

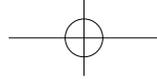
# Dog Barking at the Moon: Transcreation of a Meme in Art and Poetry

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## Introduction

In *Empire of Texts in Motion: Japan, Korea and China* (2009), Karen Laura Thornber provides us with a convincing account of East Asian literary interconnections, demonstrating that modern Chinese literature constitutes a plural form that took shape within a context of “polyvectoral” intra-East Asian and worldwide transculturation. In modern times, Chinese and Taiwanese writers have translingually and transmedially interwoven large amounts of Japanese and Western art and literature with Chinese and Taiwanese cultural fabrics, “reversing the sinocentric cultural flow that had dominated East Asia for centuries” (Thornber 2009, 24–25). Translation, adaptation and allusion constitute essential elements of these writings, and become particularly evident when we zoom on a single image that occurs in a range of works across time and space.

Within this translingual and transmodal cultural context, this essay gathers together a rich assembly of texts from different artistic and cultural backgrounds that offer a broader perspective on the creative processes of translation in modern and contemporary poetry in Chinese. I critically reflect on the connection established between a text and its translation, juxtaposing fifteen texts that employ the meme of a dog barking at the moon, from an iconographic representation in a Tarot card to poems by four Taiwanese writers, to Astrid Alben’s 2017 performance of a sound poem by Jaap Blonk.



Beyond the turbulent discussions over the comparative approach, I trace this small constellation of variations across different artistic traditions and media, from painting to writing to performance, focusing on the use of this single image throughout. The wide cultural spectrum of the texts under scrutiny will highlight the enduring role of the meme but equally its diachronic modifications, revealing the ways in which its signification has been transcreated, conceptualised and understood.

I explore the excitement that the meme has generated and continues to generate around the world as transcreation and “nomadic itineration” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 369) that is not transfer or influence, but a process inviting further adaptation:

[...] it is not exactly a question of extracting constants from variables but of placing the variables themselves in a state of continuous variation. If there are still equations, they are adequations, inequations, differential equations [...].

From the perspective of nomadic itineration, texts inherently *move* and are recognized as changes and approximations.

The questions I raise in this essay pertain to the relations among the texts under scrutiny, and between language and thought, and to cultural (in)commensurability and (un)translatability. Does the meme refer to the same thing throughout, different linguistic and cultural contexts notwithstanding? And if not, how can it be different when what we are juxtaposing is in fact always and “simply” the sound-image of a dog barking at the moon? In tackling these questions through texts that generate meaning both experientially (visually and aurally) and conceptually (verbally), my hypotheses and my tentative answers will naturally link up with theories of language and translation, from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1986) to Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature* (2013) and to Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (2002).

### **The Texts: A Line-up**

In 1942, in the middle of the Sino-Japanese War, the Taiwanese poet Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913–2013) wrote a poem called “Dog Howling at the

Moon” 吠月的犬. In subsequent years, other Taiwanese poets were inspired by the same image, adopting it in their writings and engaging with its signification in various ways; they appear below. But in recognition of the ubiquity of the image and the fascinating questions it raises in relation to translation and transcreation and to the universal and the particular, I'd like to first position the material in a broader, international and intermedial context.

I'll start from the 18<sup>th</sup> card of the Tarot deck, “The Moon.” There exist numerous versions of this card, from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century when it was used as a playing card in various parts of Europe to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it started being used for divination purposes, up until today. Most often, the scene depicted on the card is complex, as in this 1909 specimen by Pamela Coleman Smith [Fig. 1]. It features a wolf and a dog barking at a full moon, two side pillars or towers in the background and a crayfish in the foreground. The moon is anthropomorphised, with a face that appears to frown, as if disturbed by the barking. According to Arthur Edward Waite's 1910 interpretation, the dog and the wolf symbolise animal elements in human nature: they are “the fears of the natural mind,” whereas “the path between the towers is the issue into the unknown.” The moon symbolises intellectual light, diffusing “upon the unrest below,” illuminating “our animal nature [...] [that] strives to attain manifestation,” as represented by the crayfish surfacing from the water but destined to return into the deep. Beyond all this is “the unknown mystery” (Waite 1910, 115).

The paper cutout “Dog Barking at the Moon” [Fig. 2] by the German Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge is a much simpler illustration. The dog is depicted as looking at a partially obscured moon, with its neck stretched upwards. The work dates from 1800 and has been interpreted by Robert Rosenblum as representing a “strangely haunting opposition between terrestrial desire and skyborne inaccessibility” (Rosenblum 1988, 41).

Then there is the famous painting by the Spanish surrealist artist Joan Miró, “Dog Barking at the Moon” (1926) [fig 3]. The piece was intended as part of a series the artist called “painting poems,” which included written texts. In the picture are a dog barking at the moon, a flying bird, the moon and a ladder. The smallness of the dog in the empty space, the peacefully flying bird and the ladder

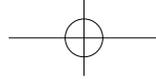


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

that leads to a nowhere-in-the-sky convey futility and indifference, bringing to mind that “the moon does not heed the barking dogs,” an idiom that is also found in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1623), when Brutus remarks: “I’d rather be a dog and bay the moon / Than such a Roman” (Shakespeare 1832, 44). This interpretation is supported by a preparatory sketch in which Miró adds to this “painting-poem” the phrase “You know, I don’t give a damn,” written in Catalan, in relation to the moon ignoring a dog’s wistful yelps. Although these words do not appear in the finished painting, according to art critic Michael R. Taylor their meaning is conveyed through the vacant space between the pictorial elements, in what he calls a scene of “frustrated longing and nocturnal isolation” (Taylor 2007, 180). The simple background of the brown earth and the black night sky, the colourful dog and moon, and the ladder receding into the sky are also evocative of a surreal dreamscape that exudes nostalgic and metaphysical yearning. In the Catalan cap and in the empty space of the sky scholars have recognised the long shadow of Goya’s disturbing “Dog” (1819–1823 ca.) [Fig 4].

We may conclude that Runge’s, Goya’s and Miró’s works tell a story of descent, through the misery of a dog that would like to ascend to the moon, alone in the immensity of the night. Miró’s ladder especially stresses this kind of narrative, with its verticality separating the realm of the dog below from that of the celestial body above. A barking dog that longs to climb the ladder to reach the moon suggests a desire for escape and transcendence as well as the isolation and loneliness of earthbound creatures. So much so that O’Keeffe, in “Ladder to the Moon” (1958) drastically revises the meme, eliminating the dog and leaving only the moon and the ladder in the middle of the picture. The absence of the dog can be seen to add to an abstract sense of spirituality or a dream-like atmosphere, but equally to diminish the desire for transcendence, through the obliteration of the earthbound creature.<sup>1</sup>

1 Research on this particular painting takes one to the ladder in Indian Hopi culture, where it symbolises the link between nature and cosmos. In the biography of the painter *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life*, the author Roxana Robinson considers: “It is not difficult to read this painting as a self-portrait: the light, hopeful form of the ladder, balanced, serene, and radiant is poised between the vanishing glow of earthly day and the rich

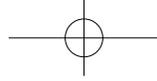


Fig. 4

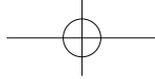


Fig. 5

Yet another interpretation is found in *Howling Dog*, by the Swiss-born painter Paul Klee [Fig. 5]. Dated 1928, this painting can be seen as portraying “archetypical canine behaviour [...] a wraith of a dog bays at the remote glow of the moon, an eerie sound that, through a meandering line, seems to penetrate the entire canvas” (Rosenblum 2006, 81). Miró’s Mediterranean clear night is replaced by Klee’s forest fog, which is harmoniously intertwined with the dog, through lines and curves. The scene appears to portray a world that is more commensurable with canine instincts, as it contains no ladders to climb and no hats to be worn. An echo of the Tarot card can be heard in this dog’s howling, strenuously alerting us to the primal force of nature overturning reason. The scene is enthralling, as the howls fuse the dog with the forest.

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blue night of the heavens” (Robinson 1989, 495). The painting and its title has also been adopted by a social care organization that uses the metaphor of the moon for “a world where every social care organisation is a vibrant, open, creative place where people want to come to live and people want to come to work,” and the ladder as the means to reach the moon. See <http://www.laddertothemoon.co.uk/>.



My final visual text is an untitled piece by pop artist Keith Haring from 1982. His transcreation features an earth-dog barking not at the moon, but at a UFO. The dog is agitated, its muzzle surrounded by short lines, in a cartoonist representation of its sonorous barks at the flying object. Perhaps it is afraid of being abducted, but it could also be amused and wanting to play.

\*

I will now move on to a series of verbal texts where the meme has itinerated, before docking on my principal four cases of poetic transcreations in Chinese.

In “On the Vision and Riddle” in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Zarathustra narrates his encounter with a dog howling next to its master’s corpse, in a full-moon-lit night, provoking a dreary feeling of solitude:

Then, suddenly, I heard a dog *howling* nearby.

Had I ever heard a dog howl like that? [...] And saw him too, bristling, with his head stretched up, trembling, in the stillest midnight, when even dogs believe in ghosts:

—so that I was moved to compassion. For just then the full moon was passing, silent as death, over the house: just then it stood still, a rounded glow—still upon that flat roof, as if upon alien property: - that was why the dog was terrified: for dogs believe in thieves and ghosts. And when again I heard that howling, I was moved to compassion once again.

[...] Between the cliffs I stood all at once, alone, desolate, in the most desolate moonlight.

*But a man was lying there!* And there! the dog, jumping about, bristling, whimpering. Now it saw me coming - then it howled again, then it *cried*: [...]

Now guess for me the riddle that I saw then, now interpret for me the vision of the loneliest! (Nietzsche 2005, 137–38)

The dog is not barking but howling, and we are informed of the reason for its sorrowful howls: the death of its master and its sudden loneliness. The scene also conjures up the image of a poet that is



reflective of the dog, and the imaginative union of animal and artist is conceived as the confluence of their feelings. The passage appears to speak to the theme of transience rather than transcendence, and to the sense of existential loneliness shared by the dog and Zarathustra.

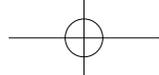
Next, let us consider Hiroaki Sato's English translation of a poem by the Japanese surrealist poet Hagiwara Sakutarō 萩原朔太郎 called "Sad Moonlit Night" (1914), from Hagiwara's 1917 collection *Howling at the Moon*. "Sad Moonlit Night" presents a bleak and mournful scene, with a "pale," "unhappy" dog-poet, surrounded by a girls' choir with gloomy voices:

### Sad Moonlit Night

A damned thief dog,  
is howling at the moon above the rotting wharf.  
A soul listens,  
and in gloomy voices,  
yellow daughters are singing in chorus,  
singing in chorus,  
On the wharf's dark stone wall.

Always,  
Why am I like this,  
dog,  
pale unhappy dog?  
(Hagiwara 2014, 22)

We don't know what specifically motivated the poet to use the figure of a dog in his poetry, but it does occur on several occasions. According to Ueda Makoto, Hagiwara's use of this meme "date[s] back to 1914, when he was an especially ardent admirer of Nietzsche" (Ueda 1983, 157). It is possible that this intertextual reference convinced the translator to use *howling* for the character *ni* 吠, whose dictionary translation is 'to bark.' Iteration is detectable in the fact that both in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in "Sad Moonlit Night," the mellow, sad mood of the dog is given the narrative of a mournful event (the loss of its master in Nietzsche and an unspecified event in Hagiwara). Both texts use the meme to express a shared manifestation



of a persona's feeling of loneliness and sombre mood.

Some critics suggest that the title of Hagiwara's collection, *Howling at the Moon*, could have Edvard Munch's painting "Head of a Dog" as possible source, or Ishikawa's three-line tanka "Should the maidens hear me wail, / They'd say, / 'Tis like an ill dog barking at the moon" (Cf. Hiroaki in Hagiwara 2014, 11; Ishikawa 1934, 41). At any rate, Hagiwara recorded the vision of a dog coming to him in his notebook and after extensive revisions it eventually reappears in the last two poems, "Sad Moonlit Night" and "Howling Dog." In the fourth version of "Howling Dog" Hagiwara changes "the poet" to "man," significantly broadening the implications of the poem, which then portrays the plight not just of the poet but of all men possessed by *shiseishin* (Ueda 1983, 159).

My next text is the 1942 poem by Ji Xian mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Ji Xian is generally considered a Taiwanese poet, but he was born and raised in the Chinese province of Hebei. In 1936 he went to Japan to study poetry and art, until the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when he returned to China. In 1948 he moved to Taiwan. Almost thirty years later, in 1976 he relocated to the United States, where he resided until his death in 2013. "Dog Howling at the Moon" was written in the middle of the Sino-Japanese War, when the poet was still in China. In Denis Mair's translation:

### Dog Howling at the Moon

A train rolls by and out of sight, carrying a dog that howls at the  
moon.

The tracks heave a sigh of relief.

Songs with personality arise from all sides from naked girls astride  
giant cacti,

A chorus with no consistent meaning,

Discordant sounds on all sides.

Dark shadows of cacti recline on the flatland.

The flatland is a suspended disc.

The fallen train does not crawl back from the curved horizon,

But forlorn howls have struck the moon's gong and now bounce back

To swallow the voices of girls singing.

(Ji 2000, 76–77)



### 吠月的犬

載著吠月的犬的列車滑過去消失了。  
鐵道嘆一口氣。  
於是騎在多刺的巨型仙人掌上的全裸的少女們的有個性  
歌聲四起了：  
不一致的意義，  
非協和之音。  
仙人掌的陰影舒適地躺在原野上。  
原野是一塊浮著的圓板哪。  
跌下去的列車不再從弧形地平線爬上來了。  
但打擊了鍍鏤的月亮的淒厲的犬吠卻又被彈回來，  
吞噬了少女們的歌。  
(Ji 2008, 15)

Michelle Yeh has discussed Ji Xian's (and Shang Qin's 商禽 [1930–2010] and Chen Li's 陳黎 [b. 1954]) poem in reference to Miró, but from a substantially different perspective than that of the present analysis. First of all, as evident from the title of her essay, "From Modern to Contemporary: Starting from Miró's 'Dog Barking at the Moon,'" Yeh's analysis operates within the framework of artistic influence, using the "transfer" approach. She recognizes the origin of artistic transfer in Miró's painting, and its end points in Ji Xian's, Shang Qin's and Chen Li's poems. At variance with this approach, I submit that a point of origin is difficult if not impossible to track, and Miró's is but one famous text among many other nomadic itinerations. Yeh comments on the theme of fleeting human life and the use of "fantastic images" (Yeh 1994, 9). She notes the disappearance of the ladder depicted in Miró's painting and sees it replaced by the train in Ji Xian's poem. She understands the replacement as reducing "the incongruity" of the source text and interprets the naked girls singing on a giant cactus in a desert as "adding a fantastic touch to the scene" (Yeh 1996, 343). Conversely, I see the railroad track—not the train—as replacing the ladder, horizontal rather than vertical, a liberty that transforms a transcendental vertical distance into a spatio-temporal horizontal distance. Yeh does not connect Ji Xian's poem with Hagiwara's, which I find a useful interlacing feature for understanding of the entrance of the naked girls into Ji Xian's text-world. In the absence of this



reference, in Yeh's reading the girls become a "fantastic touch" and an allusion to "western pictorial modernity" (1994, 8-9); I read the girls as primarily an extra reference to sound itinerating through Hagiwara, perhaps a classical reference to the Muses in a mythological world such as that of Orpheus. Like the Muses, women who find themselves in a garden of flowers have erotic connotations in Chinese symbolism, suggesting the hope of attracting a butterfly, that is: a male partner. The image also invites a sexual reading, with the cacti as phallic symbols ridden 騎 (*qi*) by naked women.

Ji Xian's sound-image invokes the precedence that sound can take over the visual image in certain situations, for instance when a noisy "protagonist" has just left our line of vision. His recreation of Miró's painting presses past the central role of the dog in the text, and noise and movement fill the text-world, with sound exuding energy and taking central stage, bouncing back from the gong-moon. The scene is whirling, moving horizontally rather than vertically on the semi-sphere of the earth. Even though the dog is barking—or, in Mair's translation, howling—at the moon, the fact that it is moving on a running train reduces verticality. Furthermore, an important variation is that Ji Xian's dog receives a response from the moon, even if this is merely the echo of its own barking. The disappearance of the dog leaves a world devoid of the persona but resounding with its barking, which has swallowed the girls' song. Ji Xian's world is much more theatrical, propelling the dog and pulling together all the cacophonous, discordant sounds.<sup>2</sup>

Miró's paintings were also transcreated in a number of surrealist poems by the Sichuan-born Shang Qin, who, like Ji Xian, migrated from China to Taiwan in 1948. Elements from Miró's art are so frequently detectable in Shang Qin's work that poet and critic Bai Ling 白靈 has defined a portion of his poetry as "Miró-style Shang Qin" 米羅式的商禽 (2016, 73–74). In the prose poem "My Amoeba Kid-Brother" 阿米巴弟弟 (*Amiba didi*) (1960), with Shang Qin's permission, translator Steve Bradbury added the descriptive epigraph "After Joan Miró's 'Dog Barking at the Moon,'" which is not included in the original poem.

2 In a 1964 poem this dog becomes a wolf, wandering alone, launching his "constant, echoing howls" that "shake the empty sky and earth," like percussion. See Ji Xian's "The Solitude of the Wolf" (1993, 51).



### My Amoeba Kid Brother

After Joan Miró's "Dog Barking at the Moon"

The angry little fellow plucking at my khaki shirttail as I barrel down the stairs is my amoeba kid-brother, whose invitation I only managed to turn down after endless hemming and hawing. The kid is an absolute beast, a dog barking at the moon. The scruff of his neck says: "How come you don't wanna come up to my place? You saw the ladder, how long and narrow it is. You got a nest of your own in town, with stars?"

Weird how anyone could have a kid brother like that, "clean and dirty at the same time." Like a hand or the paw of a raccoon. I bet the underside of that paw is the spitting image of a pangolin's front foot. A guy has an amoeba kid-brother who simultaneously resembles a raccoon and a pangolin, and I throw scores of shadows on the midnight streets.

### 阿米巴弟弟

拉著我草綠色衣角的小孩，哭打著從樓梯上退下來的阿米巴弟弟，對他的邀請我支吾地拒絕了。這簡直是一隻嗥月的獸，他的頸子說：為什麼不到樓上我的家去？那時你看見梯子，又細又長，你在城裡有一個窩和一些星星嗎？

我奇怪人有一個這樣的弟弟「是既乾淨又髒的？」像一隻手，浣熊的，我想其掌心一定像穿山甲的前爪。一個人有個阿米巴弟弟既像浣熊又像穿山甲，而我在夜半的街頭有數十個影子。(Shang 2006, 19).

A child is superimposed on the figure of the dog; the ladder is reintroduced into the text-world, but the theme of transcendence is gone. The scene is exquisitely worldly, with no metaphysical or transcendental overtones. In addition, there is an upside-down inversion, with the kid-brother dog upstairs. Perhaps because this is a prose poem,<sup>3</sup> the dog barking at the moon is less a sound-image and

3 I am intrigued by the hypothesis according to which the way animals are employed rhetorically may be affected by the literary genre in question. As Hagiwara, Derrida and others have suggested, it might well be that



more a metaphorical signifier of the annoying behaviour of a person (the kid-brother) addressing someone else who pays no attention (the elder brother).

Chen Li's 1990 poem "Dog Barking at the Moon" 吠月之犬 has been discussed by both Michelle Yeh and Joyce Liu. Comparing it with Ji Xian's eponymous piece, Yeh notes that while "Ji's barking dog represents the individual," Chen's "stands opposite to a collective persona (we)" (Yeh 1994, 10). For Liu, "the black background in Miró's painting becomes for Chen Li a figure of the Taiwanese collective unconscious, with suppressed or forgotten memories" (944). As in Ji Xian's poem, the elements of the meme are involved in a spatio-temporal theme. But while in Ji Xian this is enacted by movement, in Chen Li space and time only mark the persona's distance from home. The dog itself is a dreadful creature sent by raging Time, biting off pieces from the plural persona, who finds herself far away from her family members and is only reunited with them in a photo album. The moon is just a stamp obscured by the postmark. Here is the poem, in Chang Fen-ling's translation and in the original:

### Dog Barking at the Moon

Time sets its dog biting us.  
 It bites off our sleeves, leaving two or three  
 rags of oblivion.  
 We cross the street to buy sugar, finding a deserted arm,  
 not sure whether to drop it in the nearest mailbox or not.  
 Maybe our parents on the trip will receive it  
 at a distant hotel.  
 Maybe it is hanging at the door of the railroad station.  
 Every five minutes out of the loud-speaker comes the announcement:  
 "A deserted arm to be identified at the information desk."  
 We don't believe they are our long-departed relatives:  
 childhood handkerchiefs, exercise books, lipsticks and

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fiction and (by extension) prose poetry employ animals for different communicative and cognitive purposes from art and poetry (Ueda 1983, Derrida 2002). Regrettably, in this essay, I do not have enough examples of prose to substantiate or invalidate the hypothesis.



brassieres of the beloved, diplomas.  
We pick up the toys scattered about on the ground.  
They are heard to say, "It hurts."  
The moon is pasted on the sky like a stamp obscured by the postmark.  
We write letters with ball point pens of starlight and mail them  
to God, who lives north of the air-raid shelter,  
and two express conductresses in red skirts and red hats  
push the pushcart by and ask if he'll buy some medicine.  
Of course it's bitter,  
still he sends us a family photo:  
the war-fostered colonel, the black-skinned procuress,  
tomcat Gigi, the unmarried old maid A-lan—  
they are all there, on the platform of time,  
facing a dog barking at the moon with wide-open eyes.  
They are waiting to pass by us once more.  
We open the stamp album, suspiciously searching out  
seemingly familiar cries.  
Maybe that's what they call family reunion.  
(Chen 1990a)

### 吠月之犬

時間讓它的狗咬我們  
它咬斷我們的袖子，留下兩三片  
遺忘的破布  
我們過街買糖，撿到一條被棄置的手臂  
不敢確定是不是該把它投進最近的郵筒  
也許正在旅行的我們的父母會在遠方的旅店  
收到它們  
也許它就掛在火車站門口  
擴音器每隔五分鐘播報一次：  
「遺失手臂的旅客請到服務台認領」  
我們不相信那些是離散多年的我們的親友  
童年的手帕，作業簿，愛人的  
唇膏，胸罩，畢業證書  
我們拿起那些掉了一地的玩具  
聽到它們說痛  
月亮像一枚被郵戳模糊了的郵票貼在天空



我們用星光的原子筆寫信，寄給上帝  
 他住在防空洞北邊  
 而兩個穿紅裙子戴紅帽子的飛快車小姐  
 推著手推車問他要不要買藥

而那自然是苦的  
 但他還是送給我們一幅家庭照  
 被戰爭扶養的上校，黑肉鴛母  
 雄貓姬姬，終身不嫁的老處女阿蘭  
 他們全都在那裡，在時間的月台上  
 對著一隻張眼瞪視的吠月之犬  
 等候與我們重新擦身而過  
 我們打開集郵簿，半信半疑地翻出  
 一枚枚似曾相識的叫聲  
 也許這就是他們所說的家庭團圓  
 (Chen 1990b)

Ling Yu 零雨 (b. 1952) is another Taiwanese poet who was inspired by the meme. Her “Names Vanished from the Map” 消失在地圖上的名字 (1992) has a first section entitled “Kungtung Mountain” 崑崙, describing a nocturnal scene containing elements that remind us of Mirò’s painting. In the last stanza, the “dogs,” now plural, “stride up a wooden staircase,” chewing up the edges of the malevolent moon. In Andrea Lingenfelter’s translation:

### **Kungtung Mountain**

I walked far away in a dream and then I came back. First light  
 gone, getting close to noon, imitated a bird  
 imitating a human voice. Just as before  
 a house by the road, tiny insects  
 imitating a human voice strode up a wooden staircase, swung  
 in the mirror. Dreamed until midnight

Fought as far as Kungtung, every last soldier  
 This was as far as the old man got  
 There was snow in summer, many men lost feet  
 and others lost hands



Those who lost their heads were all left on Kungtung. Today  
the old man has lost his admission ticket

Kungtung. The number of hotels here keeps growing  
some people collect admission tickets, souvenirs  
and there is also a reenactment of that year's battle  
Push the map to the north  
the north  
is already nearing the horizon as distant  
as the sky

People with birthmarks on their faces are searching for relatives  
as are people with tattoos  
Those marks ring their eyes, as if  
they'd been born with the third eye, or  
they had dreamed too much

Dogs howl  
A certain kind of dream often appears  
on nights when the moon is full. Stride up  
a wooden staircase, peer  
at my own shadow  
Now the moon with edges gnawed sharp by the dogs  
is like a malevolent dream, wandering far enough away and then  
turning back around  
(Ling 1992, 326–27)

### 崆峒

夢走得很遠又回來。黎明  
過了，接近中午時分，模仿鳥  
在模仿人語。依然  
街上一棟房子，螻蛄  
模仿人聲  
跨過木質樓梯，在鏡子裡  
懸盪。夢到午夜

戰到崆峒，最後一兵一卒



這是老人到過最遠的地方  
夏天有雪，遺失  
腳的人很多也有人遺失  
手，遺失頭顱的人  
都留在崆峒。今天  
老人遺失一張入場券

崆峒。這裡旅館  
愈來愈多有些人搜集入場券  
紀念品還有表演那一年的戰役  
把地圖推向北方  
北方  
已經接近地平線 天空  
那樣遠

臉上有胎記的人尋找親人  
有刺青的人也是。  
它們包圍著眼睛，好像  
從胎裡帶來獨具的慧眼，或者  
夢做得過多

狗狂吠  
有一種夢時常出現  
月圓之夜。跨過  
木質樓梯，張望  
自己的影子  
這時為狗所噬的月亮邊緣銳利  
彷彿一個惡質的夢走得夠遠卻  
又轉過身來  
(Ling 2001, 439-40)

The dogs do not identify with the persona/e, yet they peer at her shadow. The scene in the last stanza is reminiscent of Miró, but the overall signification is itinerated, with images adapted and transcreated in a way that frees the text from a relationship of closed conversion from a non-verbal sign system to a verbal one.

My last text in this transcreative journey is Dutch sound poet



Jaap Blonk's piece "Dog Yapping at the Moonlight" (2017).<sup>4</sup> The size and the sound of the dog have changed: it does not bark, but it yaps. Its "downscaling" amplifies the sense of its frustration and ineffective protest, and even allows for a comical effect within the general pathos of the meme. When the poem is performed, the dog's / poet's tragically uncomprehended remonstrance is generally met with laughter by the audience. Meanwhile, the fact that this six-minute-long sound poem does not contain a single word, but only barks, will hopefully help to sustain the argument I want to make below.

### Questions, Hypotheses and Tentative Answers

The meme of a dog barking at the moon goes back a long time and has generated excitement in various places around the world, as testified by the large number of texts that adopt it, adequate it, inadequate it and transcreate it. Art and literature constitute bodies of knowledge that make a particular kind of sense within their "native" environment (language, culture, society), and may well make another kind of sense when translated into other cultures. Following Wittgenstein's argument on private language (Wittgenstein 1986, 100–1), we can conceptualise all these literary and artistic sound-images of dogs barking at the moon as boxes, whose content is only known to the individual poet or artist. It is quite possible that everyone has something different in their boxes. One might even imagine the content of a box as constantly changing, or the box as being empty. But how does anyone know that "dog barking at the moon" *means* anything, or refers to an actual thing or an actual matter? Not from others, for one cannot ever look into the boxes of the others; and not from oneself, since all one can know is what is in one's own box. If individual box-owners make claims about their dogs barking at the moon (for example, that they know what "a dog barking at the moon" is or means, by looking in their own box), doesn't this presuppose that they believe that this has a use for *all* the box-owners? If they fail to agree on the meme's ontology or its

4 Because of the obvious limitations of the printed medium, I refer to the BBC4 website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08fgwyn> for a performed version of this poem given by the British poet Astrid Alben in March 2017.



meaning, it starts to look like a private language, not a language of communication.

So: is there something in the image of the dog barking at the moon that is globally telling? Is there something in the nature of dogs and their barking at the moon that warrants the attribution of stable properties to the meme and renders its interpretation justifiably consistent across the globe? Crucially, the remarkable possibility to which the meme calls attention is that the sound-image itinerates from one culture to another and is intelligible *in spite of* the differences. Does the meme's recurrence in a range of disparate texts conjure up a vision of a pre-Babel universal language of sound-images? Can more perceptual media such as the visual and the aural guarantee a (relative) homogeneity of interpretation? Is there one archetypal interpretation?

I am afraid not. All the texts reviewed above feature a dog barking at the moon, but what is there beyond the specifics of the individual dogs, moons, ladders? Following the idea foregrounded by Naoki Sakai in *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (1997), I see these transcreations as practices that producedifferencebecause they are affected by the incommensurability of their cultures and traditions. But I also see that every one of the transcreations expands the meaning of the meme, thus enabling more breadth and depth in our knowledge of the meme—and of the world.

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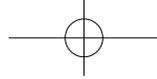
According to Emily Apter (2013, 2–7), because of the impetus given to world literature studies by scholars such as Pascale Casonava (2004), David Damrosch (2003), Franco Moretti (1998) and Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (2007), translation has often been seen as something inherently good. Conversely, Apter advocates a reevaluation of the importance of the untranslatable, of the “wrong” translation and of incommensurability. She warns us against a tendency in world literature studies of relying on equivalence and cultural commensurability, or on the celebration of differences that are nationally and ethnically branded for market purposes. The kind of translation she has in mind bespeaks a “pragmatic approach” that asserts transparency and reinforces monolingualism, as she has

previously pointed out in a 2010 essay entitled “Philosophical Translation and Untranslatability” (52–55).

The nomadic itineration of the texts juxtaposed in this essay shows that allusions and intertextual connections, semiotic and non-semiotic features, are consumed and adapted as they become part of a new painting or a new poem, adding to its complexity and helping it to develop its own ambiguities (needless to say, translations such as those included in this essay add to the play of refraction developed in such transcreations). By absorbing the meme, the new work makes it autochthonous, while reaffirming the need for a dialogical relationship with the global, in the same spirit of the theory and practice of transcreation as that proposed by the Noigandres group of concrete poets in the 1950s and 1960s. According to this group of Brazilian poets, who include Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignateri and Waldemar Cordeiro, transcreation should be an anthropophagic act that forcibly absorbs a Western (sacred) original into the indigenous. The process recognizes a poetic legacy that needs to be expropriated and appropriated through translation, in order to bring cultural productions by a minority to the fore of a poetics of a modernity that has primarily been construed to fit Western parameters (A. d. Campos 1978; H. d. Campos 1986).

Clearly, in the light of the anthropophagic approach, translation as transcreation is a vehicle that communicates its own limitations, and a tool of resistance to the homogenizing impulses of world literature. It is a violent act of parricidal dis-memory because it appropriates elements from sacred texts by dominant authors. However, based as it is on fragmentation, incomprehension and opposition, this violent act of translation does not affirm monolingualism, as do translations with what Apter calls the “pragmatic approach” that the market celebrates. Instead, transcreation challenges existing power relations by wearing out cultural soliloquy and reclaiming the right to appropriate texts by dominant authors.

As a translation strategy, the process of transcreation has been defined by Joyce Liu as “surrealist collage,” in the “mode of the glance.” In her essay “Palace Museum vs. the Surrealist Collage: Two Modes of Construction in Modern Taiwanese Ekphrasis Poetry,” she distinguishes between what she calls “the mode of the gaze” and the



“mode of the glance.” According to Liu, the former speaks about Chinese visual art, giving “a spatialized representation and relocation of the poets’ temporal memories of the historical China”; while in the latter mode, “poets invoke western avant-garde artists [...], and re-organize their interpretation of the western paintings through a collage of dissociated images [...], selecting random details, piling them up in an irrational and illogical manner” (Liu 1997, 935). The connection made by Liu between Chen Li and Miró is strengthened by her identification of the same surrealist creative technique, in which ideas are developed unconsciously, irrationally and illogically, across the two artists.

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Dogs barking at the moon remain heterogeneous in their status and their origin. I hold them to be translations, but translations of what? Why do artists and writers use them so often? Does the meme appear in so many artistic and poetic works because as an *alogon* animal—outside *logos*, incommunicable—a dog is capable of expression by sensorial means rather than rational means? Derrida seems to suggest that non-human animals appear in poetry so often because their *alogos* exceeds language, rather than being a deprivation. For Derrida, the non-human animal is a “wholly other” with a kind of secret energy that enlivens the senses and offers a glimpse into the “abyssal limit of the human” (Derrida 2002, 381).

Hagiwara, in an essay on animals that are instinctively drawn to moonlight, remarks: “the phenomenon belongs to the primeval mystery of life shared by *all creatures*” (emphasis added). He coins the term *jōshō* “emotimage” by conjoining the word *jō* (emotion) and *shō* (image), and considers poetry and music as the two arts that are capable of probing into that primeval mystery of life (Ueda 1983, 153). The quotation shows that for Hagiwara animals in poetry and music do not just connote the kind of sympathetic identification frequently found in narrative fiction. For him, animals enable the poet to abandon presumptive and rational understanding, discard knowledge and be invested with primeval energy.

Be all that as it may, I submit that it is the dog’s barks, not the dog, that fascinate poets and artists. This sound-image functions as a

learnt replacement for the unlearnt, animal, non-linguistic expression of feelings such as desire or pain. Because there is no universality in the subjective experience of feelings, it is only through naming that we can “know” what kind of feeling we are experiencing (e.g. anger, happiness, sorrow). The barks, however, incommensurable with human language, still guarantee a conceptual disconnection from transparent communication. Thus the poet uses the dog to emit an inarticulate sound indicating a trauma of language above all, because it is there to witness the limits of language, the fear of inexpressiveness, faced with which the poet is powerless and unable to make herself known; or a sound in which what the poet expresses is beyond her control. As a sound-image, the dog barking at the moon can be understood as culture-independent disruption, a moment of dissent, a request that goes unanswered. Ultimately, it manifests desire and frustration, remaining at the foot of the ladder or disappearing from sight. Its barking is a private language that no one else understands—because it means to the dog alone.

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