

Annotating the Aporias of History: the “International Style,” Chinese Modernism, and World Literature in Xi Chuan’s Poetry

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1 Lines to Decipher in the Shadows

“The precision of this statement,” writes Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) in “Rereading Borges’s Poetry” (“Chongdu Bo’erhesi shige” 重读博尔赫斯诗歌), “emerges from the chaos of the past”:

this pure force, like the rhythm of a dripping faucet
annotates the aporia of history
touching the starlight I leave night to the earth
night that licks the earth’s crevices: that forked memory

No Man is a man, No Where is a place
a No Man in No Where has written these
lines I must decipher in the shadows
I give up scouring the world of dust for the author, and lift my head to see
a librarian, lethargically, and only for his livelihood
preserving the order of the universe and books

这精确的陈述出自全部混乱的过去
这纯净的力量，像水笼头滴水的节奏
注释出历史的缺失
我因触及星光而将黑夜留给大地
黑夜舔着大地的裂纹：那分岔的记忆

无人是一个人，乌有之乡是一个地方
一个无人在乌有之乡写下这些
需要我在阴影中辨认的诗句
我放弃在尘世中寻找作者，抬头望见

一个图书管理员，懒散地，仅仅为了生计
而维护着书籍和宇宙的秩序¹

Straddling the division between our notions of literary modernism and postmodernism, Jorge Luis Borges does indeed represent a tension between the chaotic and precise, with a “pure force” that “annotates the aporia of history.” My translation is perhaps too imprecise to express the chaos to which Xi Chuan refers; his *lishi de qieshi* 历史的缺失 would more accurately be translated as “the lacunae of history,” though the alliteration of “annotates the aporia” argues for itself: “*Aporia* suggests the ‘gap’ or lacuna between what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean.”² A decidedly postmodernist term, *aporia* is defined by Jacques Derrida as the “difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage.”³ In other words, it is Borges’s “Forking Paths” that becomes Xi Chuan’s “forked memory.” Yet, its annotation might lead from the postmodern to the modern and resolve the impassable problem between the two; in the shadows, these lines might show us order in the universe and books.

Against the chaos of the possible meanings of “modernism,” especially in a Chinese context, and what modernism and contemporary Chinese poetry might have to say to, or about, each other, I should be precise in my own statements and ground my terminology. So: “philosophical modernism is an attempt to regulate the relationship of fact and value,” as Haun Saussy has explained, while “postmodernism is the abandonment of such attempts.”⁴ But, Borges is appropriate to this discussion not only for how he calls for a resolution or reconfiguration of the postmodern and modern, but also for how his words have served as a touch point in debates about modern and contemporary Chinese poetry. Arguing that the essence of a culture as seen from the outside is not necessarily essential to those inside, Borges claims that according to Edward Gibbon, “in the Arab book *par excellence*, the Koran, there are no camels.”⁵ Not that he was right: camels appear numerous times in the Koran, and Gibbon cites many of its stories in which camels feature

1 Xi Chuan, *Notes on the Mosquito*, 78–79.

2 See J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 49.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, 8.

4 Haun Saussy, “Postmodernism in China,” 119.

5 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” 423.