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Ethnic Irony: The Poetic Parabasis of the Promiscuous Personal Pronoun in Yoko Tawada's "Eine leere Flasche" (A Vacuous Flask)¹

For Professor Loisa Nygaard

Nach jenen Schüssen erwachte ich....
— Franz Kafka, "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" (302)

Circle: Ethnic Abjection

Some texts invert the protocol of reading they appear to invite, rewriting the terms of their legibility the moment they *appear* the most legible. They present themselves as autobiographical, but only to deny the legibility of their first-person narrator as their narrative center of reference. They disclaim the referentiality of their narrative "I" as their principle of unity, *as if*, in a Kantian mode, to declaim of themselves that autobiography "is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in *all* texts" (de Man, "Autobiography" 70; emphasis added). They show that the portrait of the autobiographical "self" is sketched neither by its author nor by its narrative first person, but by the *act* of literary criticism.

Nevertheless, some acts of criticism maintain the specter of the autobiographical "self" when reading the figure of the *ethnicized* narrative "I." While rigorously distinguishing the first-person narrator from the author as discursive functions of different orders, such acts of criticism still might invest the figure of the ethnicized first-person narrator with a form of causality almost indistinguishable from authorship, namely by making a social collectivity the causal "source" of a narrative. Rather than reading the narrative "I" as a figure of the text, they might choose to read the text as though it were a figuration of the narrative "I," that is, as though the text were an enunciation made by a narrator whom some *acts* choose to *ethnicize*.

Whether out of hermeneutic desire for the sensate "other" or cognitive stupor before the illusions of the aesthetic, some acts of criticism bring the

textual figure of the ethnicized narrator to *life*, but only to have it confess the social *death* that has hitherto defined the social figure of ethnicity. The referential continuity, posited between the poetically textual and the socially contextual figures of ethnicity, appears so unproblematically certain for some *acts* of criticism that they betray themselves as governed less by *reading* than by a causal, if circular, law of interpretation stipulating: wherever an ethnic appears *writing*, its writing appears *ethnic*.

However, in a sense to be considered and questioned in what follows, the sign of ethnicity *merely appears* to invite a protocol of reading in which the textual figure of ethnicity is to be read in referential continuity with the *social* figure of ethnicity and hence also as a prosopopoeic sign of the ethnicity that the narrator socially resembles. This protocol of reading is neither uncommon nor unfamiliar, yet is also not without its subtle complexities and its alazoneia. Rey Chow, for instance, calls into question a version of this protocol of reading in her *Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Arguing that the "turn toward the self, especially the ethnic self" should be read as a "form of production" (111), Chow reads first-person texts by "ethnically marked writers" (146) as standing in continuity, not with a prior "self," but with a "self" produced under a regime that she calls "coercive mimeticism" (107).² Under this regime, "those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected ... to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings (*sic*) of them as ethnic" (107). In Chow's account, "coercive mimeticism" compels ethnically marked subjects to perform the ethnicity they are thought to be. Yet, Chow also argues that the performance of ethnic "authenticity" testifies to the opposite of that for which it is valorized by theoretical discourses of "hybridity." Rather than "freedom from the given," Chow claims that first-person essays about "the experience of *actually* living as cultural hybrids" testify to a sense of "existential entrapment" in the performance of ethnicity (146; emphasis added).

Without specifying the referential force with which her adverb "actually" is to be read, Chow posits a referential continuity between the poetically textual and socially contextual figures of ethnicity on the order of collective "identity" (123–27).³ In so doing, she reads these poetic texts as though they constituted a collective "testimony" of the socially contextual condition of ethnicity (159). Noting the frequency with which such essays transform themes of "neglect, dismissal, and humiliation" into images of "decay, discharge, [and] things being dropped" (147–48), Chow submits in a Kristevan mode that the "act of writing autobiographically in these pieces is much more than being selfish; it is simultaneously writing collectively about the inherited, *shared* condition of social stigmatization and abjection" (146). Thus it seems, in her account, that when a narrative "I" is marked by ethnicity, its

ethnicization invites a reading of the narrative "I" as a "self" enunciating the social context of the ethnicity this "self" resembles, *but* only insofar as this social context resembles what this "self" enunciates about it. Chow's account implies that text and context refer to one another in reciprocity, each confirming the other with respect to the putatively "abject" condition of ethnic being.

Yet, this protocol of reading the narrative "I" prompts a referential, or hermeneutic, *vicious* circle. In this circle, the conclusion, ethnic abjection, proves to be the premise from the outset (Tosaka 27). Because the social figure of "the ethnic" is understood as a life lived in social death, or "abjection," the textual figure of ethnicity is read as though it were a *textualization* of just such a precarious life-in-death (Patterson *passim*; Butler 73). This reading obtains only to the extent that it ignores the ontological status of this textual figure's "life" as that of a dead letter prior to the act of criticism that brought it to specular *life* as an "abject" ethnic living in *death*. Implicit in Chow's protocol of reading, then, is that texts read under the sign of ethnicity mimetically textualize the social context in which they are written, but only to the extent that the social context produces ethnicity as a sign of abjection. While the abject is not always ethnic by this referential circle, the ethnic is nevertheless always "abject."

But, as Chow might ask herself, is this "actually" the case? This protocol of reading excludes from the outset the possibility that some texts *rewrite* the legibility of their ethnicized first-person narrator and thereby also the legibility of the context in which they appear under the sign of ethnicity or its metaphoric "translation" in the guise of "abjection." Such texts might evoke figures of ethnic abjection, but only to dissolve them in what one can call "ethnic irony," a form of irony that lures acts of criticism into seeing the aesthetic phantasmagoria of ethnicity, but with the aim of frustrating their hermeneutic desire for an optics of the "other" by evacuating the ethnicized narrative "I" of the seed called "meaning." It is in this sense that the following will reread Yoko Tawada's "Eine leere Flasche," a text whose brevity belies its poetic complexity at the level of the letter just as its title's *apparent* simplicity belies its translatability into English. Though its title "Eine leere Flasche" can indeed be translated as "An Empty Bottle," as its English-language critics have been wont to do, this translation is possible only by reading the German title with its irony drippingly *drained*.

Triangle: The Riddle of Referentiality I

The project of rereading Tawada's text in antithetical relation to Chow's thesis on ethnic abjection may appear thwarted from the outset by two critical observations. In *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*, Leslie Adelson argues that Chow's analysis does not obtain for the German litera-

ture of migration on two counts. First, while Adelson notes a conceptual assonance between her critique of prior readings of this literature and Chow's critique of ethnic mimeticism, she argues that the "German literature of Turkish migration does not revolve around the identity politics that Chow targets for critique in the United States and Great Britain" (134), in that its "conceits of selfhood do not necessarily serve the self-referential or confessional functions that Chow ascribes to [migrant characters] in other contexts" (134). Second, Adelson argues that "for all of her insights into ethnicity as a form of labor, Chow does not interrogate the production of 'ethnic community,' though she sometimes uses the term causally" (135). In this respect, Chow's intervention appears not to stand in any relation to the German context in which Tawada's text is written, as it is written neither under the sign of "Turkish" migration nor under that of "ethnic community."

Nevertheless, the line of this antithetical relation between Tawada's text and Chow's thesis on ethnic abjection is to be drawn through Adelson's analysis of what she calls the "riddle of referentiality" (17; 87–95). Even as Adelson's analysis of the referential relation between textual and contextual worlds does not involve Chow's argument, it exposes the problem subtending Chow's reading of ethnic literatures of migration and Tawada's poetic inversion of such readings. Fundamentally distinct from the referential circle silently organizing Chow's dizzying allegory of chromatic tropes oscillating between "white" and "non-white" (Chow *passim*), the "riddle of referentiality" to which Adelson refers in reading the German literature of Turkish migration designates not a circular relation, but the *boundary work* upon an epistemic divide of distinct orders, "figural language and referential meaning" (17). This riddle consists in the impossibility of reading texts and historical contexts of migration in isolation from one another, yet equally the impossibility of reducing the one to the other. Text and context "are mutually constitutive," as Adelson notes (49). Yet she also adds, "The ways in which this meeting ground is constituted can be articulated only through the boundary work of *reading* historically in the diversified medial economy of our time" (49; emphasis added). Inasmuch as text and context are mutually constitutive, the boundary between them cannot be decided in advance, but is first constituted in *reading* as a form of labor that inevitably generates riddles with respect to referentiality. Unlike Chow's referential circle, Adelson's riddle of referentiality between text and context turns on *reading* as the constitutive third term making this mutually constitutive relation possible. It is a riddle that produces reading. Whereas Chow's argument draws circles, Adelson's draws *triangles*, hitting as it were the *mark*, the sweet spot.

Tawada's "Eine leere Flasche" strides this line between text and context as it repeatedly calls for a reading and rereading of the *figure* of the ethnicized narrative "I" through which it is written. However, at first glance, Tawada's text appears to invite a protocol of reading in which a riddle of referentiality is

nowhere to be found. The text appears to rely on a prior, contextual imagination not only of German and Japanese as extant languages, but also of its author as a Japanese woman living in Germany writing in those languages. According to this protocol of reading, this text is to be read, and indeed has been read, as a first-person account of the narrator's struggle with gendered terms of self-reference in Japanese, her childhood fascination with a girl who referred to herself using a putatively "masculine" term of self-reference in Japanese, and finally her celebratory embrace of the gender neutral first person pronoun *ich* (I) in German as an adult living "in Europe" (56), a preposition and proper noun not to be ignored in the words to come. Following this protocol of reading, Christina Kraenzle proposes that the text's eponymous and concluding image of the "empty bottle"—a translation requiring reconsideration—marks the narrator's discovery of an emancipated "self" in fleeing the Japanese language and embracing the German first person pronoun *ich*:

The image of the empty bottle offers a metaphor for the use of the German first-person pronoun, which is emptied of the many markers of age, gender, status, etc. demanded in Japanese. Tawada thus reminds us how movement across geographical boundaries may involve the translation of the self into another linguistic medium. Here translation from one language to another offers a liberating space of altered subject positions where the self is freed of the numerous self-identifications required in Japanese. (106)

Kraenzle reads precisely as the text's narrator seduces one to read. The narrator gives her addressee to understand that the Japanese language is a fraught terrain of compulsory gendered self-reference and that the narrator's adoption of the German first-person pronoun "freed" her to be an unmarked "self." The narrator also gives her addressee to understand that its narrative "I" is an enunciating "self," which, though not identified as Tawada, bears a striking resemblance to what is biographically known about Tawada. In terms of the referential relation between text and context, Tawada's text *appears* to be a faithful textualization of the context in which it is written in Kraenzle's account. Read on the order of the narrative alone, "Eine leere Flasche" *appears* to offer not a riddle, but referentiality itself.

However, what the narrative *says* is not identical to what the text *does*. While the narrator invites the protocol of reading the narrative "I" as an enunciating "self," the text draws the "reliability" of the narrative "I" and thus also the referential status of its statements into question. This cleavage provokes a double reading, once in terms of the narrative as a *figuration*, or enunciation, by the narrative "I" and another in terms of the narrative "I" as a *figure*, or enunciation, of the text. Over the course of the narrative, the text will not only rescind the narrator's invitation to read the narrative "I" as a "self," but also reverse the narrator's self-ethnicization as an ethnicization of her addressee who might read "I" as identical to the "self."

Inasmuch as "Eine leere Flasche" is predicated upon a prior imagination of a difference between the Japanese language with which it is thematically concerned and the German language in which the text is written, it also predicates this imagination of a difference as that of an *incommensurable* difference in linguistically defined "ethnicity." Giving the reader to understand that the Japanese language is a fraught terrain of compulsory gendered self-reference, the narrator presents six Japanese terms of self-reference, all of which, she claims, "mean 'I'" in German (Tawada, "Flasche" 53). In describing the girls in her childhood neighborhood in Tokyo, the narrative first person recounts:

Eines dieser Mädchen fiel mir besonders auf, weil *es sich* wie ein Junge als "boku" bezeichnete. Wir gingen zusammen zur Grundschule. Die meisten Mädchen in dem Alter bezeichneten sich als "atashi," einige frühreife Mädchen dagegen schon als "watashi," ein Mädchen aus einer vornehmen Familie benutzte das Wort "atakushi," dieses Wort roch nach Zypressenholz. Die meisten Jungen nannten sich "boku," einige freche oder stolze Jungen dagegen "ore." Es gab natürlich keinen Jungen in dem Alter, der sich schon als "watashi" oder "watakushi" bezeichnet hätte. Das hätte lächerlich geklungen, dafür mussten sie noch viel älter werden.

Ich hatte Schwierigkeiten mit all diesen Wörtern, die "*ich*" bedeuten. Ich fühlte mich weder wie ein Mädchen noch wie ein Junge. Als Erwachsene kann man sich in das geschlechtsneutrale Wort "watashi" flüchten, aber bis man so weit ist, *ist man gezwungen*, ein Junge oder ein Mädchen zu sein. (53–54; emphasis added).

One of these girls especially stood out to me because she [it] designated herself [itself] "boku" like a boy. We went to the same primary school. Most girls at this age designated themselves "atashi," some precocious ones by contrast "watashi." A girl from a distinguished family used the word "atakushi," this word smelled like cypress wood. Most boys called themselves "boku," some brazen or proud boys by contrast "ore." There was naturally no boy at that age who would have designated himself "watashi" or "watakushi." That would have sounded ridiculous as they would have to become much older for that.

I had difficulties with all of these words that mean "I." I felt neither like a girl nor like a boy. As an adult, one can flee to the gender-neutral word "watashi," but until that point, one is forced to be a boy or a girl.⁴

Though this passage is readable without reading its Japanese terms, it is not therefore readable without reading its German—and closely so, with a sense of irony. If the text were read merely as a figuration, or enunciation, by the narrative "I," this passage would be read as an unfolding series of statements in which the narrator contextualizes her experiences with a particular aspect of Japanese without an equivalent in the German she now "speaks" in the narrative. However, if the narrative "I" were read as a figure of the text, as distinguished from the narrative, the narrator would appear less than "reliable."

On the order of the text, the narrator sutures her audience into a position of epistemic continuity with the language in which the narrator makes her address, German, and that of epistemic discontinuity with the language with which the narrator is ostensibly concerned, Japanese. Even if the Japanese terms were known by her addressee, the narrator presents them as though they were not known by her addressee, that is, as though he or she—or more precisely and rigorously “it”—required an explanation as to who uses which term of self-reference. That is to say, the narrator presents these Japanese terms such that they are not to be read but, at the most, *sounded out* or *gazed at*. But what is sounded out or gazed at is knowable to her addressee only through the narrator’s descriptions of those who use these terms that purportedly all “mean ‘I’” (53).

The point here is not that experience of linguistic or cultural “otherness” necessarily compels a situation in which one can only sound out unknown words or gaze at unrecognizable figures. Rather, it is that the narrator presents these terms as though they would remain unintelligible to her addressee without her explanations. In this sense, the narrator places her addressee in a relation of epistemic dependence, in which she presents herself as “abjected” by compulsory gender in her “native” language while simultaneously regulating what her addressee is to know about these terms of gendered self-reference. Whereas the narrator presents her descriptions as an illustration of her plaint concerning compulsory adoption of gendered terms of self-reference as a child, she does so through the epistemic framework of an *ethnography*—and, as with any ethnography, its true object is neither the object of study nor the subject who studies but the addressee to whom the ethnography is directed. Regardless of her addressee’s linguistic abilities in Japanese, her addressee is given to understand that he, she or it can only understand these terms from the epistemic remove of the narrator’s ethnographic descriptions of what kind of girl designates herself as “watashi,” what kind of boy designates himself as “ore” and so on. In this ethnographic portrait, all that her addressee is to apprehend is the image of Japanese children referring to themselves in gendered terms of self-reference, not the discursive apparatus enabling it to function as an epistemic mirror in which everything appears in *reverse*.

The ethnicized narrator’s ethnicization of her addressee thus begins with this ethnography of what kind of child uses which term of self-reference in Japanese. However, these are not just descriptions, but epistemic coordinates for the addressee’s linguistic location as an *ethnic* location. Just as the text disarticulates the narrator’s plaint as an ethnography of the Japanese language, the text also interrupts her saying with its doing. As the narrator gives her addressee to understand that the Japanese language is a fraught terrain of gendered pronominality, the text’s German interrupts the narrator, almost as if to protest her characterization of the Japanese through the narrator’s “own” words in German. Upon closer reading of the text beyond its narrative, the

first line of the passage read above shows a mirrored problematic of gendered pronominality in German, "Eines dieser Mädchen fiel mir besonders auf, weil *es sich* wie ein Junge als "boku" bezeichnete" (One of these girls especially stood out to me because she [it] designated herself [itself] "boku" like a boy) (Tawada 53). If Japanese is a fraught terrain of compulsory gendered self-reference, German is a fraught terrain of compulsory *neutering* for girls in the third person, for a girl, *Mädchen*, is an "it," an *es* in German, not a "she," by the technical demands of German grammar. This text is not allied to its narrator, making her words do what she does not want to say.

The question raised here by baring the cleavage between what the narrator says and what the text does, is not which language, German or Japanese, is more problematic with respect to gender, though the narrator seeks to cast one language, Japanese, as more problematic than the other, German. Rather, the question is how the text resists its narrator by making her words do what she does not want to say. The text sometimes even resists the narrator by appearing to comply with her, acting as though it were her most loyal ventriloquist. In the same passage, the narrator wants to say, and indeed says, that she had trouble with these Japanese terms of self-reference "die 'ich' bedeuten" (that mean 'I') (53). This seemingly anodyne claim marks yet another instance in which the text diverges from the "will" of the narrator in two respects, once on the order of context and another on that of the text itself.

Though the text is readable without reading its Japanese, its claim that the Japanese terms of self-reference "mean 'I'" is dissonant if the Japanese *context* were indeed read. What the narrator does not say in claiming that these Japanese terms "mean 'I'" is that it is not only grammatically permitted in Japanese to omit the grammatical subject (or object) of a statement, but also that it is the norm to do so when the identity of the subject (or object) is "clear" from the pragmatic scene of address. Moreover, unlike Indo-European languages, Japanese does not have or even need an explicit pronominal system, though it today has rough equivalents to those required in Indo-European languages while often omitted in both speech and writing. The terms of self-reference cited by the text are substantives that are used pronominally but retain their character as nouns. Historically, the pronominality of these terms of self-reference was literally an effect of the practice of translation. Their pronominality was *invented* from the eighteenth century onward to translate Indo-European languages (Miura 10), which grammatically require the marking of "person" and would be non-sensical without such markings.

Hence, closer reading is required when the narrator states that until one is an adult, "ist man gezwungen, ein Junge oder ein Mädchen zu sein" (one is forced to be a boy or a girl) (Tawada 54). The German here is a passive construction without any indication of the agent behind this compulsion. Contrary to Kraenzle's reading, nothing in the German suggests that the Japanese language or culture *requires* gendered self-reference. Further historical contex-

tualization would show that gendered self-reference, in the form presented in Tawada's text, is an effect of the postwar education system in Japan. In 1952, the Japanese National Language Council (*Kokugoshingikai*) codified *atashi* and *watashi* as terms of self-reference for girls, *boku* for boys, and *watashi* and *watakushi* for use by both genders upon their entry into civil society (*Kokugoshingikai* §1.0–1.2). Prior to this, educational policies and the mass media promoted the formal codification of gendered language as a part of the so-called *genbun'itchi* movement, rendering the written language more closely aligned to the spoken language as a means of undoing class and regional distinctions with the aim of consolidating the population, as Miyako Inoue argues, around the idea of being "Japanese" (108–59). That is to say, nation-building is predicated upon the subjective technology of gender differentiation.

This logic however is *not* specific to Japan, but common to political modernity in general, as Hegel observes in his analysis of the modern state's dependence on what he calls—unironically, ruefully, if not simply stupidly—its "internal enemy," namely, *women*: "the commonwealth spawns itself (*erzeugt sich*) upon that which it oppresses and that which is simultaneously essential to it, on womankind (*die Weiblichkeit*) as its internal enemy in general," such that "womankind" is said to be "the eternal irony of the commonwealth" (Hegel 352). In other words, the agent that "forces" children in Japan to identify as a boy or a girl is neither the particularities of the Japanese language nor those of Japanese culture. Rather, it is political modernity in general, its medial networks and, above all else, its education system manufacturing gendered subjects *en masse*. It would not be an act of irony to add German Idealism as a part of this modernity codifying gendered roles.

However, even in the absence of this historical context, the narrator's claim that the Japanese terms of self-reference "mean 'I'" would remain dissonant as a linguistic claim on the order of the text. Can "I" be said to have a "meaning"? Does *ich* have a *Bedeutung*, or *imi* (literally "intention flavor"), as one says in Japanese? A logical dissonance arises in this claim, due not to the Japanese terms of self-reference, but to the narrator's ascription of "meaning" to the first-person pronoun *ich* in German. A third person pronoun might be said to have "meaning" to the extent that it has an antecedent with "meaning." But, unless the word *ich* appears in a direct quotation, it does not have an antecedent, for it necessarily lacks an "objective" notion when used to mark the first person. As will literally be seen, the *ich* does not and cannot even denote the "self" without precipitating a contradiction in who can appropriate it over the course of a conversation.

What, then, is an "I"? The meaninglessness of the "I" calls for further elaboration in what follows before this reading returns to the riddle of referentiality in Tawada's text, for much in Tawada's poetic practice turns on the inversive irony of the textual "I" undoing the platitudinal complaints of the narrative "I." A

consideration of this question will underscore why the riddle of referentiality is a riddle that produces reading, a form of labor that takes place at the vertex of the text's temporal vanishing point with reference.

Vanishing Point: The Temporality of the "I"

A poetics of the parabolic promiscuous personal pronoun in Tawada would begin by acknowledging the fundamental rupture between the two temporalities introduced the moment "I" is used to mark the first person: the temporality of enunciation and that of the enunciated, i.e. that of uttering versus that of the utterance. Considering only the temporality of enunciation, Émile Benveniste argues that "I" does not refer, by necessity, to either a universal concept (such as "the self") or even to the particular individual who utters it (such as "myself"). More simply, it does not, cannot and must not have "meaning" if it is to fulfill its linguistic function. Benveniste argues instead that the "I" is an indicator of deixis and, as such, its reference is strictly temporal: "I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse" (226). Because "I" refers to the "act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced," it can be appropriated by interlocutors in a conversation without contradiction in reference. "I" can be appropriated by anyone because it "refers," in Benveniste's account, to the *present* at which its enunciation takes place and hence "has only a momentary reference." It "designates," but does not "refer" to its speaker in time.

However, there is a shortcoming in Benveniste's argument. He only considers the temporality of enunciation to the exclusion of that of the enunciated. Only taking into account the present at which enunciation take place, he fails to distinguish this temporality from the temporality *internal* to the utterance or statement itself, the "now" within a statement that is always a "then" *external* to the statement. In other words, immediately upon its enunciation, the enunciated attains autonomy from the "present" at which it is issued; and the originary scene of enunciation remains irrecoverable from the enunciated (Sakai 67). In his critique of Benveniste's analysis, Naoki Sakai argues, "In utterance, one lives two different temporalities that never meet: the time in which what one means to say is presented, and the time of the actual speech in which saying is actually executed" (68). Even in the presence of the speaking subject who enunciates "I," the identity of the enunciated "I" is, by necessity, anonymous. Were it not, statements such as "I always lie" would be unintelligible and "I can't come to phone right now—I've just been murdered. Please leave a message" impossible (67). However, the intelligibility and possibility

of such statements show that, even when a subject is present at the scene of enunciation, the identity of the "I" posited in the enunciated is not guaranteed by the presence of the subject who enunciates it. One can say "I" and still not mean "oneself," but instead the character one plays in a theatrical performance, or a third person whose words in the first person one translates as a simultaneous interpreter or ventriloquizes as a form of mockery. In this sense, "the 'present' of the enunciation and the 'now' of the enunciated cannot coincide with each other" as the necessary condition of possibility for linguistic expression (Sakai 69).

This radical separation between the temporality of enunciation and that of the enunciated thus introduces a conceptual distinction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated, that is, between the subject making an utterance and the subject posited in an utterance as the agent of the verb (Lacan 136–42). As a consequence of this temporal rupture, the subject of enunciation is foreclosed to linguistic representation regardless of the subject's presence to its speech. Or, more precisely, if the subject of enunciation is represented, its representation always remains *other* to the subject of enunciation. The specular figure of the living subject of enunciation is made possible only through the *dead* letter of the subject of the enunciated, or the material mark "I."

It is in this sense that Jacques Lacan reads the Cartesian *cogito*, which attempts to recover the subject of enunciation from the subject of the enunciated, "as participating, in its striving towards certainty, in a sort of abortion" (141), a bloody image that will recur in the rereading of Tawada's text to come. In attempting to recover a living subject from the proposition "cogito," Descartes thought he found a living subject of epistemic certainty, but in act and fact only found six dead letters that together claimed that an "I" was in the midst of "thinking" (Derrida, *The Animal* 56–60). Thus, whereas the subject of enunciation is imagined to be the condition of possibility for the subject of the enunciated, just as cause to effect or a speaker to her speech, it is rather the case that the subject of the enunciated is the condition of possibility for imagining the subject of enunciation. Or in the Kantian idiom rather than the Cartesian terms cited by Lacan: whereas Kant claims "*I think*, must be able to accompany all of my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not even be thought..." (Kant Ak 3:108/KrV B 132), it is also the case that its representations first make it possible to posit retroactively the subject for which they are representations but which itself cannot be represented. The predicate brings the subject to life, but only as a specter—or, more precisely, a zombie, the prime trope of the "ethnic" migrant as the "actually" living dead (Comaroff and Comaroff 282).

In this sense, the specular image of the living subject of enunciation is merely a "figure of reading or understanding" the subject of the enunciated, but is nowhere found in the subject of enunciated itself. What sutures the "I"

to a writer or speaker is neither its writer nor its speaker, but the reading or understanding of the written or spoken. Hence, Adelson's riddle of referentiality is a *riddle* precisely because reading or understanding is fundamentally a social act even as its object, the written or spoken, remains just as fundamentally *asocial*, *non-human*, a thing beyond the determinations of any reader, listener, writer or speaker. Tawada's text plays on this riddle of referentiality when its narrator invites the reader to read the "I" through which she "speaks" as a "self," but only to obscure the referential riddle she provokes in the recessive fold of her narrative furrow, through which the words to come shall now plough (Sophocles, *Antigone* 569).

Chiasm: The Riddle of Referentiality II

Whereas the first part of "Eine leere Flasche" is centered on the narrator's contextual *world* of the Japanese language, the second part turns on her contextual world of the German. In the closing paragraphs of the text, the narrator says that she was able to forget the problem of "*Selbstbezeichnung*" (self-designation) (56; emphasis added) upon her celebratory discovery of the word "ich," as she says, "in Europe" (56).⁵ The words "in Europe" accrue a significance in the narrative greater than they would imply on their own, for they anchor the second part of the narrative not only in cartographic contrast to "Tokyo" (53), in which the first part of the narrative takes place, but also in cultural continuity with the language in which the text is itself written, German. Pronominally, the "I" through which the narrator "speaks," posits the narrator as coming from "them" but being now of "us" and "our" practices of self-reference as she performatively demonstrates throughout the narrative by using "ich," rather than the Japanese terms of self-reference she had cited earlier. And, yet, a riddle of referentiality remains, for the text once again does something other than what the narrator says.

While the narrator invites reading this shift from the Japanese context to the German as a transition from abject entrapment, as Chow might claim, to celebratory freedom, as Kraenzle in fact claims, the text undoes the narrator's celebratory embrace of the German first-person pronoun *ich* as yet another ethnography, but this time directly of her addressee. It shows that the narrator is engaged in a silent ethnography of how readers "in Europe" tend to read *ich* to mean "self." The narrator first extols the German first-person pronoun for its social anonymity, stating, "Ein Ich muss kein bestimmtes Geschlecht haben, kein Alter, keinen Status, keine Geschichte, keine Haltung, keinen Charakter" (An I has to have no determinate gender, no age, no status, no history, no stance, no character) (56). The narrator then gives her addressee to understand that the German *ich* is a "self freed of the numerous self-identifications required in Japanese" (Kraenzle 106). However, if read on the order

of the text rather than that of the narrative, the narrator's characterization of the *ich* ethnographically sketches not a free "self," but a precarious "self," one with "no determinate gender, no age, no status, no history, no stance, no character" (Tawada, "leere Flasche" 56). It is a "self" without particularities, determinate qualities and indices of sociality. In other words, this "self" is literally *nothing*.

Thus, the exuberant praise with which the narrator proclaims, "Ich' wurde zu meinem Lieblingswort" ("Ich" became my favorite word) (57), veers away from the celebratory "freedom" Kraenzle claims and towards an asteismus, or an ironic veiled insult, of the "self" that readers "in Europe" might see in the *ich*. However, until this point in the text, an ethnography of how some read *ich* remains only implicit in the narrator's cartographic discovery of the German first-person pronoun "in Europe." It becomes explicit in the closing paragraph of the text in which the narrator lauds the German first-person pronoun with its conjugated copula, *ich bin*. In a short but often cited passage, whose density of images requires more close reading than usually demanded of literary criticism, the narrator states:

Mir gefällt außerdem, dass ein Ich mit einem "I" beginnt, ein einfacher Strich, wie der Ansatz eines Pinselstriches, der das Papier betastet und gleichzeitig die Eröffnung einer Rede ankündigt. Auch "bin" ist ein schönes Wort. Im Japanischen gibt es auch das Wort "bin," das klingt genau gleich und bedeutet "eine Flasche." Wenn ich mit den beiden Wörtern "ich bin" eine Geschichte zu erzählen beginne, öffnet sich ein Raum, das Ich ist ein Pinselansatz und die Flasche ist leer. (56-57)

I also like that Ich begins with an "I," a simple stroke, like the beginning of a brush stroke that touches the paper and simultaneously announces the opening of a discourse. Also "bin" is a beautiful word. In Japanese there is also the word "bin," which sounds exactly the same and means "a flask." When I begin to narrate a story with both lexemes "ich bin," a space opens up, the I is a brush mark and the flask is empty.

The ethnography of this passage is apprehended only if the *European* cultural and intellectual-historical context of the words *ich bin* (I am) is comprehended. But what is comprehended is a logical *absurdity*, a referential circle that has haunted the modern history of the European "self" since its formal philosophical articulation in the early seventeenth century.

Here again reading is brought to rework the boundary between text and context constituting Adelson's concept of the riddle of referentiality. In her reading of this passage, Yasemin Yildiz argues that this passage "is a deeply philosophical articulation of existence and subjectivity that is encapsulated in *Ich bin*" (82). Indeed, Yildiz could not be more insightful and incisive in her observations. The words *ich bin* are not just two words, but together have marked the image of the sovereign "self" grounded in sovereign thought since

Descartes's formulation of the *cogito* (Descartes 127). The proposition, "ich bin," is that which *follows* from thinking yet is posited as ontologically *prior* to thinking, a line of argumentation that Descartes's late contemporary Baruch Spinoza critiqued as *circular* and, hence, a failure of thinking itself (Spinoza I: 145-49). Rather than drawing circles like Descartes, Spinoza insists upon drawing triangles. However, the object of the narrator's ethnography is less the words *ich bin* than the European "consciousness" that reads these words as a mirror reflecting its image of sovereign "selfhood." Or, to draw out the logical consequence of Lacan's reading of the Cartesian *cogito* as "participating...in a sort of abortion" (141), the object of Tawada's ethnography is the European *cogito*'s aborted fetus brought to specular life.

As the narrator celebrates the sovereign "self" found in the words *ich bin*, the text just as soon *rewrites* the cultural legibility of these two words. Whereas the narrator would have her addressee understand that she embraces an "image of the empty bottle [that] offers a metaphor for the use of the German first-person pronoun, which is emptied of the many markers of age, gender, status, etc. demanded in Japanese" (Kraenzle 106), the text recodes the words *ich bin* to the point of evacuating them of all possible metaphoricity, emptying as it were the image of the "empty bottle" not only of its bottle but also of its emptiness. It empties its own emptiness—a pleonastic irony that indeed does its dirty deed in deep need. The text translates the terms *ich bin* synaesthetically, not from one language to another, but from the *sight* of the first letter of *ich*, "I," and the *sound* of the copula *bin* into the optics of a brush stroke and acoustics of the word for "bottle," or "flask," in Japanese, whose own semiosis in German in the guise of the word *Flasche* exceeds its conventional English translation as "bottle" or "flask."⁶ In other words, rather than interpreting "ich bin" for either their culturally accrued contextual "meaning" as an ontological assertion of "self" or their simple linguistic function as a first-person pronoun with its conjugated copula, the text recodes them by their materiality as a sight and a sound, a "brush stroke" (the "I" of *ich*) and a "Flasche" (*bin* as read in Japanese to signify "bottle" and translated back into German as "Flasche").

Contrary to Kraenzle's claim, this synaesthetic translation of *ich bin* is not a "metaphor" for the German first-person pronoun emptied of its particularities, determinate qualities and indices of sociality. It is rather the opposite, the flattening of all metaphor to the materiality of an optic and an acoustic literally signifying *nothing*. Or—yet amounting to the same conclusion—to the extent that "metaphor" literally translates "translation" (*meta-phorein; über-setzen*) (Quintilian 8.6.4; de Man, "Conclusions" 83), the sight and sound derived from *ich bin* are "metaphors" that translate semantic sense into phenomenal sense, that is, into semantic *non-sense*: the optics of a brush stroke (the letter "I" in *ich*) and the acoustics of the word "bottle" (*bin*) in Japanese.

Yet, semantic non-sense is itself not the conclusion of this synaesthetic translation. In rewriting the cultural legibility of these words, the text also re-

writes their legibility in the specific instance of the text itself. That is to say, the text's decapitative reduction of the *ich* to its first letter "I" read as a brush stroke is self-referential to the text itself, such that each instance in which *ich* previously appeared in this text must be *retroactively* reread, neither as a "self" nor even as a narrative "I," but simply as the materiality of a brush stroke. Thus, if this narrative has an actual narrator, then it is a story told not by a narrative "I," but by an impersonal line. The signification of the "I" is flattened to the point where it is less than the "meaning" attributed to the first-person pronoun yet still more than the ink with which it is written. The narrative "I," through which the specular figure of a "self" prior to language might have been posited by the act of reading, is now to be reread, according to the text but not its narrative, as anything but a "self" or even a first-person pronoun. This text dismembers the *ich* of its first letter, eviscerating the narrator from the text as its center of reference. Just as a henchman severs a head from its body, the text severs the "i" from "ich" turning this letter into an inert brush stroke as a Derridean trace of the narrative "self" who was already dead on arrival.⁷

Any reading that insists upon reading the text as though it were an enunciation made by the narrative "I" would be further undermined by the text's homophonic translation of the sound "bin" in this short but dense passage. The text translates the sound *bin* from the Japanese into German as *Flasche*, forgoing the other semantic possibilities of *bin* in Japanese such as "airline flight" or "sideburns" (compare *Kenkyûsha's* s.v. "bin"), both of which would have evoked images of travel and hirsutism recurring throughout Tawada's other texts, such as *Das Bad / The Bath*. However, though *bin* is translated from Japanese into German as *Flasche*, *Flasche* need not be translated from the German into the English as "bottle." Nothing in the text insists that it must be translated as such. For, while *Flasche* can be translated as "bottle," it can also be translated according to its idiomatic meaning in German, namely, as "a failure."⁸ Any hermeneutic doubt of this idiomatic meaning will be promptly dispelled by the violent "fusion of horizons" that will "actually" take place in calling a German speaker a *Flasche*. In other words, if it is insisted that the text is enunciated by a narrative "I," the terms *ich bin* attain an ironic force literally undercutting their significance of sovereign selfhood read in the words "I am." They could be translated as "I, a bottle," but also as "I, a failure." And insofar as the narrative "I" claims that the "Flasche" is "leer," or empty, it could also be translated as "I, a vacuous failure" or, better, "I, an idiotic failure." The words *ich bin* would mark then the beginning of a first-person narrative in which the narrator denies any knowledge whatsoever, let alone that of "self," except as an idiotic failure who, as it were, just can't get it up and stick it in a copulative bottle (*bin* in German and Japanese).

Pentagram: Ethnic Irony—or, Being-towards-the-Little-Death

Tawada, to be sure, is not an “idiot” and not at all a “failure.” Rather, “Tawada” is a text of six Latin letters constituting a name, which has served at least once as an authorizing signature for an essay whose title denies its signatory’s existence, entitled “Tawada Yôko Does Not Exist” (Tawada, “Tawada Yôko” 13). Nevertheless, the narrator’s implied claim to idiocy in “Eine leere Flasche” is not merely a literary conceit or a figure of reading or understanding absent in the text. Instead, the apposition of “I” with an idiom for an idiotic failure performs the classical scene of comedic irony played out between two opposed figures that are in fact one: the *eirôn*, who acts dumb but plays his hand smart, and the *alazon*, who acts smart but in so doing plays his hand dumb (de Man, “Concept” 165; Ronell 130; Hubbard 2–8). Each inverts the other into itself, composing one figure divided into two with each continuously trading places with the other. Just as the roles of smart and dumb must perpetually flip in the performance of comedic irony, the “I” and the idiotic failure in “ich bin” continuously invert into one another, copulatively. The “I” that asserts its sovereign being (*bin* in German) also turns itself into an idiotic failure (*leere Flasche*). Yet an “I” that calls itself an “idiotic failure” might just as well be the smart guy masquerading as the dumb.

In this sense, the classical scene of irony also describes the literary scene of ethnicity, in which the figure of the “ethnic” is always doubled, cast as both characters, simultaneously in apposition and opposition to each other. Noting the etymology of “ethnicity” in the Greek *ethnikos* (heathen; foreigner) in contrast to *ethnos* (people; nation), Gayatri Spivak argues that the literature of ethnicity “writes itself between *ethnos*—a writer writing for her *own* people (whatever that means) without deliberate self-identification as such—and *ethnikos*, the pejoratively defined other reversing the charge, (de)anthropologizing herself by separating herself into a staged identity” (482). In describing the literary scene of ethnicity as writing between these two positions, Spivak rejects “ethnicity” as an embodied heritage or substance and instead seeks to show the “[ethnicized] writer’s signature as divided against itself” (482). Implicit in her claim is that the literary figure of ethnicity is enunciated from a dual pronominal position, a first person that is simultaneously a third person external to the scene of address. Yet, if it is neither a cultural “heritage” nor an “embodiment,” what then is this thing “ethnicity.” It is first and foremost an *aesthetic* category (Weber 238 [220]), or what cultural sociologists call, in borrowing from literary theory, a specific form of representation, namely a “figure.” As Andreas Langenohl argues in his analysis of public discourse around the referendum banning minarets in Switzerland in November 2009, “A figure is a representation of a (group of) person(s) neither vouched for by nor in need of any person(s)” (Langenohl 10). In contrast to theoretical approaches centered on “subjects” and “selves,” those centered on “figures,” such as

Langenohl's, show that the crux of the problematic lies not in "actually" existing "ethnics" but in the medial production of such representations as spectral figures feasting on the body politic, not unlike zombies.

Thus, in terms that draw upon Adelson's riddle of referentiality but take it outside its initial frame, the textual ethnicization of a first-person narrator takes place through a third person contextualization of the first-person narrator. While this division within the figure of ethnicity can imply "abjection" as Chow might claim, it can do so only if the opposite of this division, the unity of the first and third person, implies authenticity, which Chow would not claim. However, if the figure of ethnicity is understood pronominally, rather than as an embodied heritage of authenticity, it would be shown to function as a form of *disjunct simultaneous deixis*, the act of pointing in two distinct directions at one and the same *time* (de Bary 40; Haver 181). The figure of ethnicity is "divided against itself" in the sense that it is a figure that is from "over there" but is curiously "over here," from "them" but ruefully among "us." It describes a scene in which each side of the divide inverts the other into itself, forming one figure—a beast with two backs—which is also the scene of irony or, more rigorously, *ethnic irony*.

The social figure of ethnicity is thus structurally indistinguishable from the poetic trope of irony. Each threatens the hermeneutic desire for understanding by suggesting that there is nothing to be understood whatsoever, least of all a "self." Or, if there is indeed something to be understood, then what is to be understood is a scene of address in which the addresser abuts the addressee in an obscene scene of reciprocal undress, a sight to be seen. Hence, the term "ethnic irony" is less a "concept" in the sense defensively guarded by philosophy than the solecism called a *pleonasm*. It performs the doubling and mutual inversion implied not only by each term of this pair but also by their redundancy as a pair. It performs the *boundary work* upon the textual and socially contextual worlds, not as a "solution" to Adelson's riddle of referentiality, but as this riddle's innermost demonstration of the demand to read. It issues a reading requirement without prerequisites.

In Tawada's text then, ethnic irony is distilled into the textual figure of "ich bin," which is fractured by its own internal heteroglossia found in the practice of translation, that is, in its flattening of its own metaphors—which is just to say, it makes its own metaphors go *limp*. Its irony undermines the reading of an ethnicized narrative "I" as striving toward an *aestheticized* state of "selfhood" where it is "freed" from any particularity, determinate quality or index of sociality. Indeed, such "freedom" entails not the attainment of "self" but its *absolute* negation in "being" nothing. Moreover, by translating "ich bin" as a brush stroke and a vacuous flask that is simultaneously an idiotic failure, the text not only disables the reading its narrator invites at the outset, it also ironizes its own narrative. By recoding the semiotic of the first-person pronoun and the ontological status of its copula, the text interrupts the narra-

tive's unification around the first-person narrator as its center of reference. The narrative is thus left uninterpretable by the text's retroactive recoding of the narrative "I" as a brush stroke. Rather than conferring narrative unity, each "I" in the text fractures the narrative into serial bits of text bracketed at either end by a brush stroke that looks like a first-person pronoun but is not. This recoding thus redoubles the separation already introduced between the subject of the enunciation and that of the enunciated but within the enunciated itself. The enunciated "I" is split into an image of the narrator and the textual materiality of a brush stroke that refuses the narrator the most basic form of prosopopoeia, the narrator's personification of its "I." As such the "I" read as brush stroke does not so much "deface" the "self" but declines to lend any "face" to it whatsoever, or what Adelson calls "reverse prosopopoeia" (67).

This continuous interruption is perhaps the most basic sense in which Friedrich Schlegel's description of irony as a "permanente Parekbase" (permanent parabasis) can convey tangible meaning (Schlegel 18:85, Fragment 668; de Man, "Concept" 179 and "Rhetoric" 228), but which it already does in any case as long one draws triangles, rather than circles, to rub a text's clitic nub. It is in this sense then that irony appears literally "at all points" within the text, as de Man claims in his reading of Schlegel ("Concept" 179), that is, wherever a brush stroke masquerades as a first-person pronoun slashing her vocal chords the moment she attempts to come on the scene by saying "I."

Notes

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² See also Adelson 134.

³ The present essay uses the terms "text" and "context" contrastively with caprice. For the problem of the impossibility of "saturating" context, see Jacques Derrida's "Signature Event Context."

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author of this article. Because of Tawada's import to those in literary studies beyond German studies, the editors of *The German Quarterly* have graciously allowed for a modification of its editorial norms in admitting English translations of the German.

⁵ Due to concerns of length, a discussion of the middle section of Tawada's text is omitted from the present essay. It is forthcoming in its author's book *Ethnic Irony: "Autobiographies" of the Living Dead*.

⁶ Words of gratitude belong to Gunhild Lischke for pointing out this passage's synaesthesia.

⁷ Susan Bernstein is the recipient of great thanks for noting the link between the "I" and the Derridean trace.

⁸ The polysemia of the term "Flasche" would have remained occluded without the helpful suggestion in 2006 of the graduate students of the Department of German and Scandinavian, University of Oregon.

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