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**AGAINST WORLD
LITERATURE**

**ON THE POLITICS OF
UNTRANSLATABILITY**

EMILY APTER



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concern with ecosystems (and their organicist, genetic, evolutionary applications) and more concern with computational systems tout court, albeit in the service of literary and social history. From the well-endowed seat of the digital humanities, gracious concessions are offered to the old humanities:

For all we have learned from the admirable restraint the sciences show towards making conclusions, we find great value in the humanistic modes of argument that put forward possibilities and power ideas, which may not yet be conclusive or certain, but which drive further study and force us to look at what we thought we knew in new ways.¹²

Hope is pinned on inconclusiveness and skepticism toward what one knows, but rarely are the rewards of this abstracted, digital account of World Literature made clear. It would seem that the expansive "world" of this quant-driven ecosystem tends towards contraction of the economy of interpretation.

12 Stanford Literary Lab, litlab.stanford.edu; the study report of a lab experiment: Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore, "The Very Large Textual Object: A Prosthetic Reading of Shakespeare," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9: 3, January 2004, as cited by Sarah Allison, Ryan Heuser, Matthew Jockers, Franco Moretti, and Michael Witmore, "Quantitative Formalism: An Experiment," *n + 1* 13, Winter 2012, 81; Hope and Witmore, "The Very Large Textual Object," 92; *ibid.*, 108; Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac "A Quantitative Literary History of 2,958 Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Semantic Cohort Method," *Literary Lab Pamphlet* 4, 7; *ibid.*, 49.

III

Eurochronology and Periodicity

Shaped by classical genre theory, Renaissance humanism, Hegelian historical consciousness, *Geistesgeschichte*, Goethean *Weltliteratur*, and the Marxist ideal of an "International of letters," literary history has been beset by what Christopher Prendergast, following Arjun Appadurai, calls the "Eurochronology problem." This is a problem arising from the fact that critical traditions and disciplines founded in the Western academy contain inbuilt typologies—"epic," "classicism," "Renaissance," "genre," "world history"—adduced from Western literary examples.¹ It is impossible, for instance, to disentangle the genre of epic from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and from the idea of ancient Greece as the foundation of Western civilization. Developmental narratives of literary history that structure the unfurling of national literary traditions privilege the works of canonical authors as peaks in a world-literary landscape. They tend to naturalize parameters of comparison that exclude certain kinds of cultural production from the realm of "art," or assign the term art only to certain kinds of objects. So, for example, when European nineteenth-century art history invented "Chinese art," it treated China as a totalized cultural essence; calligraphy and painting were anointed as art, while temple architecture was consigned to lower status as sacred building.² Similarly divisive

1 Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, New York: Verso, 2004, 6.

2 Craig Clunas suggests, "The question 'What is art in China?' could really be rephrased as 'What has historically been called art in China, by whom and when?'" The

categorizations govern Western classification of works as either "literature" or "folklore." European literatures carry the prestige of print culture (heightened by a special claim on the modern novel), while non-European literatures, subject to Eurocentric standards of literariness and readability that class them closer to folklore and oral culture, tend to occupy a more tenuous position in World Literature. Clearly, the nations that name the critical lexicon are the nations that dominate the classification of genres in literary history and the critical paradigms that prevail in literary world-systems.

In recent years, the critique of Orientalism within international modernism has prompted the need for new paradigms of literary history; paradigms that assign cultural specificity and theoretical density to Asian modernisms. Attention has increasingly been devoted to the multiple "imperialisms" of modernism, and, in particular, to the impact of the Japanese occupation during World War II. In the context of intra-Asian world-systems, Western modernism continues to figure strongly as a critical rubric for literary techniques and genres, but the emphasis is on how Western forms enabled Asian modernisms to redefine what modernism *is*. A prime example of this approach can be found in Peng Hsiao-yen's work on what she calls "transcultural modernity" in Shanghai, Tokyo and Paris during the 1930s. Hsiao-yen suggests that the genre of neo-sensationalism, as it moved from Europe to Japan to China, occasioned the rethinking of modernism by temporal, regional, national.³ Hsiao-yen Peng's emphasis on shifting temporal frames of modernism within comparative literary history is of particular interest. If one stays within the standard periodized parameters of modernism as a designation for early-twentieth-century American and European experimental writing (including stream of

French scholar Victor Segalen (1878–1919), author of a pioneering work called *The Great Statuary of China*, refused to deal at all with Buddhist sculpture in China (which forms the bulk of the surviving work in all media), on the grounds that it was "not really Chinese," but rather an 'alien' import from India ..."; see *Art in China*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 10 and 12.

³ Peng Hsiao-yen, *Dandyism and Transcultural Modernity: The Dandy, the Flâneur, and the Translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris*, New York: Routledge, 2010.

consciousness narrative, typographical novelty, free verse, and multilingual poetics), Asian modernisms tend to figure only marginally. Once extended to Asia, however, modernism becomes the name for slippages among modernity and modernization, nationalism and Westernization, cosmopolitanism and anti-imperialism, individualism and militant collectivism, bourgeois and proletarian culture. It also serves to designate a complex aesthetic dischronology during the interwar period, which saw the coexistence of "art for art's sake" (typified by the poetry of China's Li Jinfa and Korea's Kim Ok), realism (defined by the Chinese writers Lu Xun and Mao Dun), the Japanese "new sensibility writers" (fascinated by the avant-garde "new woman," urban spectacle and technology), pan-Asian nationalist fiction (Sato Haruo's 1938 *Son of Asia*), and anti-Western proletarian narratives (by China's Zhao Shuli or Korea's Lin Hua). This heterodox modernism does not wane the way modernism in Europe and America arguably did with the end of World War II but continues in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms as an omnibus term designating the desire for "democracy; avant-garde conceptualism, humanism, structuralism; "global" imagism; and much more.

Discrepant modernisms necessitate the conversion of conventional paradigms of literary history or incite the invention of new ones altogether. As already noted, in Western literary criticism, even when the purview is World Literature, Occidental genre categories invariably function as program settings. And when non-European literatures are addressed, they are often grouped under monolithic rubrics such as "Islam" or "Asia" (a tendency criticized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Other Asias* [2008]). Dipesh Chakrabarty has gone some distance to correct for Eurochronology in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000, new edition 2007). He challenges emulative problematics in the study of non-Europe, and argues convincingly that, in the words of one reviewer, "Historical experience establishes that no country can be an unquestioned model to another country."⁴ Avoiding the simplistic substitution of Asiaticity or Afrocentricity for Eurocentricity,

⁴ Wahé Balekjian, *International Constitutional Law-Journal* 2: 3, 2008, 222.

which rests on a caricatural logic of divided world-systems and cultural Othering, Chakrabarty proposes translational approaches that negotiate among regionally marked concepts, practices and institutions in his 2007 preface.

A translational literary history would take its cue from Chakrabarty's critique of European historicism as well as from Johannes Fabian's 1983 classic *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, which revealed the "denial of coevalness" in the historiography of comparative culture; from Edward Said's practice of "contrapuntal reading," on which basis, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), the author argues for "reading with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those subjected and concealed histories against which the dominant discourse acts"; and from Ania Loomba's *Re-Orienting the English Renaissance* (2008), which contests the dominance of Western chronotopes in the early modern period. Lionel Ruffel's edited volume *What is the Contemporary?*⁵ which emphasizes modernism's accommodation to colonialism and postmodernism's comfortable fit with the era of Americanization. In this context, Pascale Casanova extends Said's notion of "Greenwich Mean Time" to the concept of a nomothetic *oeuvre qui fait date*—a watershed, game-changing text—that acts as a "temporal accelerator" on non-metropolitan literary traditions. As Casanova makes clear, periodization logics are anchored to fetish dates like the birth or death of an author or the publication of a groundbreaking work. Such dates serve as pretexts for colloquia or retrospectives that are in turn constitutive of the sanctification of *lieux de mémoire*, national patrimonialization, and the cartographic survey of distributed intellectual capital. The date-driven humanities shores up post-Hegelian ways of doing aesthetic history that rely on progressivist blandishments; the "rise" and "evolution" of

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; and Ania Loomba, *Re-Orienting the English Renaissance*, Cambridge, MA: University of Cambridge Press, 2008; *What Is the Contemporary? (Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?)* Nantes: Editions Cécile Defaut, 2010. See Lionel Ruffel, Introduction: *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?* 9–35 and Pascale Casanova, "Le méridien de Greenwich, réflexions sur le temps de la littérature," 113–46.

genres, the "emergence" in time of stylistic movements, and the "exuberance" of capital markets.

Periodization has routinely been accepted as a standing order of criticism that eschews the kinds of controversy surrounding national literature, canon, and theory. But it, too, as Virginia Jackson has emphasized, impedes the ability to think literary history:

Literary periods allow us to write literary history, but do they keep us from thinking about literary history? The necessary abstraction of periodization is bound to make contemporary critics nervous, and for good reason. The history of literary history is full of old-fashioned ideas: Hegelian transcendence and the progress of civilization, Darwinian social evolution, the drive toward and past the modern. Those nineteenth-century ideas had some rotten consequences in the twentieth century, so it's small wonder that most of us don't like to admit their persistence in literary critical practice.

Jackson builds on previous efforts (by Fredric Jameson, Johannes Fabian, and Edward Said, among others) to periodize otherwise. Practically speaking, this implies renewed attention to time intervals that do not conform to Greenwich Mean Time or the Gregorian calendar; examples being the French revolutionary calendar (based on decimal clock time), differential East–West calibrations of duration, and discrepant temporal orders (such as the correspondence of the Iranian 1940s with Euro-America's 1960s). These discrepant temporal measures may be defined as Untranslatables of periodicity. They orient literary history toward time studies and open up new functions for historical anachronism and *décalage*. Rey Chow, recalling that Erich Auerbach was already thinking along these lines in the 1940s, urges comparatists to mobilize non-Euro-American timelines to understand "what world literature means or has already meant in other world situations." In a complementary vein, Eric Hayot (in his *On Literary Worlds*) criticizes conventional periods for their strong bias toward national limits and "untheorized and inherited notions of totality," and exhorts recourse to "telescopic models that lead from the small to the large, rather than the reverse" (e.g., focus a course on a single year) as well as the disruption of "the

period logics embedded in Realism, Romanticism and Modernism by weaning them from the master-narrative of "Modernity."⁶ For her part, Kathleen Davis shows how "the Middle Ages" and "feudalism" operate as Untranslatables of periodicity within a larger politics of time. In *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, Davis extracts the period monikers from their clichéd use as generic terms for the unmodern, and, as it were, re-translates them historically in relation to law, politics and religion:

At least two histories of periodization are implicated here: one that generates and protects cultural and political categories by grounding them upon a division between medieval and modern; and one that grounded Christian political order by attaching it, by way of the *anno domini* and the biblical supersession of the New Testament over the Old Testament (which is also to say Christian history over Jewish history), to a division in sacred time.

In a subsequent essay Davis employs the concept of "tycoon medievalism" to capture the temporal instability of "medieval" when applied to the architectural conceits of corporate philanthropy. Her prime example is Bucknell University's Carnegie Building, burnished by a lintel of names leading from Charlemagne and King Alfred through to several American presidents. The building establishes "an impersonal, self-perpetuating mechanism for redistributing economic capital into symbolic capital at a crucial moment in the history of U.S. labor relations."⁷ In addition to signaling how capitalism relies on period anachronism as a branding device for institutions and commercial products, Davis's tycoon medievalism indicates how the anachronic time-signature is

6 Virginia Jackson, "Introduction: On Periodization and its Discontents," in *On Periodization: Selected Essays from the English Institute*, American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Humanities E-Book, 2010; Rey Chow, "A Discipline of Tolerance," in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 22; Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*, London: Oxford University Press, 2013, 154–64.

7 Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, 6; Kathleen Davis, "Tycoon Medievalism, Corporate Philanthropy and American Pedagogy," *American Literary History* 22: 4, 2010, 784.

politically conscripted to graft an American plutocracy onto Europe's most legendary monarchs. Davis treats periodization categories as referents unhitched from their historical moorings, emphasizing how they function; they mis- (or re-)translate cross-temporally. Like Alexander Nagel in *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time and Anachronic Renaissance* (co-edited with Christopher Wood), she experiments heuristically in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of the "Middle Ages" outside Europe* (co-edited with Nadia Altschul) with an anachronic timeline of the Middle Ages.⁸ Here, in addition to modeling non-Eurochronological re-periodization, the authors sharpen a critical regard on the "chronic" ageism inflecting historical narrative and the periodization of aesthetics.⁹

Treating conventional period metrics—centuries, decades, *zeitgeist*, style-defined eras (classical, Gothic, Baroque, etc.)—as Untranslatables of periodicity takes us back of course, to Nietzsche. His *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, or *Untimely Meditations*, sometimes translated as "unfashionable (or unmodern) observations," published between 1873 and 1876 shortly after *The Birth of Tragedy*, grew out of a rejection of *fin-de-sièclism*, a distaste for being

8 See *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of the "Middle Ages" Outside Europe*, eds. Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2012; *Anachronic Renaissance*, ed. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, New York: Zone Books, 2010, 13: "The work of art when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it protects a future or an ideal, is 'anachronic.' We introduce this term as an alternative to 'anachronistic,' a judgmental term that carries with it the historicist assumption that every event and every object has its proper location within objective and linear time." See also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, and *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern*, ed. Patricia Clare Ingraham and Michelle R. Warren, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

9 Davis is certainly not alone in contesting the built-in ageism of conventional periodization. Her work belongs to a corpus, some of it dedicated even more exclusively to challenging the Eurocentrism of Eurochronology, that includes Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983); Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993); Peter Osborne's *Politics of Time: Modernity & the Avant-Garde* (1996); William Green's "Periodizing World History" (1998); Michael Denning's *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (2004); Adünis's *Sufism and Surrealism* (2005); Zhang Longxi's *Two Questions for Global Literary History* (2006); Kamran Rastegar's *Literary Modernity Between Europe and the Middle East* (2007); and R. Bin Wong's "Did China's Late Empire Have an Early Modern Era?" (2009).

abreast of the times typical of those who suffer from historical malady. For Nietzsche, historical malady embraces all strands of historicism, from *Geistesgeschichte* (spirit as telos, absolute spirit, classless society, progress of humanity) to historical relativism. It was only through the unfashionable, or history off its hinges, that one could deprogram the future. Nietzschean efforts to untime academic historicism, particularly those notions of *zeitgeist* that personify the archaeological and political dating of history, line up with Marx's incalculable "time" of revolution, Freudian belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*), Benjamin's historical compressors, the "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) and the Outmoded, Derridean reworkings of Shakespeare's "time out of joint," Lacan and Žižek's "parallax view," Badiou's "century." In each case, politics is timed to undo prevailing logics of history.

For Badiou, untiming takes the form of *sequences* broken up by temporal intervals that disable linear history. The sequence "restoration," for example, corresponds to the long, if briefly interrupted, political reign of capitalo-parliamentarism that stretches from the Bourbon Restoration of 1814 (cementing the end of the First Republic and its vestiges under the Empire of Napoleon I) to the ongoing era of high neoliberalism. Badiou opens *The Century* with a rhetorical gesture—a rewriting of Jean Genet's preface to *Les Nègres*—that demonstrates how time-signatures, like racial categorizations, have little foundation as essentialist predicates. Genet wrote: "One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?" Badiou transposes this statement as: "A century, how many years is that? ... which is the instant of exception that effaces the twentieth century? The fall of the Berlin Wall? The mapping of the genome? The launch of the Euro?" In drawing attention to the shifting frame of the centennial bracket as it exceeds, coincides with, or falls short of one hundred years, Badiou prompts reflection on how the name of an event—Berlin Wall, genome, Euro—times the political. As Bruno Bosteels has noted, there is a shift in Badiou's work from the politicization of history to a historicization of politics that "remits a purely sequential understanding of politics to its own

intrinsic history." In *The Century*, short and long sequences straddle the borders of the twentieth century. The sequence 1890–1914 designates "the prologue"; a period before the Great War marked by the intensely compressed "polymorphic creativity" of Mallarmé, Einstein, Freud, Schoenberg, Lenin, Conrad, Henry James, Joyce, Proust, Frege, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Picasso, Braque, Poincaré, Cantor, Riemann, Hilbert, Pessoa, Méliès, Griffith, and Chaplin. Another sequence is the Soviet Century (1917–1990) that begins with the October Revolution and ends with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.¹⁰ Inside the Soviet Century, there is the smaller "totalitarian century," "timed" according to the perpetration of crimes against humanity and the state-sponsored mass extermination of humans orchestrated at the Nazi and Stalinist camps. The Totalitarian Century overlaps with, but remains distinct from, the Communist Century, measured from the time of Lenin's ascension in 1917 to the death of Mao in 1976. Badiou uses the sequence to emend epochal brackets. *The Century* wants to enable time theory to think for itself within but also beyond the strictures of historical periodization. Extrapolating here, one could say that literary history needs to open up to radical re-sequencing, through anachronic timelines, non-Eurochronic descriptions of duration, and a proliferation of new names for periods as yet unnamed, or which become discernible only as Untranslatables of periodicity.

The categories of "the contemporary" and "contemporaneity" are especially susceptible to analysis as period Untranslatables that stave off the "chronic" ageism of eras and epochs. Where and when does the contemporary begin if we are counting in years? How far back historically do we go: a decade, or only a year? When does something fall out of contemporaneity, when it no longer feels of the now-time or when temporality itself, and the styles used to measure it, are recalculated? How does the notion of a contemporary period function politically in the context of exhibitions,

10 Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, Isère, France: Marc Barbezat, 1958 (English translation: *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Grove Press, 1960); Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Polity, 2007, 1; Bruno Bosteels, "Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics," in *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13: 3, Winter 2005, 586; "the sequence 1890–1914": Badiou, *The Century*, 17–18; the "Soviet Century": *ibid.*, 10.

biennials, bookfairs, the marketing and making of art and literature? For the longest time “contemporary” art was off-limits as an area of research for art historians. To work on contemporary art implied a shift in genre from academic scholarship to criticism, journalism, exhibition reviews, catalogues, and curatorial ventures. The received wisdom was that time had to settle to determine which works of art warranted consecration under the value-added category of the historical. Twentieth-century art history routinely stopped in 1950; it crept slowly into the '60s and '70s, and even more gingerly into the '80s and '90s. A similar reserve was discernible in literary criticism and history, with the contemporary often treated as a marginal temporality. As Alex Woloch noted in his description of a course offered at Stanford University on the problem of “a genealogy and taxonomy for critical recuperation,” the “too contemporary” lines up with the “under-recognized, the forgotten, the out-of-fashion, the peripheral, the disorderly, the too difficult, the too popular, and the too old.”¹¹

Defined by elusive parameters of actuality, the future and the now-time, Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* is a temporal Untranslatable essential to the task of de-stigmatizing “the contemporary” as a periodized unit. Writing on the term in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin notes, “Although the lexical form of this word existed before Walter Benjamin marked it (it is found, notably in the work of the Romantic poet Jean Paul), Benjamin was the writer who made it into both a heuristic and a philosophico-practical concept. It is not easily translatable. Benjamin seemed to have wanted to emphasize the everyday meaning of ‘the now-time’: its nontechnical, nonscholarly use as a common noun modernized by doubling it up as *jetzt* (now, at present) and *Zeit* (time).”¹² Reminding us that *Jetztzeit* makes its entrance in Benjamin's later work “On the Philosophy of History” (or “Theses”) in 1940 as well as in notes for Notebook “N” of the *Arcades Project*, Gagnebin underscores the concept's two dimensions:

11 Alex Woloch, “Recuperative Criticism” course description, available at english.stanford.edu/courseDetail.php?course_id=3597.

12 *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, forthcoming.

a theoretical dimension, the critique of a spatialized, undifferentiated, and indifferent conception of temporal “unfolding,” in which history becomes an infinite accumulation; and a practical and political dimension, interrupting this enumeration, blocking this avalanche (Thesis 17, *Stillstellung, stillstellen* [blockage, blocking, halting]) so as to bring about a knowing transformation of the present, which also transforms the image of the past. So even though *Jetztzeit* is close, in its brief and radiant temporality, to *Augenblick* (another frequent term in the “Theses” and which Benjamin uses in the sense of “instant”), the word no doubt borrows many of the characteristics of *kairos*: the ideas of a break, of something discontinuous, of a decisive and irreplaceable moment ... It is because decisive and just political action, which happens within the time of the now, is both urgent, acute, and extremely precarious, since it has to grasp the “right moment” in midflight, that it is comparable to a messianic redemption that no theology of history or any ideology of progress could guarantee.¹³

Benjamin's “now-time” encourages us to think of “contemporaneity” as an action of politics on time. Another name for political theology, or the imagination of a futurological present tense governed by the primal fear of emergency or a sense of impending catastrophism, *Jetztzeit* complicates periodicity, and calls forth an idea of “contemporaneity” to replace the static, periodized label of “the contemporary.”

Recent theories of aesthetic chronology that would seem to take Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* as a starting point include Tim Griffin's notion of “compression”; i.e. the stitching of “‘several temporalities together’—ancient, mid-twentieth century, and contemporary” with reference to Yang Fudong's artwork *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–7). Griffin speaks of a “compression algorithm,” grafted from technical devices that permit digital information to be compactly stored and speedily transferred from one format or medium to another. For Griffin, this can function as a kind of selective memory loss. A subtractive approach to information allows for temporal foreshortening or the untiming of critical

13 VEP 660.

and historical coordinates. Compression might be seen as a way of naming “the contemporary” as a period of the “now” that shares with postmodernism specific mnemonic techniques of distillation, condensation and suturing. Following Pine and Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy*, Griffin associates compression with the sense of “being-in” and “being-out” of time associated with consumer experience.¹⁴

For Lionel Ruffel, following Francis Hartog’s *Régimes d’historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* [Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Temporal Experiences], “contemporaneity” is less about the jolt of the “now-time,” typified by Griffin’s post-postmodern aesthetics of temporal compression, and more about a kind of historicization without periodization. He connects contemporaneity (as opposed to “the contemporary”) to a sense of the present that is alive to the moment, calibrated with “what’s in the air” in terms of styles of living or aesthetic translations of the event. Contemporaneity distinguishes itself from “the time of the present” (in French “le temps présent”) inasmuch as it is neither a conventional notion of an actual era, nor a presentism that precludes the possibility of a counterfactual or parallel universe. If there is a historical dimension to contemporaneity it is, somewhat ironically, hitched to twentieth-century fin-de-sièclism: to *dénouement* or “end of history” paradigms. Ruffel is here taking his cue from a number of philosophical works that appeared after the Wall came down and the first Gulf War ignited, all of which dealt with “le champ de la fin,” or philosophical apocalypse. Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, Badiou’s *D’un désastre obscur, sur la fin de la vérité de l’Etat*, Rancière’s *La Méésentente*, Pascal Quignard’s *Sur le jadis*, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *La Comparution* are interpreted as struggles with a transitional moment; a moment that was supposedly “post-ideology” and identified with new ways of being “with time” or “in-existence.” Nancy’s “*La Comparution*/The Compearance: from

14 Tim Griffin, “Compression,” in *October* 135 (Winter 2011): 8. Griffin cites here Yang Fudong in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, “1000 Words: Yang Fudong Talks about *The Seven Intellectuals*,” *Artforum* 42 (September 2003): 183.

the Existence of ‘Communism’ to the Community of ‘Existence,’” is particularly resonant for it evokes a state of “concurrence” with a state of “appearance,” a facing down of the French juridical state of exception known as “comparution” that allows for on-the-spot judgment of a violation, leading to pretrial detention. Nancy construes “compearing” as a “co-appearing” before the world court, a way of answering for existence—and to existence. From Nancy, via Ruffel, we derive a historicized understanding of contemporaneity as the coincidence of existence and community.¹⁵

Nancy’s ethics of coincidence, or “comparution” may be extrapolated for a new approach to periodizing in the study of world literatures. Rather than recur to Eurochronological fixities of date, chronotope, style, aesthetic movement or “ism”—all of which tether literary history to conventions of periodization—one might concentrate instead on Untranslatables of periodicity; on new and old names for temporal units that untime Eurocentric historicist frames and allow anachronic aesthetic phenomena to “compear.”¹⁶

15 Jean-Luc Nancy, “*La Comparution*/The Compearance: from the Existence of ‘Communism’ to the Community of ‘Existence,’” *Political Theory* 20 (Aug 1992): 371–98.

16 Lionel Ruffel, *Le dénouement*, Lonrai: Verdier, 2005.