Verse*, p. 82. A lover of Shakespeare, Borges may also be overhearing *King Lear*, when the fool says to the sovereign: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

⁴⁰ W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *The Tower: A Facsimile Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1928; 2004), p. 2.

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Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

The resemblance of the two Yeats poems is deceptive. The meditation on decrepitude in “Byzantium” continues beyond its opening lines. And it is in the last two sections where the crucial dehiscence occurs, and the mask of certitude falls away. Because there is no wisdom in decrepitude, the old man appeals to the gods of prosthetic life to guide him toward unnatural innocence. “Once out of nature”—the fourth stanza begins.

But the reader might ask: does the first stanza equate age with wisdom? I think the old man is doing just that. Yeats of course is more equivocal. The old man, however, believes age grants him a comportment of wisdom. He assumes this posture by dwelling overmuch on the contrast between himself and, on the other hand, the birds, fish, and young people—all in estrus. “All neglect,” he says, their impermanence and what he strains to touch: “monuments of unageing intellect.” Weary of “that country,” he departs for Byzantium.

Perhaps I should call on a more credible witness to this traversal. In a book devoted to Yeats, Helen Vendler reads “Sailing to Byzantium” as a progression, each “station” representing a shift toward “a singing proper to the soul.”⁴¹ I think that it’s apt then to read the first stanza as a claim to wisdom. The stanza articulates, as a measure of wisdom, the distance or nearness to Byzantium.

From an old man’s point of view, Byzantium is the most proper site of proper singing. He presumes that his awareness of mortality puts him in relative proximity to this monument par excellence. Better music lessons, he believes, can be found there—better, that is, than what the sensuous multitude hear, the music of “*dying* generations,” as passionate as an Elizabethan pun on orgasm, well-sustained but ultimately fleeting.

⁴¹ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 29. A relevant bit of trivia concerns Yeats’s allusion (“mosaic”) to the Hagia Sophia, his myth’s historical basis: the name literally means “Holy Wisdom.” See Vendler, “The Later Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 83.

Toward the end of the poem, however, Yeats asks the reader to buy *knowingly* into the fiction at work: a “bodily form” that is not “taken from any natural thing.” There are no words in nature. What sings is pure language emanating from an apparatus.⁴² This artifice (instead of being called “poem alluding to Keats”) Yeats calls: “a form as Grecian goldsmiths make.” The trope used is “hammered gold” mixed with imitation, “gold enameling.”

Yeats registers the old man’s equivocation, questioning the claim implicit in the first section. It is important then to step back, as Tiempo does, and to hear the voice prior to the moment of Yeatsian shape-shift. “Babylon” critiques “Silence” by mutely invoking the supplication for the impossible in “Byzantium,” like Clammy-Hand in Tiempo’s poem, reaching into the heart of Inanna and Dumuzi. In the third stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium,” the old man addresses fire-spun figures and asks them to be the “singing-masters of my soul.”

It is tempting to suppose that the figures Yeats hails with apostrophe are stern-looking men. But no one in the poem fits that portrait. The sages look more like acrobats; they “pern in a gyre.” It is to these graceful giddy folk that the old man prays to become other-than-human—as if to echo Stevens writing in 1915, “The body dies; the body’s beauty lives.”⁴³ But apostrophe, it should be noted, hails an other whose reply is foreclosed. Even the third stanza, then, doesn’t quite affirm wisdom in age. For who in the end hears the old seeking translation?

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Only the reader hears. Reading this poem, Tiempo seems to discern in Yeats the younger a speaker hesitating after claiming wise decrepitude. He equivocates by praying to be translated into artifice. Take my “hot

⁴² “The bird is less than human in its toy-like character; out of generation, it yet must sing of generation, ... irrevocably dependent upon the nature which it affects to spurn.” Richard Ellmann, “Yeats without Analogue” *The Kenyon Review* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1964), p. 45.

⁴³ Stevens, “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, p. 8. See note 28 above.

heart,” he seems to be say, and with it animate a toy in some unimaginable imperium. Store my “bodily form” in a memory device that need not suffer time while singing for time’s tatters.

Yeats’ bird-like phonograph emits sounds on the way to signification. The signs depart for the “yellowy burning,” a kind of heliotrope sensed with an ephebe’s ignorant eye. What the third stanza names “eternity” is described by the fourth as an imaginary place where, extracted from decay, the voice sings “of what is past, or passing, or to come.” There is no wisdom here but music, Blakean longing for the productions of time.

But tampering with his own tune, Yeats falls into the dialectics of “Silence.” And Tiempo hears the alteration, preferring the hesitancy of Yeats the younger, the deferral that belongs to poetry’s philosophical movement. Neruda, in his famous poem about poetic vocation, describes this sort of wisdom as “*pura sabiduría del que no sabe nada*,” the pure knowing of one who knows zilch.

It is the Yeats in “Byzantium” whom Tiempo invokes to question the supposed wisdom she hears from Yeats the elder. She addresses her skepticism to a poet she has learned by heart, a loved-one she has memorized, incorporated, loved to bits. She asks him, once more via *Twelfth Night*, “How have you made division of yourself?”⁴⁴

And what does Tiempo do in the face of the babelization prompting Yeats to change his mind about “Byzantium”?⁴⁵ She engages it. She translates the differing Yeats into her idiom. She read-writes the spaces

⁴⁴ Poetry for Derrida is “the dream of learning by heart [*le rêve d'apprendre par coeur*].” It is the dream of “letting your heart be traversed by the dictated dictation [*par la dictée*]..... I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, that which, finally, the word heart seems to mean.... The memory of the ‘by heart’ [*par coeur*] is confided like a prayer... to a certain exteriority of the automaton, to the laws of mnemotechnics.” Derrida, trans. Peggy Kamuf, “*Che cos’è la poesia?*” in *A Derrida Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 231. Emphases in the original.

⁴⁵ Lehto, “In the Beginning Was Translation,” p. 50. “If the original poem already effects a new material dimension in its own language, translation in turn will unfold yet another one that is not, strictly speaking, situated in either of the languages. This way, Benjamin’s solution to the ‘problem’ of babelization is—more babelization.” Lehto alludes to the idea that a work’s afterlife is its translatability. What quickens a poem or story is that which invites the reader to translate it beyond the period of work’s emergence, letting the text to survive long after its time. See Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard, 1996), p. 254. Originally published in 1923.

that she already seems to have been destined to pierce, crossing the borders of cities and nations, and granting Yeats an afterlife he could not have foreseen. Tiempo writes: “Babylon.” The set scene, reread and rewritten, becomes a scene of invention. “If this hand seared and seared by terrible beauty,” Tiempo writes in her last stanza,

Could menace the coiled destroyer in the rice,
If it could swing in hooks and whorls
Despising (or missing) the dull stance of protection,
Then he might wear shiny both switch and pen.

Writing subjects certitude to usure. Responding to the two Yeatses, Tiempo’s voice matures, younger than ever. “Babylon” echoing “Byzantium” takes the gnomic statement in “Silence” back to its proper reserve of indeterminacy and skepticism. Bodily decrepitude is *not* wisdom. Young lovers, however akin to ancient deities, are unable to love passionately enough what they claim to love—and yet they are not ignorant.

Outside time, Yeats’ mechanical bird sings for “a drowsy Emperor.” Tiempo, on the other hand, writes about being in an age where the pairing of Mesopotamian vestiges and rice paddies could not have occurred without Empire. And while Yeats dreams of immortal song, Tiempo’s insight into reading-writing is that it offers only a mimesis of eternity. Her gambit with otherness relates to the *historical* potencies of the signifying animal.

Babel after Babel

Tiempo’s arthritic man is mustering the courage to write. Of course, comparing the literary task with agricultural labor is far from being an abrogation of colonial systems. And yet something of this venal trope is fraught with historical recognition. The skepticism toward the received thematics of innocence and age, the skepticism found in Tiempo’s poem about a literate rice farmer, can be read in terms of cultural politics in the postcolony. Nothing in “Babylon” forbids the reader from destabilizing the aura of Tiempo’s metaphysical vocabulary, with phrases like “young Southeast Asian democracies” or “the old legacies of the West.” Here is another possibly telepathic gloss from Peter Cole:

<https://archium.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol15/iss3/1>

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And may my love and language lead me into
 that perplexity, and that simplicity,
altering what I might otherwise be.
 But let it happen through speech's clarity—
 as normal magic, which certain words renew.⁴⁶

For the poet Jacques Roubaud, it is not truly possible to write a poem without submitting oneself to an unknown reader. "The reader," Roubaud says, "is included in defining poetry as a quartet of forms." There is in advance a "person receiving the poem," attending the scene of making from another time, perhaps another politics. But what is the quartet of forms? Of this four-part playing I recall only "written form." I have to echo it with my term "read-write" to describe the spaces of futurity inhabit a poem. The internal forms, Roubaud writes,

are in the mind of the reader-listener; essentially nontransmissible from one person to another; they are always in the movement within memory: movement of images, of thoughts. Ultimately, the external written form is idle, but not the internal mental page that constitutes the written form.⁴⁷

Entonces, dear Wreader, no me preguntes como pasa el tiempo. Do not ask me how poetic time passes for eternity. Do not ask me how poetic signatures come about, coaxing dead language to revive in places where they are least expected. And do not ask me how in passing through one

⁴⁶ Cole, "Notes on Bewilderment," p. 42. Emphases added.

⁴⁷ Jacques Roubaud, trans. Jean-Jacques Poucel, "Prelude: Poetry and Orality," in *The Sound of Poetry*, "Notes in Bewilderment, 19. Cf. Roubaud, "Obstination de la Poesie," in *Le Monde Diplomatique* online, in January 2010. A member of the "workshop of potential literature," Roubaud ends his essay with a distillation of principles not alien to *Tiempo*: "that poetry takes place in a [particular] language, constitutes itself through words; without words, no poetry; that a poem should be a linguistic art object with four dimensions, that is to say, it is composed at once for a page, voice, ear, and for inward vision. Poetry must be *read* and *uttered*." Emphases in the original.

catastrophe of misapprehension after another, from Babel to Baghdad, history manages to draw out new writing from tired readers.

My retelling is coming to a close. And yet there is no end to singing-school. There is no end to reading "Babylon," rewriting "Byzantium." How indeed does a poet ever get back to that set scene, the hot heart? How does one learn to conserve youthful perceptions in the face of aging and nonreturn? To try to catch up with others, to desire with them the desire for thinking; to keep loving wisdom ignorantly as only perhaps the poet can? The poet: not any but the singular Edith Tiempo.