Fetishizing the Loss: the Phantasms of Eros in Zhu Tianxin’s Writings of Melancholia

Jen-yi HSU *

Abstract

This paper analyzes the literary articulation of temporal disorders in Zhu Tianxin’s mature stage of writings that are produced after 1989. Varied forms of temporal disorders such as fetishism, melancholia, or addiction pervade Zhu’s works (mainly Remembering My Brothers from the Military Compound, The Old Capital, The Flâneur, and her latest “A Glance toward the Southern Capital”) and indicate the writer’s compulsion to have a relationship to loss by suspending or controlling time. The essay begins with the investigation of the phenomenon of temporal anxiety by analyzing Walter Benjamin’s allegorical figure of the angel of history. Benjamin’s famous angel induces a productive tension between the past and the present, between the dead and the living, and can be usefully factored into our discussion of Zhu Tianxin’s continuing obsession and dialogue with loss and its remains. Freud’s important essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) further provides us with a ground to explore the temporal dimension of melancholia, a peculiar mental state that is “pathological” and opposes to “normal mourning.” However, Juliana Schiesari, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler give us a better understanding of melancholic attachments to loss, making visible not only their social bases but also their aesthetic, ethical, political aspects. These critics’ elaboration of the discourse of melancholia furnishes a discursive frame for my reading of Zhu Tianxin’s melancholic writings.

Keywords: Zhu Tianxin, mourning and melancholia, fetishism, eros, recollection, loss, temporal disorder

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, National Dong Hwa University
As many critics pointed out, Zhu Tianxin’s creative trajectory made a dramatic shift in 1989 when she published *I Remember (Wo ji de)*. Her previous works, produced in the 1970s and early 1980s, are characterized by a kind of juvenile idealism that shows a lack of sophistication and critical judgment. After her political “enlightenment,” she bade farewell to an Eden-like stage that was nurtured by her un-reflexive nationalist belief, identification with the paternal state and metaphors, and indulgence in simple romanticism. The new stage of Zhu Tianxin is marked by the belligerency of social criticism and the vertiginous creation of sundry characters that encompasses housewife (“The Tale of the Kangaroo Clan,” 1990), pedophile (“Last Year in Marienbad,” 1989), lesbian (“Of Butterflies in the Spring Wind,” 1992), hypochondriac (“Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” 1992; and “The Knight de La Mancha,” 1994), former political dissident (“There Was Once a Fisherman Named Urashimataro,” 1990), and the wai sheng ethnic minority, to name just a few. Although diverse and impressive, her characters somehow exhibit a common trait—that is, they are people who suffer from varied forms of temporal disorders: symptoms such as trauma, melancholia, fetishism, compulsion, or addiction pervade Zhu’s works. In *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity*, Elissa Marder investigates how modernity gives rise to temporal disorders when the urban environment gradually

---

1 For example, see David Der-wei Wang’s “The Previous Lives and the Current Incarnation of the Old Soul: the Novelistic Aesthetics of Zhu Tianxin” in *The Old Capital* (9-32); Zhang Dachun’s “An Old Soul: the Wrestling with Temporality in Zhu Tianxin’s novels,” in *Remembering My Brothers from the Military Compound* (5-16).
impoverishes man’s structure of experience and modern subjectivity
becomes unable to assimilate and make sense of the flux of information
and impressions. Marder’s exploration of literary articulations of temporal
disorders might be usefully factored into our discussion of melancholia in
Zhu’s works, in which the psychic compulsion to accumulate signs of loss
engenders her narrative discourse and the phantasmatic play of desire.²

By consciously or unconsciously resisting the onslaught of historical
progress through plunging into the past, Zhu joins many writers of
modernity such as Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Marcel Proust
who deem the clock of modernity not as “progress” but as catastrophe. The
disjunction of the exteriority and the interiority traumatizes her characters,
making them melancholic and constantly in mourning. The end of grand
narrative (be it nationalist or idealistic) heralded Zhu’s new creative stage;
however, her argumentative, antagonistic way of writing and her seemingly
reactive obsession with the past alienate some critics who criticize her
ideology as conservative and anti-progressive. In this paper, I aim to
psychoanalyze Zhu’s compulsive complex that is prevalent in her mature
stage of writing. I propose to view her obsessive melancholia in a
dialectical way, to read her various psychic symptoms as temporal anxiety
that is potentially critical, rather than accusing her of conservatively
clinging to a world that is perpetually gone. Sigmund Freud, Walter
Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler furnish a discursive frame

² Marder launches her investigation of temporal disorders through close readings of
Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Both works testify to the
atrophy of the collective experience that is characteristic of modernity. Zhu Tianxin’s
works also exhibit similar temporal symptoms of modernity that are explored by
Marder’s discussion of these nineteenth-century works. I want to argue that we are
dealing not with two different periods of traumatized loss but rather with the somewhat
analogous symptoms of cultural melancholia that index artists’ affective response to the
increasing velocity of modernity or postmodernity.
for my reading of Zhu Tianxin, whose articulations of temporal disorders such as trauma and melancholia may index the very core of our modern condition and its malaise.

The case of Zhu illustrates the so-called “anachronism,” for she, like Don Quixote de La Mancha, tries to impose the order in a world that is resistant to her conception of totality and meaning. The world is already “disenchanted,” and the writer suffers from the death of gods and the end of history. Like a necromancer who practices mnemonic invocation in the postmodern age of amnesia, Zhu creates numerous “old souls” who grasp inconsolably in the earth for the scraps of genuine passion. As Julia Kristeva remarks that the “postmodern is closer to the human comedy than to the abyssal discontent” (258-9), Zhu is apparently discontent with the postmodern lightness of being and is desperately sinking into the abyss that is opened between desire and its unattainable object.

As has often been remarked by critics, Zhu is good at utilizing postmodern literary techniques like intertextuality or pastiche. Her novels tend to appropriate names from canonical works, renowned films, or exotic places (for example, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” “Death in Venice,” “The Old Capital,” or “Last Year in Marienbad,” etc.). However, her use of pastiche makes these intertextual references into something more than the dazzling flaunting of academic jargon or an infinite regress into textuality. If pastiche is usually considered central to a postmodernism that contests our

---

3 For example, see Lingchei Letty Chen’s “Writing Taiwan’s Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Zhu Tianwen and Zhu Tianxin,” in The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature, 584-91.

4 Breakfast at Tiffany’s is the 1961 romantic adaptation of Truman Capote’s novella, in which Audrey Hepburn plays the enchanting Holly Golightly. Death in Venice is Thomas Mann’s classic 1912 novella. The Old Capital (Gudu) is Kawabata Yasunari’s canonical 1962 novel. Last Year in Marienbad is Alain Resnais’s 1961 feature, one of the most experimental films of the French New Wave.
humanist assumptions about authenticity and utopian categories, Zhu’s use of pastiche is far from this postmodern temperament. Literary appropriation clearly implies more than “mere” parodic reprise; it is not a simple, undialectical, play of signs, nor a breeding ground of depthless, indeterminate, derivative literary performance. What is called to our attention is Zhu’s persistent quest for an “authentic” experience—a contradictory temperament irrepressible beneath the seemingly postmodern technique of pastiche—in her manipulation of textual hybridization. Her idealistic impulse—that is, her insistence on the possibility of historical experience—is awkwardly revealed and proportionally heightened by her various ironic citations or intertextuality. Therefore, we can say that Zhu’s quest is still a modernist quest, a self-lacerating longing for the irretrievable in the age of the postmodern.

I. The Wife of Lot and the Angel of History: a Traumatic Subject Facing the Catastrophe of (Post)Modernity

Zhu Tianxin’s mature works invite reference to Walter Benjamin, whose “angel of history,” an allegorical figure evoked in his famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” may serve as a useful tool to analyze Zhu’s melancholic fixation upon the past, an anachronistic temperament at odds with a postmodern era that is memory-free, sanguinely buoyant, and telos-driven. Borrowed from Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” Benjamin shows us the image of the blown-away angel who is traumatized and horrified when the “storm of progress” violently forces him to move forward to the future to which his back is turned: “His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread” (257). Being propelled irresistibly into the future, the angel turns his melancholic gaze
toward the past, which he refuses to let go:

*Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.* (258)

This famous angel of history is Benjamin’s critique of the ideology of the progress embedded in the discourse of modernity and any kind of regimes (ranging from vulgar Marxism, capitalism, to Fascism) that equate technological advancement with historical progress. In this championship of development, authentic experiences such as tradition, nature, and memory are sacrificed. In Benjamin’s description, the angel is not ready for flight; he refuses to be enlisted in the glamorous vision of “progress” and “development” proponed by the official ideology and insists that the past has a claim that cannot be blotted out, forgotten, or “settled cheaply.” As Benjamin writes: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (254). A fascinating blend of Messiah mysticism, avant-garde surrealism and radical Marxism, Benjamin’s angel is the allegory of a melancholic intellectual who “regards it as his task to brush history against the grain” (257).

As I note earlier, around the early 1990s Zhu Tianxin started a new stage of writing that bade farewell to her earlier naiveté and uncritical romanticism. Melancholia becomes the dominant temperament permeating her works from *Remembering My Brothers from the Military Compound*
Fetishizing the Loss: the Phantasms of Eros in Zhu Tianxin’s Writings of Melancholia

(Xiang wo juanchun de xiongdimen, 1992), The Old Capital (Gudu, 1997), The Flâneur (Manyou zhe, 2000), to her latest work “A Glance toward the Southern Capital” (“Nandu yi wang,” 2006). Saturated with the language of longing, her melancholia initiates a series of recollection and enables the reconfiguration of the oldest dreams into the newest cultural symbols and images, which function as a critique of today’s socio-cultural condition. In “Old Capital,” her object of loss is an ideal abstraction such as youth, love, or her enchanted view of old Taipei. In Flâneur, she grieves for a concrete loss that also encompasses other orders of loss. As Huang Jinshu remarks in his preface to Flâneur, in this book Zhu manages to “approximate the fecund productiveness originating from the abyss of death.”

By death Huang means the death of Zhu’s father Zhu Xining (1926-1998). The death of her father triggers this melancholic writing on death, time, and the solitude of existing. Zhu’s father’s death bleaches meaning from existence, rendering her afloat without any ontological anchorage or points of reference.

Of course, the object of lamentation is not only her father’s death, but also the passing of the ultimate reference of meaning, of everything meaningful. Disinherited, deprived of that lost paradise, the writer is wretched. However, melancholia becomes, as it was for Freud, a moment of insight, in which the subject has a “keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic,” “has come pretty near to understanding himself.” Melancholia becomes a way of seeing and a way of writing. For Zhu, writing becomes a way to overcome the pain of severance. Loss becomes the springboard for the bereaved artist’s aesthetic imagination, which is expressed in a kind of manic logorrhea that is haunted by an

---

5 From Huang Jinshu’s foreword to The Flâneur, 10.
6 From “Mourning and Melancholia,” 246. Further citations in text.
unrecoverable past and a more replete existence. Starting from *Remembering My Brothers from the Military Compound* and culminating in *Flâneur*, Zhu repeatedly attempts to return to what is lost, absent, different from what might be made present, located and identifiable.

What is worth noting is that throughout *Flâneur*, the biblical reference to the wife of Lot who was turned into a pillar of salt looms large as a melancholic figure. Zhu keeps identifying herself with Lot’s wife, who defies God’s words, looks back on Sodom the condemned city, and is frozen into a pillar of salt. Why is this allegory so alluring to Zhu? Time and time again, she looks back, and freezes in the precarious present, motionless and horror-stricken, not unlike the Benjaminian angel.

In “Voyage” (“chu hang”), death is represented as a journey away from the terrestrial present. Death is a departure, a departure toward the unknown. Zhu uses a simile to figure this departure: “The world is a house caught on fire, it is absolutely necessary to flee.” However, her visceral attachment to things past makes such fleeing all but impossible. She is precipitated into the predicament of Lot’s wife, for whom the temptation of the past is too great to let go. Her hesitance and sentimentality turn her into a pillar of salt, a monument to her incurable grief and the futility of departure.

To leave or not to leave, that’s an existential question. Zhu’s preoccupation with exile and going away has incurred a lot of criticisms, which label her as not loving this land and always eager to take off. In “The Old Capital,” she reveals her dissatisfaction regarding the invective such as “If you don’t identify with this land, why don’t you go back to China?” by retorting that it is as if “we had some place to go or to live; we

---

7 In *The Flâneur*, 87. Translation mine. Further citations in text.
just shamelessly insist on staying here” (169). The narrator in “The Old Capital” says that all these years she has even had to imagine some streets of this city as those existing in some other cities which she may or may not ever have visited. Only with the help of this “imagination” can she continue to lead her life. She uses a simile to describe this lamentable condition: “This situation is like that of many men who can only have sex with their own wives by imagining them as other women” (169). Nevertheless, her obsession with the motif of going away is ambivalent and is in fact interlacing with her desire of retrieving something lost, or recovering the repressed memory of her native land. It is a gesture saturated with the nostalgic sentiment of Lot’s wife or Benjamin’s angel of history. Even though the world ruled by capitalism is evil and destined to be destroyed, she does not have the strength to let go. Stuck and frozen between where she never should have been and where she needs to go, she relates herself to a pillar of salt.

“You return those ancestral parts back to some particular zone of celestial bodies, return the totemic spirit back to nature’s realm of spirits; and then, that skinny soul of yours will step into the temporality of dream; like a barnacle, it will fix itself tightly to damp rocks full of tree ferns with a ficus above. It is as if you’ve already been there four or five thousand years ago…. (99)

This peripatetic metaphor takes on a mythopoeic overtone in “A Blue Moon in May” (“wu yue de lan se yueliang”), in which the narrator associates the world without her father with the world in the wake of an atomic explosion. After this cataclysm that almost brings the world to an
end, the world relapses into a prehistorical state of being. Ahead of her lies a long journey, to which she must prepare to pledge her wholehearted devotion. Much like Odysseus’ home-bound journey, it is homesickness which gives rise to the narrator’s wanderings. She must make this journey in order to be reunited with her beloved. However, civilization has been destroyed and she must undergo a number of hardships and privations in order to make the pilgrimage to her destination. Like other essays in this book, the metaphor of traveling or wandering is paramount. Walking amidst civilization’s debris and journeying through various sites of decay and transience, the traveler becomes a ghost herself. The traveler even warns herself that, when she arrives in the land of the Lotus-eaters, weary though she is and in need of refreshment, she must leave quickly. She must decline the offer of their flower-food, since once you taste it, you lose your longing for home. You would want only to dwell in the Lotus Land, and let the memory of your home and your beloved fade from your mind.

The horror of forgetting is constantly evoked in Zhu’s works; she retains a construction of the past in the face of the relentless pressure of temporal erasure. Her effort to remember is a gesture that opposes the modern propensity for amnesia and reification. "Distant Thunder" ("yuan fang de lei sheng"), another essay in this collection, starts with a hypothetical question: “Try to imagine what it is you’d miss most the moment you had to leave this island-nation forever?”8 “So please look back…like a dying man whose life flashes before his eyes. What would be the last thing to remain on your retina? What sort of frame would the camera pause at?” (76). Again, we witness a gesture of Lot’s wife.

---

8 Translated by Sylvia Lichun Lin, this translated article is included in The Chinese Pen: Contemporary Chinese Literature from Taiwan (Winter 2003), 75-93. Further citations refer to Lin’s translated article and will be given in the text.
Fetishizing the Loss: the Phantasms of Eros in Zhu Tianxin’s Writings of Melancholia

After this question, the narrator embarks on her ritual of evocation, which is also the process of reversing forgetfulness. “Would it be the smell of coir palm?” “Could it be another summer afternoon when a gust of wind sent down a yellow rain of tiny spiky flowers from the cassia trees?” “It might be a summer...[in which] you traveled south with a friend to look after an old dormitory belonging to the sugar cane factory on behalf of the father of his high school friend” (89). Suffused in a patina of longing, the whole essay is based on these practices of collecting and re-collecting. Recollection becomes a repetition circling the loss. At the end of the essay, the thread of reminiscence brings her back to herself as a child waiting for her father after work. Reduced to a child-like status, the narrator longs for a level of being beyond present life, a prelapsarian existence, replete with richly blossoming plentitude, when her father was still around. However, as demonstrated in the opening epigraph in “Voyage” that is quoted from Edgar Allan Poe’s “Morella”—“the hours of thy happiness are over; and joy is not gathered twice in a life”—the loss of a loved person signifies the end of this blissful existence. She is therefore in exile and becomes a mourner, as shown in the second half of the epigraph: “thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on the earth, as do the Moslem in Mecca.”

Amid a menacing rumble of distant thunder, the narration stops in a sudden blackout, using the analogy of a power outage to describe the rent in the fabric of consciousness wrought by loss: “Was it because Father had switched off the electricity, since the bulb hanging in the middle of the living room suddenly went out? The house was pitch-black; memory and the dot of light on the retina abruptly vanished” (93). Now, without her father, she is just like a child groping her way in the darkness. “The

---

9 See “Morella” in Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, 224.
Each of the essays in Flâneur engages the question of loss, of mourning, of melancholia, and of existing, culling out the ethical implications of our attempt to create a relation to loss. Like Lot’s Wife or the Benjaminian Angel of History, Zhu casts her retrospective gaze toward the wreckage of the past, which keeps piling in front of her and compels her to arrest the moment to form what Benjamin called “a dialectic at a standstill.” In her latest novella “A Glance toward the Southern City,” she recurs to the motif of Lot’s Wife. This time the person who directs her “glance” toward the past is situated in an imaginary world in which alarming tendencies of our present social and political order are projected in some calamitous future culmination. Zhu employs a form of dystopian fiction to express her warning against the trend of polarized bipartisanship which is currently much in the air in Taiwan. In her ominous depiction of 2030, Taiwan is torn apart into two independent states due to the aggravation of ethnic frictions. She presages the most sinister prophecy, which indeed is a nightmarish vision that could paralyze the reader in its glaring intensity. Due to the subject matter and her unapologetic, confrontational attitude toward the sensitive issue of ethnic identity or identity politics, it is predictable that debates and controversies will soon be stirred around the novella. In this novella, Zhu deploys hyperbolic rhetoric and takes extreme measures to depict a future Taiwan embroiled in the disastrous outcome of ethnic tensions. In the DPP-controlled 2030, the

---

10 In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin writes: “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.” In this standstill that halts the flow of the teleological movement, the historical “victors” have their accounts with history cancelled, and we recognize “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (Illuminations, 262-3).
ethnic origin becomes the golden standard by which to judge if you love this land or not. Zhu describes the enactment of apartheid laws to institutionalize the discrimination against “wai sheng ren” (Mainland Taiwanese). The “wai sheng” people, charged with collaborating with the Mainland Chinese, are disfranchised and prohibited from miscegenation.

After the parliamentary election results come out, the DPP announces that the capital will be moved to the south due to the party’s failure to win the northern part. The oppositional party is asked to form a separate state that is independent from the ruling party. As a result, the island is split up into the “wai sheng ren” north and the “ben sheng ren” south; and people are forced to take sides.

The novella is narrated by an adolescent who is the age of Zhu’s daughter; through whose eyes we see the dramatic difference of two generations’ attitude toward memory and forgetting. The mother in the story (a verisimilitude of Zhu herself) refuses to write the mandated “apologia” (wai sheng ren shu) confessing the “wrongdoings” perpetrated by her “wai sheng” forefathers or even herself. Facing the “threat” of an oppressive regime that dedicates itself to the ideology of essentialism, the mother is adamant to wrest a historical tradition anew from an empty continuum of forgetting. However, to the daughter and her generation, nostalgia is a matter of indifference, and she hopes to consign all the problems and unpleasant thoughts to oblivion and to move on with her life. She says, when it comes to the moment she has to leave this island forever, unlike her mother, she has nothing to reminisce about. She can be “at home” in any Starbucks-like coffee shops worldwide and be clear of the burden of history and memory. Unlike Lot’s wife, this time when she is forced to leave the burning city, she may forget to look back, a gesture that is not without the deepest anguish. In this dystopia, Zhu presents a story of
ultimate horror, an eerie parable that aims to warn against the corrosive bipartisanship that has ripped a big open gash in our society. The message of the story is excruciatingly clear: If we don’t pay our timely attention to the problems and conflicts now, the gash would develop into irreparable sores and these sores could fester and become gangrenous.

Curiously, ten years after the publication of Old Capital, Zhu’s mourning is never resolved and her new work presents nothing new in terms of the subject’s psychic compulsion to narrate her relationship to loss. The inability to invest in new objects, we are told by Freud, is part of the definition of melancholia. “A Glance toward the Southern Capital” is imbued with the most toxic resentment that paralyzes any gesture that might offer redemption or salvation. Bluntly presenting the writer’s relentless anger and her unpolished rancor, this piece evokes horror and points to the exacerbation of symptoms of melancholia. The necessary distance between the “real-life” author and the “fictional” world is eliminated; we can almost identify the “mother” in the novella with Zhu herself. Motivated by a loss that she cannot grieve and yet is compelled to repeat, Zhu becomes an addict to memories of the past or a fetishist who keeps accumulating signs of loss. All of these symptoms of “temporal disorders” bring us to Freud’s account of melancholia, which is a kind of “failed mourning.” According to Freud, mourning is a recovering process through which a person can overcome his or her grief after a certain period of time; however, melancholia is a pathological addiction to the experience of loss. In melancholia, the loved object is impossible to be declared lost or dead, and the subject continues to “magnify” the importance of losing what he or she loves. Therefore, Zhu proves to be a melancholiac, not a mourner. In the following section, we shall take a look at Freud’s analysis of melancholia, Agamben’s elucidation on the relationship between
melancholia and fetishism, and Butler’s discussion of melancholia and ego formation, in order to have a more dialectical reading of melancholia’s compulsion. How does the inability to mourn or the refusal to complete the task of grief allude to something that is not purely regressive but might be aesthetically fertile and paradoxically productive? We will unravel this seemingly paradoxical crux in order to tease out the phantasmatic and the ethical strain implicit in Zhu’s melancholia.

II. The Discourse of Melancholia: Freud, Agamben, Butler

In “ Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguishes the two as follows: mourning is the “normative” or the “normal” form of grieving that results in decathexis, the withdrawal of the libido from its attachments to the loved object and the transference of it to a new one. When the working of mourning is completed, the “ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). In contrast, melancholia is “pathological,” since it refuses to let go of the loved object, and instead relocates the loss in what Freud calls “the region of memory-traces of things” (256).

Put another way, mourning is a kind of “survival tactic” that helps the ego to re-gain its equilibrium by breaking attachment to the lost object. The lost object may be a lover, a friend, a place, or an ideal abstraction such as liberty, citizenship, or love. Nevertheless, the mourner has no trouble pointing to the referential status of his loss. But in melancholia, what is opaque to observation and to consciousness is “what it is that is absorbing [the melancholic] so entirely” (246). As Freud writes on the object relation in melancholia:

The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost
as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he lost either. This indeed might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost not what he has lost in him. (245)

Freud is apparently embarrassed by this fact that the origin of the melancholia is especially difficult to explain, that there seems to be a loss without a lost object. From this description of melancholia, we might proceed to see the “excessive” nature of melancholia, something that cannot be subsumed into a unitary, fixed category. Juliana Schiesari raises the question of whether melancholia can be seen as a kind of floating signifier: “[T]he very definition of melancholia, in Freud’s term, ‘fluctuates,’” thereby resisting interpretative closures” (40). And Schiesari argues that it is this semantic “excess” that disturbs Freud so much in his account of melancholia that he marks it as pathological: “[I]t can be seen as pathological precisely to the extent that, as a state, it [melancholia] is opaque rather than self-evident. Such a binarism between mourning as transparency and melancholia as opacity defines the pathological as something that escapes definition, thereby exceeding the normative or the quotidian” (38).

Hence, the depletion of the ego becomes the effect of an ungrieved loss. The melancholic, instead of investing the libido onto another object, narcissistically identifies with the abandoned object by “incorporating” that
other into the very structure of ego. As Freud says, “So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation” (256). This incorporating strategy of melancholia is not a simple one, since Freud writes, “It is complicated by the conflict of ambivalence” (256). The opposite feelings of love and hate become the important conditioning factors in melancholia, as Freud remarks: “If the love for the object—a love which cannot be given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering” (251). Ambivalently, gratification derives from this sadistic tendency of self-punishment, by means of which the melancholiacs can “avoid the necessity of openly expressing their hostility against the loved ones” (251). At the same time, the internalization of the loss becomes not only a preservation of the loss but also an elevation of the loss to an ego-ideal. The ego-ideal becomes the measuring stick “against which the ego is judged by the super-ego.”

In contrast to this pathological scenario that Freud narrates of melancholia, Giorgio Agamben’s theories on melancholia highlight the erotic constellation and the role of the phantasm that have escaped Freud’s account of the dynamic of melancholic incorporation. According to Agamben, melancholia’s compulsion to transform an object of contemplation into an “amorous embrace” involves a “phantasmatic” operation. For him, the history of melancholia is a precipitate on which

12 Giorgio Agamben, Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, 20. Further
converges medieval humoral medicine and mystical theory, literature of the Renaissance and the Romantic age, and the philosophies of Western metaphysics. In particular, the perception and fear of black bile during the Middle Ages as an amorously and dangerously fantastic way to imagine makes Agamben to emphasize melancholia’s relationship with the erotic impulse, which engages melancholia in an “ambiguous commerce with phantasms” (24).

Agamben rejects to identify melancholia with paralysis or immobility; instead, he views melancholia as a “mode of becoming.” The opaque nature of the origin of melancholia that previously disturbs Freud is recuperated by Agamben by reading it as a surplus of signification, a figure pregnant with potentialities and productive becoming. He perceives incorporation as an imaginative capacity that confers upon the lost object a “phantasmagorical reality,” enabling “the existence of the unreal and marks out a scene in which the ego may enter into relation with it and attempt an appropriation such as no other possession could rival and no loss possibly threaten” (20). This intense turn away from reality by withdrawing the libido inward unfolds before us another epiphanic realm of experience in which the lost objects “can be possessed only with the provision that it be lost forever” (26). As Agamben writes:

*The imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm. The lost object is but the appearance that desire* 

---

creates for its own courting of the phantasm, and the introjection of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real. (25)

It is in this phantasmatic realm of experience with which human beings enters in contact that the creations of human culture find their expression. And herein lies the traditional association of melancholy with artistic activity that can be traced back to Aristotle. We can also say that melancholia opens up new ways of talking about narrative. Melancholia triggers the narrative impulse and becomes the point of origin for narrative, since the object of desire must remain incomplete and impoverished so that “it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse, a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire.”

Interestingly, here we find the structure of Freud’s account of the genesis of the fetish: the substitution of a part of the body for the whole, or the substitution of an inorganic object for the whole sexual partner. And this also corresponds to one of the most common tropes of figurative language: synecdoche or metonymy (i.e. a part of something is used to signify the whole). In Freud’s discussion of fetishism, the boy once had ample pre-oedipal access to the mother’s body. Fetishism is the result of the boy’s unwillingness to acknowledge his mother’s castration. His disavowal is also a mechanism to ward off the threat of castration directed

14 In Problems, Aristotle asks this famous question that gives melancholy a glamorous aura of creativity and brilliance: “Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells?” (The Nature of Melancholy, 57).

15 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, 136.
toward his own organ. Therefore, the fetish object takes over the role of the missing maternal phallus. He maintains ambivalent views of his mother’s castration: in affirming her castration he can be the subject of the Symbolic; yet in disavowing her castration, he is able to retain his libidinal investments in his pre-oedipal, maternal attachments. In other words, fetishistic disavowal is the simultaneous affirmation and denial of perception.

Considered from this point of view, the fetishist’s metonymic substitution is a kind of dispossession in that the presence of the fetishistic object (shoe, underwear, souvenir, etc.) radically indicates its status as a “mere” substitution and its distance from the pre-oedipal, maternal plentitude. However, the object of substitution is both incomplete and forever expansive; as Agamben writes: “it is something infinitely capable of substitution, without any of its successive incarnations ever succeeding in exhausting the nullity of which it is the symbol” (33). In other words, it is experienced “as catastrophe and jouissance simultaneously.”

So far we have attempted to “depathologize” melancholia and to emancipate it from the fixed signification in order to open up a new semantic field that enables us to see melancholia as a figure of becoming. Judith Butler has pushed further by reminding us that melancholia is central to the formation of the ego; that is, melancholic identification is “prerequisite” for all identities. She helps us to see that in The Ego and the Id (1923), Freud revokes his claim in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” that grief can be resolved through a breaking of attachment, as well as the subsequent investment in new objects. In The Ego and the Id, he reverses his previous position by speculating that there may be no final

16 Susan Stewart, 135.
breaking of the attachment; rather, “the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications. The lost object is, in that sense, made coextensive with the ego itself.”\(^{17}\) If we bring this ego theory to extend beyond the mechanism of the psychic life and to bear on the analysis of the bigger realm of historical and social life, we might say that Butler here joins Benjamin’s re-construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward. Both thinkers reverse the direction of the futurist myth of ego formation or historical progress and aver: “the past is not actually past in the sense of ‘over’, since it continues as an animating absence in the presence, one that makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself.”\(^{18}\) Seen in this way, we can come to the understanding that disavowed loss not only gives rise to a longing that triggers narration, but also becomes the condition of a new political and ethical agency. What Freud posits as a marginal and pathological process becomes in Butler and Benjamin the fundamental event in the topography of human history and culture. This understanding shall help us proceed to read Zhu Tianxin’s relationship to the experience of loss and analyze melancholia’s dialectical movement of regression and becoming.

### III. Eros and Recollection

Recalling Agamben’s conceptualization of melancholia’s compulsion, we see that Zhu Tianxin’s works exhibit his narration of the exacerbated phantasmatic practice. The Janus-faced nature of the phantasm is


responsible not only for her “morbid propensity for necromantic fascination” but also for her “aptitude for ecstatic illumination.”\textsuperscript{19} The courting of the phantasm triggers her narration that is based on recollection. Moreover, many of her mnemonic narrations bring us into the realm of the body and the senses. Her empire of memories is also the “empire of the senses.”\textsuperscript{20} The erotic relations between sense impressions and memory are constantly explored in Zhu’s works. This is particularly evident in her novella “Hungarian Water” (“Xiongyali zhi shuei,” 1995), in which the artist is like a wizard, a perfumer-alchemist, who concocts scents and distills essential oil from the underimagined everydayness, transporting us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived to awaken in us erotic memories and remembered grief.

The title comes from the history of perfumes: in 1370 A.D. for the first time alcohol was added to perfume, which was then called “Hungarian water.” Like Zhu’s other stories in this book collection \textit{The Old Capital}, this one is also told from the first-person point of view and is equally replete with linguistic exoticism and textual extravagance in a highly performative fashion. Zhu juxtaposes memories with theories of smell and the history of perfumes in a dazzling way. The story begins with the narrator’s encounter with a strange man (who is termed “A” by the narrator) in a beer house. Both of them are male, middle-aged, and doing white-collar jobs. For no reason at all, out of the blue, the narrator is approached by slightly drunken “A,” who comes along and asks: “Why do you have this smell?”\textsuperscript{21} Befuddled by this question and out of courtesy, the narrator sniffs the sleeves of his own wool suit and finds nothing.

\textsuperscript{19} Agamben, \textit{Stanza}, 24.  
\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{Empire of the Senses: the Sensual Culture Reader}, edited by David Howes.  
“Citronella oil!” the strange man says in ecstasy, “I haven’t smelled it for thirty years....”

The narrator then remembers why his clothes have caught the scent of the citronella oil; it is because this oil was once used by his wife, in the rainy season, as a repellent to keep termites from damaging the clothes in the closet. “A” indeed has a sharp nose, since, according to the narrator, this happened quite a while ago and his suit had been taken to the dry cleaner’s no less than four times. Taking a deep sniff and seeming uncontrollably emotional, “A” tells the narrator how the scent of citronella oil fills him with a tumult of childhood memories. He remembers a street that was permeated with the aroma of citronella oil day and night, a small-town street to which his aunt (the wife of his uncle) usually took him to do grocery shopping, speaking Japanese with the wife of a sundry store owner. Because his aunt was divorced from his uncle, “I almost forgot her; for thirty years I haven’t thought of this woman,” he says. Yet, the scent of the citronella oil transports him back to the period when he, as a child, lived with his aunt, a beautiful woman with a good smell.

Citronella oil is distilled from lemongrass, which, together with camphor and peppermint oil, used to be Taiwan’s main agricultural export to Japan in the colonial period. Lemongrass planting had its heyday until the early 1970s, when laboratories could start producing synthetic scents to mimic natural essences. Therefore, the smell of citronella oil is not only about personal memories, it also entails Taiwan’s past, a vast historical and social tapestry into which the story is woven. Zhu’s fusion of childhood history and collective history is always stunning. The combined scent memories have such a savage power to overwhelm “A” that he makes a blunt request of the narrator: he wonders if the narrator can spare him some
old cloth (such as old socks or a useless handkerchief) from his closet, some piece of cloth tinged with the smell of citronella oil and a powdery scent, a combined smell that is the smell of his aunt. Despite some feelings of uneasiness, the narrator says yes to this eccentric man’s request, since, “aside from my wife, all these years I haven’t heard any adult with such tearful voice,” he says (115).

Thereafter, these two men occasionally meet up in a coffee house. “A” becomes the narrator’s olfactory “mentor,” who leads him into the exploration of scent-triggerable memories. Before knowing “A,” much of the narrator’s life used to be in the background, but now a strange bucketful of light has poured into the shadows to make the narrator’s life new again. One afternoon, sitting in the coffee shop and sipping Long Island Ice Tea, the pair is assaulted by a strong odor exuding from a waitress’ armpit. The odor triggers different memories in them. Strangely, the odor issuing from the armpit smells like other substances it seems remote from. For the narrator, the odor reminds him of a curry his mother had cooked when he was in elementary school. As for “A,” the body odor carries him back to childhood memories and, again, to his aunt, who used to take him to a tailor’s shop to have her clothes made. Back then he was only five or six years old; when his aunt was selecting fabric or measuring her size, he was allowed to play in a cage-like basket that contained rolls of lint and fragments of linen fabric, useless remnants discarded by the dressmaker. Although these scraps came from brand new cloth, for some mysterious reason they exuded a very strong smell that resembled a robust body odor distilled from hundreds of people’s armpits. Sometimes he fell into a doze on the scrap heap while playing inside the cage, his nostrils filled with the pungent odor that is now vividly remembered.
Here we might recall Benjamin’s discussion of smell in “The Image of Proust,” in which he remarks on smell’s capability of mnemonic preservation. He writes, “To be sure, most memories that we search for [with the aid of smells] come to us as visual images. Even the free-floating forms of the mémoire involontaire are still in large part isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images.” Indeed, smells are surer than sights and sounds because they trigger powerful images before we have time to edit them. Smell is the most direct and ancient of all our senses; nothing is more memorable than a smell-triggered memory. In “Hungarian Water,” a long-forgotten aunt is remembered by a smell, which is overwhelmingly nostalgic because the effect caused by this mute sense is immediate, undiluted, deeply emotional, and profoundly different from the effect produced by abstract words or ocular images, which somehow need a mediator or interpreter. Hit by a smell, memories explode all at once. A complex vision leaps out of the preconscious underground.

Next time the two men meet, the ritual of fetishistic sniffing is taken outdoors—a stroll through a street lane in a summer night is transformed into another mnemonic exploration. The smell of a gardenia awakens in the narrator sweet memories of a pretty girl sitting next to him when he was a first grader in elementary school. The odor of the yellowish-white flowers transports him to his first-grade classroom, in which kids had a penchant for putting gardenias (together with other odd things like aromatic pencil shreds or their rotten baby teeth) into their pencil boxes. Groping for words to describe his inarticulate exaltation triggered by a gardenia’s smell, the narrator feels like becoming an analysand and making a confession to and being hypnotized by analyst “A,” who is like a wise man transporting the

---

22 *Illuminations*, 214.
narrator back to an otherwise inaccessible world.

Like an old-fashioned storyteller, “A” speaks of the art of smelling and the intersections of scent and memory:

*Therefore, I am not afraid of Alzheimer’s disease or something like becoming a vegetable someday, since, if that should happen to me, I would be able to see my past effortlessly, just like watching films, purely from smelling the scent of the nurses. And this past is a very honest one; it has not yet been edited by us grownups in any cunning way.*

*In order to preserve memories, or to preserve some women in your memory, you can purposely use a particular perfume for a period of time, if you feel it’s interesting and important for you to remember the past.... (125)*

The narrator, who hitherto was never a sentimental person, becomes infected by his friend’s mnemonic obsession with the sense of smell. Once realizing this change, the narrator begins to feel afraid of those awakened memories, since their authenticity is of such an alarming degree that he is in fear of their divergence from those hegemonic memories fabricated by the official discourse. The clash between the personal and the hegemonic memories is so violent that he says, “I feel like I am a traitor.” He says, “It’s better to preserve the useful memory; if not, it’s too dangerous” (133). This should be read as an ironic footnote regarding the power of remembrance, which indeed retains a demystifying, critical import, bearing sober witness to the truth of the past.

In a city of amnesia, these two men use smell to “cast nets into the sea
of the *temps perdu*" in order to get hold of authentic experience. Memory as a tool to overcome fragmentation is suggested by Zhu, who in this story attempts to harness the energies of recollection for revolutionary purposes or alternative imaginations. Smell brings back a palimpsest of layered memory. For the narrator, the bitter-sweet, fruity ooze of the raw grape’s pulp is redolent of *juanchun* and the summer before he moved out of the village. The smell evokes in him a remembrance of the names of his adolescent playmates in *juancun*; in that summer, they dashed and frolicked about neighbors’ fields and gardens from which grapes not yet ripening were stolen. Now the odors of raw grapes waft him back to his *juanchun* home, to his childhood frolics in the ripening fields and yards with a whole trellis of vines. Tears begin to water in his eyes. The narrator even muses that, compared with animals, which can smell with beatific grandeur (for example, a shepherd dog has twenty-two million olfactory cells, forty-four times keener than human noses), we must have missed a lot!

In order to remember the name of his then-girlfriend when he was serving in the army, “A” heads south towards Ping Dong, the southern tip of the island, hoping to re-live the hours of passion on a hot summer night. He chooses the same season and takes a train to the tropical Southern countryside, where his unit was staying and where his girlfriend used to visit him at that time. Yet now, half the landscape, with a monstrous sprawl of new houses, has changed beyond recognition. However, driving through the countryside at sunset in summer, with his eyes closed and the windows open, he conjures up a cavalcade of smells in memories: manure, cut grass, clean vapor, chaff and husks, air that smells like a typhoon had just passed.

---

23 *Illuminations*, 214.
The air is drenched with thick curds of perfume and the evening chorus of insects is deafening. The combined scent leaves his sinuses full; the density of the moment crests over him like a flood and saturates his senses to such a degree that it almost chokes him. Inhaling this ardent aroma of summer air, “A” feels that, for decades, all this dewy fresh life-force, optimism, expectancy, and passionate bloom of youth have been forgotten or hidden under the platitudinous mass of many years and experiences living in Taipei.

Next time they meet, “A” tells the narrator a research result that terrifies him: “when the Alzheimer patient loses all his memories, he simultaneously loses his sense of smell” (146). “A” thereby associates death with amnesia. For him, forgetting is even more horrifying than physical death. He calls it the “horror of forgetting.” He then asks the narrator what he would like to do the most if there were only a short time remaining and he only preserved a slight sense of smell. Like making a will, the narrator catalogues the names of those he would like to see—his childhood playmates, long forgotten and hidden in the innermost recesses of his memory. Like a drunken old man, he begins to weep in gasping, choking sobs.

**IV. Conclusion: Zhu Tianxin; or, the Fetishist of Loss**

Zhu Tianxin’s mature works unfailingly evoke a feeling of melancholy. The focus of this article is to investigate her intriguing compulsion to have a relationship to loss by suspending or controlling time through artistic strategies of repetition, substitution, negation, or refabrication. And these aesthetic deployments, as I have shown, are also implicated in the psychic operations and symptoms of melancholia.
As I argue earlier in this article, Zhu inscribes a poetic description of her temporal anxiety on the allegory of Lot’s wife: through this biblical allusion, the writer attempts to suspend loss, escape reality, and stop time. This echoes Zhang Dachun’s discussion of the morbid tendency of the “old souls,” who are vehement in wrestling with temporality. And when we turn to Freud and the language of psychoanalysis to help us understand this temporal anxiety, we enter into a discussion of the temporal dimension of melancholia. More precisely, melancholia is a way of denying temporal loss by an endless metonymic chain of substitution, whereby the loved object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time. This is the characteristic of the fetish according to Freud; and we have seen how Zhu becomes like a fetishist who accumulates signs of loss and makes a gain out of loss itself. As a result, her works become an encyclopedic collection of the experiences of loss.

Paradoxically, absence provides the plethora of interpretive meanings and her ambiguous commerce with phantasms. Zhu’s compulsion to ward off a loss so passionately felt highlights melancholia’s relation to eros. As we have witnessed in her melancholic writings, the erotic tango between loss and recollection triggers the whole elaborate and encyclopedic web of narration and brings us endless encounters with sensuousness. This leads us to Agamben’s discussion of the melancholia’s potentialities of unfolding a productive space that is aesthetically fecund and dialectically becoming. In other words, utopia can only be rendered present through a kind of negative reference, through the irrecoverable that animates critical imagination and possible redemption. Thus, I think it befitting to conclude this article by quoting the following words by Agamben: “In the space opened by its obstinate phantasmagoric tendency originates the unceasing alchemical effort of human culture to appropriate to itself death and the
negative and to shape the maximum reality seizing on the maximum unreality. Simultaneously a regression and a creation, melancholia in Zhu’s works presents itself as a reminder that human beings cannot overcome the loss without losing their capacities for imagining communities and alternative becomings. Attachments to loss and its phantasms never simply hold on to a fixed notion of the past; rather, the very process of narrating loss orients an impulse toward the future.

Works Cited


---. “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?” *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*

Fetishizing the Loss: the Phantasms of Eros in Zhu Tianxin’s Writings of Melancholia


Hsu, Jen-yi. “Ghosts in the City: Mourning and Melancholia in Zhu Tianxin’s The Old Capital.” Comparative Literature Studies 41.4 (Winter, 2004): 546-64.


---. Nandu yi wang (A Glance toward the Southern Capital) (南都一望).
Fetishizing the Loss: the Phantasms of Eros in Zhu Tianxin’s Writings of Melancholia


責任編輯：程克雅
此篇論文分析朱天心 1989 年後創作的作品當中所表達的時間失序現象。時間失序的症狀如戀物、憂鬱、成癮等，充斥朱的作品如《想我眷村的兄弟們》、《古都》、《漫遊者》、甚至新作〈南都一望〉；象徵著作家如患強迫症般的渴望藉由中止或控制時間的流動，來和「失落」建立關係。論文首先分析班雅明的「歷史的天使」，藉由對這個寓言的分析，來剖解現代性當中時間焦慮的現象。班雅明著名的天使在過去與現在、死去的與現存的之間，誘發出一種極富辯證價值的緊張關係，這種對時間的辯證討論，也將導入對朱作品的分析中，探討其沉溺失落與執戀憂鬱的文本症狀。佛洛依德 1917 年的《哀悼與憂鬱》將提供我們剖析憂鬱情結的時間面相。根據佛洛依德的分析，憂鬱和哀悼不同，憂鬱對失落愛物的持續愛慾投入，具有病態的特質。然而，關於憂鬱對失落物的愛戀與執著，施紗蕊、阿岡本、與巴特勒提供给我们們比佛洛依德更寬廣的解讀空間；不但揭示出此依戀情結的社會基礎，還有其美學、倫理、與政治層面。這些理論家對憂鬱的闡述，提供了本論文討論朱天心憂鬱書寫的理論架構。