

Agnes S.L. Lam, *Poppies by the Motorway*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2018. 54 pp. ISBN 9789882370418.

Agnes S.L. Lam's collection of poetry, *Poppies by the Motorway*, is a part of International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong 2017's collection based on the theme "ancient enmity." It is unsurprising, then, that the poems in the book delight in contrasts. Most of the poems in the book examine the contrast between the past and the present, as in poems such as "White Orchids on Concrete," "Time to Go," or the eponymous poem "Poppies by the Motorway," though Lam also makes use of biblical examples of ancient enmity with poems about humans and snakes, body and spirit, or heaven and earth. Lam's language is spare and concise, vividly conjuring images with both words written and unwritten. This elliptical writing style is exemplified by the poem "Black Swan," where the rhythm of the text is reminiscent of the fluttering of ballet footwork, and the spareness of the text on the page recreates the sensation of walking in mist.

The poems, originally in English, are all accompanied by Chinese translations by 陳嘉恩. This makes for an interesting comparison between English and Chinese, albeit not a particularly illuminating one. Here I will have to confess my inexperience with the conventions of translation in publications, which might account for the prioritising of accuracy over meaning. However, I strongly believe that the inclusion of the translations within a poetry collection demands equal poetic merit from the translations themselves, so the Chinese translations were slightly disappointing in this area. Though the Chinese translations are faithful to the original, some of the meaning of the poems nonetheless seem rather lost in translation – the emotional impact of the English original appears to be sacrificed for word-for-word accuracy in the Chinese translation. This is most obvious in poems like "Poppies by the Motorway"/ 《公路旁的紅罌粟》 or "Black Swan"/ 《黑天鵝》, where and the line-for-line translations occasionally obscure the meaning of the Chinese text, and the flow of the Chinese poems are somewhat stilted by the translator's factual obedience to the punctuation.

Punctuation plays an interesting role in Lam's poems, though by "punctuation" I really mean a particular punctuation mark: the ellipsis. Most of Lam's poems end in ellipses in *Poppies by the Motorway*, and out of 10 poems, only 2 end in full-stops. The ellipses provide the poems with a sense of the "yet-to-be": of things yet to be written into being, as in "A Conversation with My Body," in which the body has to type the unknown thoughts of the spirit until the death of the spirit; or of a world still unexplored, as in the seductive lake in "Black Swan," where Odile is perpetually waiting.

Yet the ellipsis also signals an unsatisfactory absence to me. Perhaps this is a symptom of the age of social media, in which the ellipsis often connotes a self-

referential withholding of information or communication. A quick example would be receiving the text, “I’m not mad...” from a loved one out of the blue. A more pertinent example would be the typing awareness indicator on social media such as Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp, in which the ellipsis is made to signal that there is a message that we cannot see yet. Oftentimes, the ellipsis is seen as a sign of an attempt at communication that is held in limbo, social anxiety encapsulated in three small dots. With this understanding of what the ellipsis means to digital natives, it is hard not to see Lam’s ellipses as a sign that there is a world withheld from us, a solution to or an understanding of ancient enmity that is curtailed by the trailing-off of the poet.

Lauren Berlant, in a discussion with Andy Campbell on *Artforum*, describes the ellipsis thus:

The thing about an ellipsis is that it has a set of contradictory meanings.

An ellipsis is a sentence that I don’t end because... I don’t know how to.

An ellipsis is a sentence I don’t end because... you know what I mean.

An ellipsis is a figure of return that isn’t symmetrical.

Ellipses might be a figure of loss or plenitude: Sometimes it is more efficient to go dot dot dot. Sometimes it’s also a way of signaling an elision. Sometimes the referent is beyond words.¹

Lam’s poems about ancient enmity end (or, rather, do not end) with ellipses because she does not know how to end poems about unbridgeable divides between the past and the present, between the body and the spirit, between post-Handover Hong Kong and post-Umbrella Hong Kong. They also (do not) end with ellipses because acceptance of the divide is the only way to cross the divide, as she suggests in poems such as “Time to Go.” They invite us to consider that there is no conceivable solution to the enmity at hand, or that there is still a whole host of solutions yet to be explored. But ultimately, they all refer to a shape of the future that can only be seen, half-squinting, through fog. Personally, I do not like this obscurity, but perhaps that is just my preference for definite endings. Or perhaps, I am looking for answers in a medium that should not be made to offer answers or illumination.

Or, perhaps, they are just ellipses.

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¹ Lauren Berlant, “Interview by Andy Campbell.” *Artforum*, 30 Jan. 2014. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/lauren-berlant-discusses-reading-with-and-her-recent-work-45109>. 7 May 2018.