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Marie-Agnès Gay

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Études de Stylistique Anglaise

Playing Truant with Language, or the Journey of the “Disease” in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* and *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works*

Marie-Agnès Gay

- 1 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is a Korean American writer and visual artist whose incredibly hybrid production includes experimental poetry, mail art, handmade books, videos, films, multi-media performances. In 1982 she published *Dictée*, an experimental autobiographical memoir, only days before she was murdered in New York¹. The book – which juxtaposes narrative passages, poetry, handwritten and typed letters, representations of Chinese and Korean characters, grammar and translation exercises, diagrams, captionless photographs, etc. – is “alinear and achronological, multivocal and multilingual, heterogeneous and collaged, decontextualized and without a central narrating voice” (McDaniel 2009, 71). This Unidentified Artistic Object, which escapes all established canons, has however become a classic in the field of Asian American studies.
- 2 Its title, a reference to one of the most constraining language-learning exercises, clearly stands at odds with the book’s free-wheeling artistic inventiveness and its overwhelming use of deviant syntax and punctuation, which literally turn the textual space into “no grammar’s land”, to borrow an expression from Lecerle’s book *The Violence of Language* (1990, 19). However, the title does tell us crucial things about the book in particular and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in general:
  - Most directly, the title alludes to the incipit of the memoir, which is made up of two paragraphs of detailed and, as shall be seen, subverted dictation.
  - The title signals Cha’s knowledge of French, which is indeed an essential constituent of her poetic idiom, whether it be in *Dictée* or in her other works, as also made clear by the title of the posthumous collection of lesser-known pieces published in 2009: *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works*, to which this article will also refer².

- The title is an invitation to play with words and grammar. Indeed *Dictée*, which on the book’s cover page appears without the French accent, soon allows for morphological displacement, and consequently for a shift in meaning: *Dictée* can be read as *Dict-ee*, where the suffix -ee would express the attributive role assigned to someone – as in *addressee* or *narratee*. *Dictée* in this case would refer to the individual receiving the dictation, and by extension would suggest the idea of a linguistic *diktat*. It therefore points to Cha’s political endeavor as a Korean female immigrant who is wary of “hegemonic demands on enunciation” and who, from her position as a postcolonial subject, intends to challenge “the authorizing and alienating structures of language” (Kang 1994, 74 and 78).
  - Although the opening page does not describe the pupils doing the dictation exercise and simply reproduces the text of the dictation, the reader is invited to imagine young Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the implicit protagonist of this autobiographical scene. In such a context, because the -ée suffix in French is also that of the past-participle with gender agreement, we could see in “*Dictée*” – as a continuation of the previous point – the elliptical passive form “[être] dictée”, but with an animate subject (Cha as a young pupil), on the English model *to be dictated* as in *to be asked/told...* However, if this structure is grammatically correct in English, French does not allow it (one cannot say *être demandé, dit...*, nor therefore *être dicté*), and this interpretation of the title has us enter the land of “the exceptional and agrammatical” (Lecerclé 1990, 52). Yet this land, “[a countryside hosting] the irrelevant and the excluded aspects of language, [...] the ambiguities and impurities of natural idioms” (Lecerclé 1990, 52), is Cha’s favorite home.
  - Lastly, the title not only signals Cha’s knowledge of French; it announces one of her favored artistic acts: that of playing not with one linguistic system, but with two, in a clear attempt to further disrupt and free herself from fixed linguistic structures.
- 3 We can therefore say that the title *Dictée* encapsulates the aporetic tension which informs the book, and which will be the focus of this article. First, it points to language as a set of prescriptive rules that confines the individual into a logic of faithful reproduction based on the principle of equivalence, a reality that Cha ceaselessly denounces in her works and which will be the object of the first part. I will then quickly show that by exposing the prescriptive logic of linguistic systems, Cha more widely exposes the mechanism of ideological subjection through standardization. However, because the word *dictée*, as has been seen, lends itself to all sorts of deformations, the title reminds us that, conversely, language is also an inexhaustible means of emancipation when one takes it as a primary material of subversion, as Cha systematically does in her entire body of work. Of course, the *systematic* practice of exception and distortion runs a risk: don’t exceptions always confirm the rule? Or, as we are reminded by Lecerclé’s playful formulation: “where there is no (linguistic) prohibition, there is no speakeasy” (1990, 52). I however intend to demonstrate in the third part that this is not the case with Cha, who does not only bend standard language to her rebellious will, but who makes it the plaything of her wild – sometimes *delirious* – poetic inventiveness. Furthermore, her frequent play with French and with translation is what more definitely frees her texts from the overarching rigid system of standard English. It indeed opens Cha’s texts onto a space of in-betweenness and irresolution where the true “remainder” (Lecerclé 1990, 19) of language is to be found.

"the recitations... Ceaseless. Again. Over and over." (Cha 2001 [1982], 47): Dictation or the Tyranny of Repetition

- 4 Cha's personal history accounts for her obsessional relation to language and her acute perception of the issue of language and authority. During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1919 to 1945, the use of Korean was strictly forbidden, and Japanese became the official language of the colonized country. "Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary", Cha tells us in *Dictée*, and her mother is part of "All of [those] who are one, who by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue" (Cha 2001 [1982], 32 and 46): the paratactic style and noun sentences in the first example express a refusal to fully articulate an idea in a dominant foreign language and the faulty syntax in the second one attempts to loosen the linguistic corset that constrains the speaker. Language was therefore a sensitive issue for Cha's family even before her parents emigrated to the United States in 1962, when Theresa was about ten. After two years in Hawaii, the family settled in California, where Cha attended a Catholic school. There she learned French, which she then continued to practice in the 1970s as a BA student in Comparative Literature at Berkeley and later on when she spent a few months in Paris.
- 5 In an artist's statement in which she summarizes her work, Cha explains: "Since having been forced to learn foreign languages 'consciously', there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language. Certain areas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax"³. While the passive "having been forced" implicitly refers to the circumstances of her exile, it undeniably betrays Cha's association of language-learning with coercion ("Since having had to learn..." would have been a slightly more neutral form), and more particularly her perception of language as a highly prescriptive system. Hence her – ironic – inclusion in *Dictée* of a series of items linked to the process of language acquisition, all based on the practice of faithful repetition, all reminders that "the logic of identical equivalence subsum[es] the student to the example" (Lowe, 42). These items comprise:

the introductory dictation

Aller à la ligne C'était le premier jour point
 Elle venait de loin point ce soir au dîner virgule
 Les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guillemets
 Ça c'est bien passé le premier jour point
 d'interrogation ferme les guillemets au moins
 virgule dire le moins possible virgule la réponse
 serait virgule ouvre les guillemets Il n'y a qu'une
 chose point ferme les guillemets ouvre les guillemets
 Il y a quelqu'une point loin point ferme
 les guillemets (Cha 2001 [1982], 1) [Ex.1]⁴

- 6 Tellingly, the dictation opens on an injunction, "Aller à la ligne", the less directive infinitive being later clarified by the explicit imperative form "ouvre/ferme les guillemets".

traditional translation and conjugation exercises:

Ecrivez en français:

1. If you like this better, tell me so at once.
2. The general remained only a little while in this place.
3. If you did not speak so quickly, they would understand you better.

4. The leaves have not fallen yet nor will they fall for some days.
[...](Cha 2001 [1982], 8)

- 7 We may note here that the open contents of the first entry ("1. If you like this better, tell me so at once") are sapped by the next entry, which quickly summons up the highest possible figure of authority ("2. The general remained only a little while in this place.") As for the exercise which comes next, it significantly proves integrally self-reflexive as regards the topic of language and the imposition of linguistic practice:

Traduire en français:

1. I want you to speak.
2. I wanted him to speak.
3. I shall want you to speak.
4. Are you afraid he will speak?
5. Were you afraid they would speak?
6. It will be better for him to speak to us.
7. Was it necessary for you to write?
8. Wait till I write.
9. Why didn't you wait so that I could write you? (Cha 2001 [1982], 8) [Ex.2]

references to the field of phonology and phonetics through pages devoted to oral speech. The first paragraph of page 3 appears as a description of a student's attempts to faithfully imitate the pronunciation of a foreign language, a real torture:

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits. Torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (one thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. [...] She swallows once more. (Once more. One more time would do.) In preparation. It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refueling itself, Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak. (Cha 2001 [1982], 3) [Ex.3]

- 8 Further on, page 74 features highly technical anatomy charts of the phonation system with the page opposite evoking a speaker's patient and again painful efforts to pronounce correct sounds:

One by one.
The sounds. The sounds that move at a time
stops. Starts again. Exceptions
Stops and starts again
All but exceptions.
Stop. Start. Starts.
Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.
Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.
Pidgeon. Semblance of speech.
Swallows? Inhales. Stutter. Starts. Stops before starts.
[...](Cha 2001 [1982], 75) [Ex.4]

- 9 All such language-learning exercises in fact doubly rely on the principle of repetition. Firstly, the pupil/student, a reciter, has to keep "mimick[ing]" in order to learn, with no space for deviation, as made clear by this excerpt from *Exilée - Temps Morts - Selected Works*:

As a standard mark a standard marking
maintained as a marking, repeated, has been always
repeated as long as i can remember, started before,
even before my time.

traced as standard procedure for marking

(repeated as invocation
of that one thing that only one thing
the one thing and the one place)

can't be helped. [...] (Cha 2009, 51)

- 10 Secondly, each linguistic element produced (each single written or pronounced word), a linguistic variant, refers back to an original model, which has to be applied following an authoritative logic of equivalence. Indeed, subordinating the multiple to the identical is what drives grammar. This finds an apt expression in *Dictée* in the fact that one of the drills provided bears on the conjugation of 1st-group French verbs (allegedly the most regular verbs because the radical does not change through conjugation), but with a particular focus on verbs ending in -yer and -eCONSONANTer (-eler/-ener/-eter...), i.e. exceptions:

Complétez les phrases suivantes:

1. Le lac est (geler) ce matin.
2. Je (se lever) quand ma mère m'appeler.⁵
3. Elle (essuyer) la table avec une éponge.
4. Il (mener) son enfant à l'école.
5. Au marché on (acheter) des œufs, de la viande et des légumes.
6. Il (jeter) les coquilles des noix qu'il (manger).
7. Ils (se promener) tous les soirs dans le rue.
8. Elle (préférer) le chapeau vert.
9. Je (espérer) que vous m' (appeler) de bonne heure.
10. Ils (envoyer) des cadeaux à leurs amis. (9) [Ex.5]

- 11 What is particularly telling in the choice of this exercise is that the exceptions it focuses on are precisely exceptions that French grammar manages to subsume under a sophisticated system of rules that it takes several pages of the well-known Grevisse French grammar textbook to unfold⁶. The logic of remedial grammar (to which textbooks such as the "Grevisse" pertain) is very different from that of generative-transformational grammar; however, what Lecercle says about the latter's mode of functioning can be applied here: "Scientific grammar does not ignore the existence of a remainder. It denies it – which is a kind of avowal – under the collective name of 'exceptions'. [...] Thus, in an older version of the generative-transformational model, Lakoff constructed a whole machinery of sub-rules and meta-rules to account for exceptions" (Lecercle 1990, 22). Although remedial grammar just lists endless particular cases while generative transformational grammar seeks to establish the deep structure that will encompass all surface structures, what they have in common is their insistence on not leaving any element outside the system. Indeed, remedial grammar shares generative transformational grammar's drive towards exhaustiveness:

The movement of the theory [...] is the scientific movement of generalization and abstraction: a certain rule is shown not to account for all the data, and thus leaves a residue; an exception rule is then produced in order to reduce this residue (a scientific grammar aims at being comprehensive as much as coherent); eventually, this exception rule is discarded in favour of a more general rule [...]. The acknowledgement of exceptions is thus merely a confession of temporary failure. (Lecercle 1990, 23)

- 12 But why such desperate efforts towards comprehensiveness, towards reintegrating the exceptional into the normal?

"the hieratic tongue. *Theirs*." (Cha 2001 [1982], 18)

- 13 It is just a short – linguistic – step from the noun *totality* (the generic dimension aimed at by grammar) to its derived adjectival form *totalitarian*... Which is why Lisa Lowe, when she evokes the mechanics of ideological subjection, seems to echo Lecercle: "[t]he algebra of equivalence is actually an algebra of transformation, which divides all unlike variables into the 'one,' leaving behind heterogeneous 'remainders' of nonequivalence" (Lowe 1994, 51). As formulated by another critic, "the desire for equivalence [in language] grounds a strategy for producing compliant subjects" (Wong, 120). Language is the site of politics, an idea Cha explicitly voices in *Dictée*, as in "Japan had already occupied Korea and is attempting the occupation of China. Even in the small village the signs of their presence is felt by the Japanese language that is being spoken" (Cha 2001 [1982], 49), or in "you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. [...] The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue" (Cha 2001 [1982], 45). Likewise, in the following passage, the frozen language of the State clearly appears as a tool of political subjection:

This document is transmitted through, by the same means, the same channel without distinction the content is delivered in the same style: the word. [...] The response is pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (Cha 2001 [1982], 33)

- 14 In addition, the unusual inclusion of language drills is what enables Cha to have the reader (re-)experience the process of language-learning, reminding them that, as explained by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 10): "[G]rammaticality [...] is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker [...]. Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws".
- 15 Beyond the issue of language, Cha therefore obviously targets all forms of domination of one category by another, which always rest on a logic of identical equivalence. I will only focus here on a short poetic memoir, *Photo-Essay*, published in *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works* (Cha 2009, 91-111)⁷, which denounces various forms of manipulation through homogenization. In it, Cha alternates poetic texts evoking memories of her first years in the United States (on the left page) and captionless photographs (on the right page). Two photographs of churches (pages 103 and 105)⁸, with their perfect alignment of identical pews or stalls, not one of them exceeding their rigid frame, expose religious indoctrination, in particular that undergone by Cha as she experienced "the rigid obsessive order" (Cha 2009, 106) of the catholic school she attended as a young girl. These pictures call to mind the following passage from *Dictée*: "the single file waits at the door of the chapel. [...] Each pew holds nine. One monitor to count the nine then to the next pew. The next verse. And then back to the first. Over and over. Until it begins. The novena of the Immaculate Conception" (Cha 2001 [1982], 19)⁹.
- 16 In the previous pages of *Photo-Essay*, the photograph of a photo booth, with the strings of identical portraits displayed on its front¹⁰ and the text "systematic. / even with the image" appearing on the page opposite (Cha 2009, 98-99), and the photograph of a series of seven photo novel covers displayed *ad libitum* in a bookstore¹¹, juxtaposed with the mention "even / desire" on the page opposite (100-101), target the loss of individual identity through standardization and mass reproduction. This is also the

case of the picture on page 97 which features a display of wigs on the shelves of what seems to be a department store¹². Although wigs are meant to enable someone to change their appearance, the first impression conveyed is one of sameness as the three rows, featuring a dozen wigs each, do not enable a clear view of the hairstyles; furthermore, most of the mannequin heads are identical. Cha casts an ironical glance at women's desire to refashion their physical identities at their whims since, at bottom, their wish for escape has been shaped in advance by commercial imperatives and they cannot escape standardization. And indeed, the photo being first meant to illustrate a remark on the facing page about material abundance in America, Cha underscores Western society's capacity for transforming individuals into variants of a common model.

- 17 However, in this picture which appears vis-a-vis a text about Cha's arrival in the United States in 1962, our eye is attracted by three elements that break the regular pattern: three blond wigs/heads, ironical negatives to Theresa, a dark-headed child about to disrupt the American WASP system of fair-haired and fair-skinned citizenship. The text on the left page reads:

ARRIVAL 31, AUGUST 1962 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The most astonishing
of the first day
was the abundance, wealth, the excess.
As a child, one imagined this "Gold Mountain"
as having no two treasures alike.
Instead, repetition became an inevitable
vocabulary member
Inexhaustible duplication self-regeneration
as necessity
This absolute wealth tyranny of objects
As force force of the machinery

- 18 Several points deserve attention as they show that Cha's own force, a force of disruption, lies in language. At the very moment when the noun *repetition* is validated as part of the English language system (l. 6-7), it gives way to its synonym *duplication* on the next line, i.e. a repetition with a difference, ironically with a lexical term which makes of exact copying an even greater imperative than the word *repetition*. What this line and the next tell us is indeed the *inexhaustible* resource of linguistic variation, a liberating capacity of language whose practice is paradoxically a constraint, a *necessity*, because there lies the vital dimension of language: "Same word. Slight mutation of the same. Undefinable. Shift. Shift slightly. Into a different sound. The difference. How it discloses the air", Cha writes in *Dictée* (157). *Self-regeneration* indeed reflexively points to the capacity of language to revive itself endlessly¹³; but it also reminds us that language can be a path towards *self-regeneration*: a renewal of the self, of one's individual identity, against the destructive *tyranny* of equivalence. *This absolute wealth* which is mentioned at the end is not *the [material] abundance, the wealth, the excess* that bewildered young Theresa as she set foot in San Francisco. This absolute wealth is the excess of language, an excess of that which does not fit linguistic theory and its logic of equivalence. In other words, this absolute wealth corresponds to what Lecercle calls a "constitutive remainder"¹⁴. And indeed, at the end, the blank between the two repeated instances of the noun *force* leaves room for endless reformulation, for infinite invention.

- 19 Readers, in Cha's wake, are invited to replace the fixed route of iteration by the vagabond path of "itineration", to use Deleuze and Guattari's expression in the "Treatise on Nomadology" chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*:

[There is] a very particular type of multiplicity: nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities that occupy space without "counting" it and can "be explored only by legwork." A distinction must be made between two types of science, or scientific procedures: one consists in "reproducing," the other in "following." The first involves reproduction, iteration and reiteration; the other, involving itineration, is the sum of the itinerant, ambulant sciences. [...] *following is not at all the same thing as reproducing*, and one never follows in order to reproduce. (1987, 371-372)

Playing truant with language *ou l'école buissonnière*...¹⁵

- 20 Ironically, Cha's "having been forced to learn foreign languages", and her having done so along the now-dated rigid principles of coercive repetition, is also what gave her means of emancipation. As she explained herself: "As a foreigner, learning a new language extended beyond its basic function of communication as it is generally for a native speaker, to a consciously imposed detachment that allowed analysis and experimentation with other relationships of language" (Lewallen 2001, 9). Her rebellious linguistic practice targets all the aspects of language use – spelling, lexis, conjugation, syntax, punctuation –, as has already transpired from many of the examples given in the first part. Indeed, in those passages where she denounces the rigidity of all systems, including language as a system of signs to be acquired by repetition and then faithfully reproduced, Cha already breaches the system, either through irony, linguistic deviation or play on words. For instance, the second translation exercise on page 8 of *Dictée* (Ex.2), whose first entries rest on the verb "to speak", suddenly shifts to an evocation of the counterpart act of writing, with two source sentences in English which actually question the validity of the exercise itself ("Was it necessary for you to write?") and suggest potential refusal to do the required exercise on the pupil's part: "Wait till I write" (Cha 2001 [1982], 8). The text which faces the anatomy charts of the phonation system (Ex.4, page 75) illustrates both Cha's way of taking liberties with linguistic rules and her appetite for word play. It indeed features a "Cracked tongue. Broken tongue", not so much the organ under the strain of precise placement as the tongue as language, reduced through loose punctuation and syntax to little more than "Pidgeon" (pidgin) English. This mimetically-distorted word, in its turn, has the verb "Swallows" on the next line potentially morph into the noun *swallows*, just as the word "stops" seems constantly to waver between its verbal meaning and its nominal meaning in the field of phonology¹⁶. The very scientific terminology of phonetics is thus displaced and becomes a transgressive playground, and such punning through homographic paronomasia is all the more insidious as it saps the very basis of sound differentiation on which the phonetic system of a language rests. In the same way, when Cha writes: "Even in the small village the signs of [Japan's] presence is felt by the Japanese language that is being spoken", the metalinguistic play on the two possible meanings of the word *signs* betrays the lability of signifiers and the arbitrary nature of language, the latter harboring its own weaknesses and acting against itself even before the rebellious speaker does.
- 21 Just about any page of *Dictée* or *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works* could provide further illustrations of Cha's truant use of language, and I propose to continue focusing

in the rest of this third part on meta-linguistic fragments, and more specifically passages where Cha decides to disrupt the very motif of the linguistic lesson, making her transgressions all the more provocative.

Cha's artistic statement¹⁷

- 22 The full version of the opening of Cha's artistic statement, quoted in a shortened version in the introduction, reads:

The main body of my work is with language, 'looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.'

Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more 'consciously' at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language. Certain areas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax.

- 23 Several elements suggest Cha's attempts to sap the foundations of language at the very moment when she evokes the impact of language acquisition on her:

- the ambivalent use of the conjunction “Since”, which can be interpreted as a time conjunction (*Ever since I've been forced...*) or a causal conjunction (*Because I've been forced...*). The *ambivalence* undermines the rigid pattern of *equivalence* on which grammar rests, and beyond, reminds us of the arbitrary nature of language.
- the slightly awkward formulation “There has existed”, which enables Cha to formulate her thought without using the pronoun I, precisely called forth by the reference to the act of perception. The explicitly existential form *there exists* manages, paradoxically, to express Cha's disappearance as a subject, a disappearance which is all the more striking as correct syntax would require a first-person pronoun as a subject of the main clause, owing to the *-ing* form in the subordinate clause.
- the expression “that continue to hold interest for me”, which confines Cha to the status of an object personal pronoun (*me*), and in which we may hear *double entendre*: behind the surface meaning of this expression, used as a synonym for “[certain areas] I continue to be interested in”, one can hear something else, a hint that language influences Cha's interests (*it holds interests for her*, a merely passive recipient), the very structures of language shaping our thoughts and our lives.

- 24 However, Cha's subtle manipulation of the linguistic system precisely enables her to regain a form of self-empowerment through truant language.

The dictation (Ex.1)

- 25 Many elements turn the opening *dictée* of the eponymous book into an ironical exercise in disobedience by blurring the expected rigor one links with this activity. We may indeed note:

- a discontinuity in the grammatical forms of the instructions: the infinitive (*aller à la ligne*) gives way to imperatives (*ouvre/ferme les guillemets*), unless this might be nothing but a conjugation mistake (*aller* should have been *allez*, which in any case would still not fit since in the singular second-person singular, the verb should be conjugated : *va à la ligne*).
- a breach of the patriarchal rule whereby the masculine supposedly prevails over the feminine in French Grammar (*Il y a quelqu'une*).
- a programmatic resistance of the very first words, as *Aller à la ligne* does not produce the expected effect in the typed version, just as all the other typographical injunctions about quotation marks and points will – obstinately – not materialize on the page.

- a progressive unraveling of meaning as the incongruous and expansive transcription of such typographical commands hinders textual fluidity, this obviously underlining the sterile nature of the exercise.

26 Yet, of greater importance perhaps is Cha’s providing a translation of the dictation on the very same page:

Open paragraph It was the first day period
 She had come from a far period tonight at dinner
 comma the families would ask comma open
 quotation marks How was the first day interroga-
 tion mark close quotation marks at least to say
 the least of it possible comma the answer would be
 open quotation marks there is but one thing period
 There is someone period From a far period
 close quotation marks (Cha 2001 [1982], 1)

27 The absurdity of this translation is obvious since a dictation precisely tests the spelling difficulties of a given language, which therefore cannot directly be applied to another language. However, its presence in the book is crucial as the essence of translation is the impossibility of equivalence. As underlined by Shelley Sunn Wong in her article “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*”, “[t]o engage in translation is to engage in ‘the repetition that will not return as the same’ (Bhabha, 312) [... The] translation exercises in the text of *Dictée* open up the possibility of thwarting operations of equivalence and commensurability at the same time that they allow the dictated subject to claim her own ability to signify” (1994, 120).

28 Pages 66-73 of *Dictée* consist in another foregrounding of the act of translation, but away from the constraining frame of the translation exercise exemplified earlier in the book. They indeed consist in the juxtaposition of a poem delivered in French on the left page and its version in English on the right page. According to the reading pattern of these two languages (from left to right), the version on the left pages is felt to be the original poem and the version on the right pages its translation, a surprising fact (Cha’s first language after Korean was English) which is yet confirmed by the fact that the French version hinges on the wordplay allowed by the homophones *cygnes/signes*, something that fails to translate exactly in English (*swans/signs*). The poem is too long for close analysis here, but it should be noted that beside this inescapable gap between the source and target texts, the translation’s willful departures from the original version accentuate the sense of translation as a space of freedom. More generally speaking, Cha’s constant mixture of English and French within one text or visual piece, an artistic practice which is part of her more general tendency to “[intersperse] her English texts with French, Korean, Latin words and phrases, an interweaving present in her private journals as well as in her works of art” (Rinder, 19), is definitely what prevents her rebellious literary and artistic practice from falling into the pitfall of systematized deviation, which would run the risk of becoming normative in its turn. Indeed, exceptions and rule-breaking remain predicated on the standard system of reference they breach, and can reinforce it. By often fusing the two languages, Cha creates an in-between and truly open linguistic space through which she is free to wander at will, in accordance with Joris’s defense of “a nomadic poetics”:

A nomadic poetics will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them. If Pound, Joyce and others have shown the way, it is essential now to push this matter further, again, not as “collage” but as a material flux of language matter, moving in & out of semantic and non-semantic spaces, moving around and

through the features accreting a poem, a lingo-cubism that is no longer an “explosante fixe” as Breton defined the poem, but an “explosante mouvante.” (Joris 2003, 38)

The conjugation exercise (Ex.5):

Complétez les phrases suivantes:

1. Le lac est (geler) ce matin.
2. Je (se lever) quand ma mère m'appeler.
3. Elle (essuyer) la table avec une éponge.
4. Il (mener) son enfant à l'école.
5. Au marché on (acheter) des œufs, de la viande et des légumes.
6. Il (jeter) les coquilles des noix qu'il (manger).
7. Ils (se promener) tous tes soirs dans le rue.
8. Elle (préférer) le chapeau vert.
9. Je (espérer) que vous m' (appeler) de bonne heure.
10. Ils (envoyer) des cadeaux à leurs amis. (9)

- 29 The drill's systematic revision of exceptions (for 1st-group verbs), is not as strictly conceived as would-be rigorous grammar requires:

- there is no consistency in the use of guiding parentheses for the conjugation of the verb *m'appeler* (2/9) nor in the use of the pronunciation-induced contracted form of pronouns: *Je (espérer) / vous m' (appeler)* (9). Could this mark a lack of rigor on the part of the teacher?...
- there is a grammar mistake in *le rue*. Is this the teacher's fault again? Or could this hint at the fact that pupils often introduce grammar mistakes into drills, the latter thus sometimes proving self-defeating?
- unlike the other sentences (*lève, mène, promène...*), the first one actually does not illustrate the way verbs ending in -eXer" function (need for a grave accent) since the form required here is the past participle, where the exception rules do not apply.
- as the sole example of the required doubling of the consonant (*il jette*), the verb “jeter” is an exception within the set of exceptions exemplified here.
- “manger” is also another exception to the coherence – however flimsy – of the group of verbs tested. Indeed, its sole exceptional uses are when it is conjugated in a form that brings the vowel -a or -o: *nous mangeons / il mangeait...* Because it is here conjugated in the 3rd-person-singular in the present, it actually seems to function as a regular first-group verb, since its radical does not undergo any transformation. The example thus weakens the very foundations of the exercise, meant to have pupils labor over systematized exceptions in French conjugation.

Diagrams and declensions

- 30 Finally, one of Cha's favorite playgrounds is the transgressive use of allegedly scientific diagrams or patterns. The first example comes from a 16-frame piece of visual work entitled *It is almost that (Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works 2009, 193-203)*. The fourth frame features a very serious arborescent structure explaining the pronominal system in English, but it is followed by a series of diagrams that become hardly readable and which all but lose touch with scientific logic, bordering on erratic creativeness. This brings us back to Lecercle again, who points to the fact that the poet's “playful but profound activities sometimes border on delirium” (1990, 39) and who says about *délire* (with the obvious play on *dé-lire*¹⁸ in French) or delirium that it is where “the remainder is at work” (25).
- 31 However, Cha's number-one playground is the vertical layout used for grammatical declensions – one of the most rigid grammatical patterns – which she often resorts to

in order better to engage in stray improvisations, as in *Exilée*, which opens on these lines:

EXIL
EXILE
ILE
É
É E (Cha 2009, 33)

- 32 Another telling example comes from the poetic piece “view from the willow tree” since it declines linguistic terms in a context that seems to encourage language straying:

[...]
I think ed change trans.....form grammaire
vocabulaire
speak tongue
minimally mini teeny tiny tintsy
tintzy

[...] (Cha 2009, 139)

- 33 In another piece, Cha deceptively “conjugates” two English verbs (by giving their bare infinitives, present participles and past participles), before setting language – both English and French – loose:

move
moving
moved

with eyes, and all senses even 6th

hold
holding
held

he foreigner friend
(breath)
if you could know

je pense à toi si souvent trop peut-être
if I could say
i only know so well that it is exactly this. Attempted disinheritance
neither am I intellectual nor ascetically disciplined dicipled

as I wander sadly gladly full I wake je t’appelle. ton nom.
Name. a strand thread it follows aim less but so totally

[...] (Cha 2009, 129)

- 34 The dryness of the “conjugation” of the verb *move* has given way to the vibrant expression of *emotion*, and it is language itself which, here as so often elsewhere, seems to *wander*, *aim less*, all normative shackles set aside.
- 35 The last example I will focus on is a one-page passage from *Temps Morts* (Cha 2009, 75). The insistently metatextual first half shows words bending linguistic rules while reflexively commenting on such a stance: “not to mention stuttering not to mention disorder / noun verb adjective article verb before noun / article at the end double negative pauses / loitering[...]”. Then, a few lines further, despite the rebellious agenda announced (“not to mention replacing the subject with the wrong word”), the second half suddenly adopts the visual presentation of vocabulary lists, but only to estrange us from the safe grounds of standard language, this time because of the surfacing of defamiliarizing words. The second half of the page indeed only supposedly presents a list of “all the words beginning with a”:

ablution
 absolution
 abstinence
 abstract
 abuse
 abvolute
 abyssm
 acanonical
 accent
 accidie
 account
 accretion
 adamite
 adar
 adevisism

- 36 This non-systematic lexical declension may no doubt enable the production of vagabond story-telling if one has a good sense of imagination (one could invent the following story: *she made her ablutions in order to get absolution since abstinence was not her favorite hobby, it being too abstract...*). But even the serious and/or laborious pupil/student/teacher/lecturer will be led upon an adventurous path as, clinging to their dictionaries, they will discover that to “abvolute” means to “fly away”¹⁹. But fly away/escape from what? ... “accidie” perhaps (i.e. spiritual or mental sloth; apathy)?²⁰ No doubt that induced by tiresome repetitive grammar drills and vocabulary lists... But did Cha know that the verb “obvallate”, the phonetic reversal of “abvolute,” means “surrounded by or as if by a wall”²¹, in an obvious reversal of “to fly away”?
- 37 Whether she did or not, such conjectures only prove that Cha’s reader is soon carried away by language *delirium*, ready to follow a “[d]isease de bonne aventure” (Cha 2001 [1982], 123)...

Conclusion

- 38 When it appears on page 123 of *Dictée*, this expression actually takes up and modulates (a repetition with a difference) the single word “Disease” used on page 3 as a heading for the afore-mentioned section that describes a student trying to produce speech:
- DISEUSE
 She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared
 noise, groan, bits torn from words.... (3)
- 39 The pupil/student who is pronouncing words is not named “a speaker,” someone managing to transform a theoretical model of language into correct speech. The pupil is a *disease*, i.e. a slightly decentered figure²², whose failure to exactly mime a constraining model is also her chance, a chance she seizes page after page of the book as she produces a very personal and singular text. A hundred and twenty pages later, by dint of word play, grammatical and syntactical deviance, lexical straying..., she has become a full-fledged “*disease de bonne aventure*.” The passage reads: “*Let the one who is disease. Disease de bonne aventure. Let her call forth. Let her break open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again*” (123). The first inchoative attempt, *Let the one who is disease*, yields *Disease de bonne aventure*. Indeed, she has morphed into a truly free, because marginal, figure²³. And the inclusion of a foreign language, as this French expression confirms, has done much to keep her on a truly nomadic – italic/slanting – path...

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NOTES

1. Little critical material exists on the reasons of Cha's "untimely and tragic death" (Lewellen 2001, 1).
2. It should be added that many of Cha's visual works also include texts, most of which tap both the English and the French languages, some of their titles here again transcribing the centrality of French for Theresa Hak Kyng Cha: *Faire Part, Mot Caché, Aveugle Voix...* Many of these works are reproduced in another posthumous volume edited by Constance M. Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience* (2001), and can also be consulted on the *Online Archive of California* website: https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf238n986k/entire_text/

3. This statement can be consulted here: <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf4j49n6h6/?order=2&brand=oac4>
4. Some passages quoted here will be further commented upon in the third part of the article, so these citations (and only these) are numbered for ease of reference in subsequent pages.
5. The lack of consistency in the use of guiding parentheses for the conjugation of the verb will be commented upon in the last part of the article.
6. “On distingue deux conjugaisons régulières : - La première conjugaison réunit tous les verbes dont l’infinitif est en *-er* (sauf *aller* et *envoyer*). Ils ont les mêmes désinences, et leur radical reste constant, à part les modifications graphiques et phonétiques décrites dans le § 315. [§315 runs across pages 249 and 250] / - La deuxième conjugaison réunit les verbes en *-ir* dont le radical s’accroît à certaines formes de l’affixe *-iss* (sauf *haïr*, verbe irrégulier). [...] Les verbes en *-er* représentent la vraie conjugaison régulière en français [...]” (Grévisse and Goose 1990, 246).
7. This piece can be seen here: <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?brand=oac4>
8. Also see: <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?order=14&brand=oac4> and <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?order=16&brand=oac4>
9. This passage connects with the book’s opening language exercises as it begins on: “First Friday. One hour before mass. Mass every First Friday. Dictée first. Every Friday. Before mass. Dictée before.[...] the single file waits at the door of the chapel [...]” (18-19). *Dictée* proposes a strong critique of religious doxa in its links to language: the imposed mechanical repetition of religious formulae is evoked on pages 16-19 (the title chosen for this part – “*The Hieratic tongue. Theirs*” comes from this passage), and God’s authoritative and performative Word is exposed through the recurrence of “it is written” or “for it is written” on pages 52 and 53. Furthermore, a passage which describes the swallowing of the Host Wafer (“Close eyes as the lids flutter, push out the tongue. / The Host Wafer [...]. Dissolving in the mouth to the liquid tongue saliva [...]. Place back the tongue.” [13]) is not without recalling the pronunciation exercise of page 3, quoted above (Ex. 3).
10. <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?order=10&brand=oac4>
11. <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?order=12&brand=oac4>
12. <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf1p30016z/?order=8&brand=oac4>
13. As underlined by Lecercle: “We enjoy sinning against language because the violence we impose on its structure is what makes it alive” (1990, 10).
14. He opposes this “constitutive remainder” to the “temporary residue” that will eventually yield to grammatical formula (1990, 23-25). Using Lacan’s approach, Lecercle elsewhere explains that “[w]hat is treated by langue as a lack, an exception, and is largely ignored by it as it would ignore the points where the system fails, where the structure becomes uncertain and threatens to collapse, is treated by *lalangue* as an excess, a locus for the proliferation of meaning” (1990, 40).
15. Interestingly, the synonymous French expression « faire l’école buissonnière » initially refers to heretic schools which developed in remote countryside locations (*buisson* = bush). See definition in the Littré dictionary online: <https://www.littre.org/definition/diseur>.
16. “a consonant characterized by complete closure of the breath passage in the course of articulation” (Merriam Webster Online).
17. The text provides a general outline of her work. It can be viewed here: <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf4j49n6h6/?brand=oac4>.
18. Literally : to un-read.
19. <https://www.yourdictionary.com/abvolute>
20. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accidie>
21. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obvallate>
22. The Larousse definition of the word “diseur/disease” reads: “Personne qui dit habituellement des choses d’un genre particulier : Diseur de bons mots” (Someone who says singular things).
23. A “disease de bonne aventure” is a fortune-teller.

ABSTRACTS

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is a Korean American writer and visual artist whose extraordinarily hybrid production includes experimental poetry, mail art, handmade books, videos, films, multi-media performances. Her 1982 autobiographical memoir *Dictée* – which juxtaposes narrative passages, poetry, pages of handwritten texts, grammar and translation exercises, diagrams, black-and white photographs, etc. – escapes established canons, and its title is an apt reminder that Cha’s oeuvre is a systematic act of resistance against all constraining systems, be they linguistic, artistic or political. This paper focuses on *Dictée* and other earlier and lesser-known written pieces posthumously collected in a volume entitled *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works* (2009). It shows that Cha’s undoing of the rules of standard English and her replacing obedient repetition by vagabond deviation is doubly subversive as Cha often plays on the very vectors of linguistic doxa: language drills and declensions. I further argue that Cha’s frequent play with French and translation is what makes her texts so inventive, freeing them more definitely from the overarching rigid system of standard English. It indeed opens up her works to a space of in-betweenness and irresolution which is the locus of her metamorphosis from speaker – bound by the code of a given language – to “disease”, a truly free marginal figure.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha est une écrivaine et une artiste visuelle américaine d’origine coréenne, dont la production d’une extraordinaire hybridité inclut poésie expérimentale, *mail art*, livres d’artiste, vidéos, films, performances *multi-media*. Son mémoire autobiographique *Dictée* – qui juxtapose passages narratifs, poésie, pages de textes manuscrits, exercices de grammaire et de traduction, diagrammes, photographies en noir et blanc, etc. – échappe aux canons établis, et son titre nous rappelle que l’ensemble de son œuvre est un acte de résistance systématique contre tous les systèmes contraignants, qu’ils soient linguistiques, artistiques ou politiques. Cet article se concentre sur *Dictée* et d’autres écrits moins connus rassemblés de manière posthume dans un ouvrage intitulé *Exilée – Temps Morts – Selected Works* (2009). Je m’attache à montrer que la façon dont Cha défait les règles de l’anglais standard et remplace la répétition obéissante par des déviations vagabondes est doublement subversive dans la mesure où l’artiste joue souvent sur les vecteurs même de la doxa linguistique : exercices de langue et déclinaisons. Je défends par ailleurs l’idée que les jeux fréquents de Cha avec le français et la traduction sont ce qui rend ses textes si inventifs, et qui les libère plus complètement du système rigide dominant de la langue anglaise. Ils ouvrent en effet ses œuvres sur un entre-deux et une irrésolution qui sont le lieu où s’accomplit sa métamorphose de locuteur – contraint par le code d’une langue donnée – en « disease », figure marginale réellement libre.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Cha (Theresa Hak-Kyung), littérature coréenne américaine, grammaire, exceptions, traduction

Keywords: Cha (Theresa Hak-Kyung), Korean American Literature, grammar, exceptions, translation

AUTHOR

MARIE-AGNÈS GAY

Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3

Institut d'Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles

Marie-Agnès Gay is Professor of American Literature at the University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3. She carries out research on 20th- and 21st-century American fiction, and her research interests notably include Asian American writers. She always favors a stylistic approach to literature, and many of her articles explore the textual inscription of dispersal.

Marie-Agnès Gay est professeur de littérature américaine à l'Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3. Sa recherche porte sur la fiction américaine des XX^e et XXI^e siècles, et elle s'intéresse notamment aux auteurs américains d'origine asiatique. Elle privilégie toujours une approche stylistique de la littérature, et bon nombre de ses articles explorent l'inscription textuelle de la dispersion.