

A Search for Lost Time: Walter K. Lew's *Excerpts from Dikte for DICTEE* (1982)

Walter K. Lew's "critical collage" titled *Excerpts From DIKTE for DICTEE* (1982)¹ may not be a step toward gaining Theresa Cha a *popular* audience, for its attention to, and adoption of, Cha's methods in *DICTEE* and in her own theoretical writing lead it into avenues of expression that often seem just as "uncanny"² and revolutionary as *DICTEE* itself. Lew, an artist who has worked in many fields, including film and poetry, a scholar of Asian and Asian American literature, and a translator of Korean poetry (his extraordinary translations of Yi Sang appeared in the Winter, 1992 issue of *Korean Culture*), is one of the few Asian American critics to have been actively attentive to Cha's work for the entire decade since her death in 1982. He dedicated his brief anthology of Asian American poems for the journal *Bridge* (Winter, 1982) to Cha, and in the last line of his introduction, "A New Decade of Singular Poetry," writes "We never met, but her brilliant book of texts and graphics, *DICTEE*, points to possibilities that any serious Korean American artist should contemplate as we enter a future that threatens essential continuities."³ Lew's interest in "continuities" has survived into *Excerpts* (observe the year, 1982, in his title), and he seems to be saying in this dedication that Cha's complex, experimental, uncanny and ultimately sincere *DICTEE* is a good place to start.

It is difficult to describe *Excerpts*: it operates on so many principles at once, and takes such advantage of collage techniques of image/ text juxtaposition, that it is certainly a book that has to be "seen to be believed." As in *DICTEE*, the text exists somewhere between languages, with passages in English, Korean, and French, exhibiting the polyglot sensibility of the cultural exile which is emblematic of Cha's work. The images reproduced in *Excerpts*, all provocatively reproduced by photocopying, are equally heterogeneous and eclectic. These images include an old hand-drawn map of Korea (calligraphic and highly "subjective"), the table of contents from a French book *Coreenes* (placed near its beginning, a parallel to Cha's forged invocation of Sappho), several photographs of tombs from the book *Necropoli dell' Italia Antica*, reproductions from a children's picture book about the Korean nationalist Yu Kwan-sun (with significant captions added from another text, Claude Berard's "Apocalypse Eleusiniennes"), and pages from Lew's own notebook written while watching Carl Dreyer's *Le Passion*

¹ Page citations from *Excerpts* (which uses Chinese numerals in the text. Arabic in the endnotes) will be made selectively. All references in *DICTEE* are from the first printing of the work (New York: Tanam Press, 1982).

² From "Falling Into the Korean Uncanny" by Robert Wilson (*Korean Culture*, Fall 1991). Wilson borrows the term from Freud in approach a unique understanding of the "polyphony of voices" in *DICTEE*, which can be situated within a desiccated landscape of the sublime... especially as her writing gets displaced into unconscious sites... [in a] process of repression-and-return (p. 35).

³ *Bridge* (Winter 1983), p. 12.

de Jean D'Arc. The sources of many of these texts and images are found in *Excerpts*' twenty-eight endnotes.

Excerpts measures 9 by 9 inches, a reference to the mystical significance Cha placed on the number 9. "Ninth, Unending series of nines, or nine points linked together,"⁴ Cha writes, and she individually invokes the Nine Muses of classical Greek mythology to head each of *DICTEE*'s sections. One of the first legible sentence fragments in *Excerpts* is from a reproduction of a corrupted back cover of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Fires*, and it states: "...consists of some nine monologues and narratives based on classical Greek stories. Interspersed are highly personal..." The back cover of *Fires* seems to be in an advanced state of decay, yet it is clear that someone willfully erased, or "whited out" (this sort of ambiguity is possible in "photocopy art") certain

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key words or dates, otherwise, it appears as if the rain, or other force of nature, got to it. On the facing page is another reproduction of that same back cover, but with different erasures and erosions.

This sort of attention to the book, to its status as physical artifice with expressive qualities independent of language, is characteristic of *Excerpts*. The reproductions of the back covers point toward an articulation of the very metaphysic of decay, on the attempt at reproducing and resurrecting a decayed text, and of the life a text may have in an altered, alternative state. The reproductions provide, indeed, a visual metaphor for reading, as the entire process of reading may be said to rely on a degree of "misprision," to borrow Harold Bloom's term, for its effects.

Reading, memory, and the unusual injunction to "void," and thereby purge and empower, the materials necessary for communication, whether physical or semantic, are all themes in *DICTEE*. "Bite the tongue. Beneath the teeth. Swallow/deep. Deeper. Swallow. Again, even more. / Until there would be no more organ,"⁵ (and later, in a phrase evoking vomiting (supported by a diagram of an esophagus and larynx): "Void the words."⁶ The theme adopts an elegiac tone in the following lines from "Aller":

Discard. Every memory. Of
Even before they could
Surge themselves. Forgotten so, easily
not even as associations
signatures in passage. Pull by the very root, the very
possible vagueness they may evoke.
Colors faintly dust against your vision.
Erase them.

⁴ *DICTEE* p. 173.

⁵ *DICTEE*, p.71.

⁶ *DICTEE*, p. 73.

Make them again white.⁷

This theme in *DICTEE* is evoked by the reproductions, as the gashes of erasure, irrational yet perversely determined, are violent in their potency. These pages also refer to a book that Cha, as Lew suggests here and elsewhere, knew well, and which was a necessary spur to write *DICTEE*. Themes merge with a similar intensity on each page of *Excerpts*, and yet these two early graphics are an adequate preparation for Lew's concentrated exploration.

Radical Continuities

Lew's attention to the expression of the physical, akin to a sculpture's, demands that *Excerpts* be considered beyond the confines of a normally defined "book." *Excerpts*, and by extension *DICTEE*, can therefore be thought of as not only books but as something quite different: films. In *Excerpts* and in films the images run completely to the edge of the medium, whether paper page or celluloid frame (i.e. the "silver screen"). This may seem an elaboration on something only partly realized in *DICTEE* (in which the text is less visual, and many of the images have a "standard" white border), but it is in fact a technique that Cha explores in her visual essay "Commentaire," which appears in the anthology of writings about film that she edited, *Apparatus*.⁸

The images of "Commentaire" also occupy the entire page, whether the "image" be of the word "noir" (in cursive,⁹ white on a black background), of total blackness or whiteness, of a white page/field with a thick black border along the perimeter of two facing pages, or a photo of a brick wall (The entire vocabulary of the sixty-three page "Commentaire" is not more than a handful of English and French words; yet, there it is among essays by Roland Barthes, Maya Deren, and Dziga Vertov!). "Commentaire" only becomes cinematic, however, when the reader/viewer is willing to sacrifice the comfortable determinacy of a machine that presents, at so many frames a second, the "projected" film. In "Commentaire" the rhythms are determined by the reader's own caprices or disciplines at the time, turning the pages at will: not an aleatory exercise as in much of Cage, but merely the sacrificing of the machine. This makes it, indeed, a difficult text to appreciate, for the reader cannot merely concentrate *on* the text but must participate in it.¹⁰ *Excerpts* operates like "Commentaire" on a similar principal of

⁷ *DICTEE* p. 128.

⁸ (New York: Tanam, 1980). This excellent anthology is worth considering in relation to *DICTEE* and *Excerpts* as their methods derive from what one might call an "anthologist's ethic," a mastery of communication through a precise orchestration of assembled texts.

⁹ *Funk and Wagnall's New International Dictionary, Comprehensive Edition* (Newark: Publishers International Press, 1984) defines cursive as "Running; flowing; said of writing in which the letters are joined." One wonders if Cha, who was probably not introduced to this word in her early youth, ever came upon such a suggestive definition.

¹⁰ Aspects of this complication of the reader-to-text relationship can be found in the ideas of the dominant, more consciously "theoretical," avant-garde poets of America today, those of the "Language"

book-as-film, and both works must be understood within the traditions of filmic creation" by extension, *Excerpts* can be seen not as a commentary on *DICTEE* alone, but on Cha's entire oeuvre.

Excerpts, with its unique expressiveness through collage/montage techniques, also borrows from the tradition of the haiku, the Japanese form of poetry that involves the presentation, within the length of three lines, of one or two images (traditionally derived from nature) along with little, or no, authorial comment. The form has been of interest to such writers as the American poet Ezra Pound¹² and the French semiotician Roland Barthes, who relied on a definition of haiku in essays about, for instance, the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The Asian American filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who has written about Cha, quotes Barthes on haiku in the following way in "The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia":

Because of its brevity, haiku is often referred to as a "silence," a heavy, deep, mystical silence, and is attributed to a "sign of a full language." As a "vision lacking commentary," haiku will nevertheless not allow commentary. Ku cannot

School. "[S]uch writing serves as a performance in which the reader is both audience and performer... in which meaning... is inseparable from the language in process." *"Language" Poetries: An Anthology* (New York: New Directions, 1987), introduction, p. 3.

¹¹ The indeterminacy of this exercise is no doubt a post-modern tactic (for film); the variation of filmic rhythms beyond the constraints of "real-time" sound in a film is not. Gertrude Stein writes an account in *Everybody's Autobiography* (cited in Sitney P. Adams, *Modernist Montage*, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990] p. 160) of a conversation she had with Charlie Chaplin, an individual who was much respected in avant-garde, especially Cubist, circles of that day. She writes:

He said naturally it was disappointing, he had known the silent films and in that they could do something that the theatre had not done they could change the rhythm but if you had a voice accompanying naturally after that you could never change the rhythm you were always held by the rhythm that the voice gave them. We talked a little about the *Four Saints* [a play of Stein's] and what my idea had been, I said that what was most exciting was when nothing was happening, I said that saints could naturally do nothing if you were a saint that was enough and a saint existing was everything, if you made them do anything then there was nothing to it they are just like anyone so I wanted to write a drama where no one did anything....

This passage also points to similarities between Stein's and Cha's language: a consciously limited vocabulary, resonant repetition of phrases and words (to create an air of stasis), and a heavy emphasis on rhythm. Their mutual interest in saints, though obviously diverging in many ways, are linked in that Cha, too, has rendered her saints "silent," doing nothing [observe the still, so powerfully isolated, from Dreyer's *Le Passion De Jean D'Arc*, in *DICTEE*. Lew remarks upon "Yu Kwan-sun, presented close-up and alone within the book, taking her place 'again' in the class photograph deliberately cropped down to nine students...." in his prose "August 1986. Paris" toward the end of *Excerpts* (p. 111).

¹² In "I gather the Limbs of Osiris" (1911-12) Pound describes the "Luminous Detail" method of scholarship (as opposed to that of "multitudinous detail" or the "method of sentiment and generalization") in which significant facts are contrasted rather than expounded upon, an initial insight he carries through a number of essays and anthologies, his theories of Imagism and Vorticism, and many poems including the famous "In a Station of the Metro" and *The Cantos*.

be explicated, merely repeated; nor can it be deciphered, analyzed, or developed without subjection to the processes of metaphor or syllogism. In fact, “It is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which assumes immediately its adequate form.” Its rightness is owing to a merging of signifier and signified, a suppression of border-lines, leaks of significance or interstices which ordinarily exceed or open up the semantic relationship.”¹³

Trinh Minh-Ha’s comments are an extension of her own interest in creating a form of documentary film that does not “subject” the filmed object to some sort of master discourse,¹⁴ an interest as aesthetic as it is anti-colonialist. Lew’s project in *Excerpts*, his attempt to invite *DICTEE* into critical discourse without the engagement of the “processes of metaphor or syllogism,” is similar in that he is pursuing the “rightness” that Trinh describes: his purposeful mime of Cha’s techniques are, perhaps, the “repeating” that is the limit to defining haiku. It can be said, therefore, that Lew observes *DICTEE* as something of a haiku itself, or at least treats it with the sort of sensitivity that Barthes and Trinh would have when treating their object, whether a work of literature or a source for the camera eye.

Excerpts accentuates the “mystical silences” and elliptical presences of *DICTEE* in what may be discouragingly direct fashion, so much that one may not be able to observe *Excerpts* as more than a derivative work, hence of a necessarily lesser order. Such a misperception occludes the virtue of *Excerpts*, which is that it does not reduce Cha’s work to a series of themes which then can be digested, “understood,” utilized (for political purposes), and therefore confined. One would fail to understand, also, the adaptability of the collage technique to any number of critical enterprises. *Excerpts* lives with, animates, and engages *DICTEE*; another configuration might be that Cha’s book becomes within the many quotations, images, and techniques that *Excerpts* exhibits. The two books can therefore be seen as conversant twins or mirrors of each other, communicating over the long decade since Cha’s death.

Blood and the Vortex

A recurring image in both *DICTEE* and *Excerpts* is that of blood. In a rich collation of images and phrases (pp. 24 to 35) Lew creates an air of resonances with *DICTEE* that,

¹³ As reprinted in Trinh Minh-Ha’s *When The Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 213. Quotes from Barthes are from *L’Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970), pp. 92, 96, 98 and 99 respectively.

¹⁴ “When speaking about the Master, I am necessarily speaking about both Him and the West. Patriarchy and hegemony.... Hegemony is established to the extent that the world view of the rulers is the world view of the ruled.” (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Questions of Images and Politics,” *When the Moon*, p. 148). Thomas Kuhn’s description in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of the “paradigms” of “normal science,” which render invisible the “anomaly” until a period of crisis is reached (at which point the paradigm shifts) is relevant here: a focusing upon the believed “objective,” thereby universal, methods and machinery of analysis and synthesis. (Cha, of course, was an anomaly herself.)

again, does not delimit the work, but that in no way sacrifices precision of analysis. Pages twenty-four and twenty-five contain a single word each, the mysterious neologism “sangencre,” a combination of the French words for blood, “sang,” and ink, “encre,” both of which appear in *DICTEE*. On page twenty-four “sangencre” is printed in black with a white background, and on the next page, white with a black background. This is an allusion to, and adoption of, Cha’s technique in “Commentaire,” mentioned earlier, but also to video works of hers centered around repetitions of individual words and phrases, or involving static images that change only slowly before one’s eyes. Page twenty-six of *Excerpts* is entirely white, an absence elaborated by the erasures from *Fires*, but also by such paradoxical phrases as the following from *DICTEE* (included in this sequence): “Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.”¹⁵ The five other pages of this “movement” (for *Excerpts* can also be described in musical terms, like Proust’s *A La Recherche du temps perdu*) include two other quotes from *DICTEE*, a translation of a passage from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in which the poet breaks a branch from a tree to discover that the trees are transformed souls: “. . . so forth from the broken splinter came words and blood together, and a quote from Yourcenar’s *Memoires d’Hadrien*, the first sentence of which reads: “The sorcerer who pricks his thumb before he evokes the shades knows well that they will heed his call only because they can lap his blood.”

The longest excerpt tells the story of a *p’ansori* singer, Song Hung-nok, who was acclaimed throughout the land for his precocity and skills. In the story, however, there was one person, the renowned kisaeng Maeng-nyol, who was so unimpressed with his singing that she “hadn’t once parted her lips to comment. Her indifference and injunction to make the “three rounds of blood” leads Song to practice behind a thundering waterfall:

Three months of fierce effort later, he was struggling to keep singing when there suddenly heaved up from his throat three thick gobs of blood that he spat out like dark pebbles. From then on, Song’s scarred larynx began to clear and his voice rang out beyond the roar of the waterfall; people say it could even be heard miles away.

Not long afterwards, Song was performing again in T’aegu, at the Sonwha Hall. His voice was so wondrous that Maeng-nyol almost went mad listening.¹⁶

This passage evokes Cha’s injunction to “void the words” because (as she writes later) “they are not physical enough.”¹⁷ The story can be understood as metaphor, precedent, commentary, and influence: few possibilities are excluded, and yet each

¹⁵ In *DICTEE*, p. 65. Cha’s passage describes the experience of having blood taken: “She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark.” *Excerpts* contains other parts from this section.

¹⁶ *Excerpts*, p. 31, from a translation by Lew of *P’ansori sosa* by Pak Hwang.

¹⁷ *DICTEE* p.32.

offers a compelling argument. Later, in the section “CLIO HISTORY” Cha includes many documents that describe the atrocities of the Japanese occupation of Korea, inclusions that are similarly potent and indeterminate. “Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt,” drafted by P.K. Yoon and Syngman Rhee, composes part of this section, and Cha writes, perhaps remarking on their failure:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To this enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of this enemy people.

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core....¹⁸df

The “vocabulary,” that of the Japanese language, provides “the measure of their victory. It is not only, however, that the words draw blood, like knives, but also that their forced presence invokes an absence: the memory that can only be in one’s native language. Cha writes: “The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret,”¹⁹ the “you” referring to her own mother, who was a teacher during the Japanese occupation of Korea. A universality beyond the particulars of history is attained when one understands that her mother’s loss of the Korean language is, in a sense, a duplicate of Cha’s own loss, which is that of her mother: what is sacrificed with the forfeited native tongue is the very matriarchal lineage of creative/creating speech.

The tragedy of Korea is, therefore, the tragedy of language; as language also fails to convey to “other nations who are not witnesses” the terror and atrocity of the occupation, this tragedy adopts an almost Chomskian critique of the semantics of reportage. Indeed, “enemy,” “atrocious” and other once potent words are rendered impotent by their very repetition; Cha is, consequently, mesmerized by these words, like a child with a once-blue sky. The “game” of language is, finally, not a game at all; Cha’s obsession with language is not academic, an aesthetic eccentricity or adopted theme. Her faith in it, despite its failures, empowers her.

Excerpts, which boldly situates itself among a number of languages, often in eliminating contrast, and among a number of decayed texts and half-ruined (by photocopying) images, places itself in the bleak terrain of this lineage-in-exile, its secrets and failures. As it is a critical study with the advantage of distance and rime, *Excerpts* pro-

¹⁸ *DICTEE*, p. 32.

¹⁹ *DICTEE*, p. 45.

ceeds a step further; its meanings expand to include commentary on the philosophy of art, the peculiar strengths of Cha's art, and the nature and rigorous ethic (which Lew believes necessary) of the poet/creator. The blood of the singer Song Hung-nok, for instance, is not simply the "blood of the poet," a cliché symbol of Song's dedication to perfection, but also the hard-earned trophy of a necessary revolutionary undertaking (he is, after all, trying to change someone's mind): words cannot fail. The blood of Dante's infernal trees is not just the blood of the damned (the blood that proves to the poet that the trees are, indeed, souls) but is also Cha's blood; as *Excerpts* suggests within this sequence, Cha's early, violent death denied her an essential, "novelist's"²⁰ experience: she was "robbed of her death." Finally, one of Yourcenar's sorcerers who will "heed his call only because they can lap his blood" may be the reverent scholar himself, the one who rescues the absent artist/Persephone from the inferno of critical subjugation, manipulation, indifference and ignorance. Lew's collage/homage is thrilling in this sense as it is the vortex through which the radical continuity from *DICTEE*, and perhaps Cha's life's enterprise, runs. It comments upon itself as contribution to *DICTEE*'s artistic, and now critical, lineage.

A smeared dab of blood, like a signature, marks the last page of each copy of *Excerpts*. This highly gestural relic, like an ideograph of a forgotten language, is, in fact, the point of highest concentration for this vortex: it is the text come into physical being (beyond paper, ink and press), and it, consequently, complicates the line between the signifier "blood" and the special diction of *Excerpts*. It is the dark void through which the continuity of *DICTEE* rushes.

²⁰ The quote from Yourcenar in *Excerpts* (from which this word is taken) alludes to the idea of this "experience" being dependent upon a total, "novelist's" conception of one's life. Cha, who was no doubt involved in such a totality, was, as *Excerpts* suggests, denied even the "heroism" of using [her] own demise" (*Excerpts*, p. 89).