Concentric: Between Times

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Looking back upon the history of Concentric on its thirtieth anniversary, we find that this journal is both young and old. For in the past thirty years it has changed its name four times, and with each “renaming”—the French verb renommer can be interpreted to mean the repetition of the act of naming—something new was added to it, now elements injected into the old form. Always keeping in mind (or hoping for, anticipating anew) the renom, renown or fame of the journal, the editors have worked hard to keep rejuvenating its form and content. With passing years the cover design technique, overall layout, and webpage design have continued to develop and improve; the criteria for the acceptance of journal submissions have become stricter; the number of possible readers (that is, places to which the journal is sent) keeps growing; and an ever wider range of prestigious scholars is being invited to read and comment on the journal as well as contribute to it. After each renaming, then, another life rises like a phoenix from the ashes, a life other than itself. Perhaps “[w]hen a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces” (Derrida, On the Name 89). This is also why I consider it essential to review the history of the journal’s name change1 on its thirtieth anniversary.

Published by the English Department of NTNU in Taipei, Taiwan, this journal came into being in 1979 with the title Concentric. In 1989 it was renamed Studies in English Literature and Linguistics, with an emphasis on both literature and linguistics; in 2001 it underwent a second rebirth and took a name which really combined, suggesting again the phoenix but also perhaps an Hegelian aufheben, the two earlier ones—Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics. As before the journal alternately published, in January and June, literature and linguistics issues. Although still divided into two tracks, it now began to take more seriously its goal of acquiring a leading position among Taiwan’s academic journals

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1 I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my colleague, Hsiu-chuan Lee, for her role in Concentric’s sea-change. Much information about the journal’s early history sketched in this foreword comes from “An Introduction to Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies,” a brief report she wrote in Chinese for the Humanities and Social Science Newsletter Quarterly in 2005.
in these fields. Then in June of 2003, in order to further enhance the journal’s visibility and influence in the field of literary and cultural studies, after many productive debates the literary track of NTNU’s English Department decided to double (rather than split) the identity of *Concentric* by creating two journals: *Concentric: Studies in Linguistics* and *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*. This newborn “literary and cultural” journal—originally published biannually in January and June, now in March and September—was first introduced to the reader, with a fantastic makeover of its cover design and webpage, in January of 2004.

From 2004 to March of 2009 we have featured eight special topics: “Literature in the Age of Cultural Studies and Globalization,” “Animals,” “Who Speaks for the Human Today,” “The Gothic Revisited,” “Ethics and Ethnicity,” “Water,” “Asia and the Other,” and “Affect.” *Concentric* continues to be a collaborative labor of love, and since 2001 the main editors have been running a relay race which has no sign of ending: the first runner was Sun-chieh Liang, who handed the baton of editorship on to Hsiu-chuan Lee, from whom it came to Iping Liang, from whom it came to me in 2007. And now I will deliver up the baton to Tsu-chung Su after the publication of this issue with its special topic of “Affect.” In the forthcoming September 2009 and March 2010 issues our special topics will be “The Couch” and “Transnational Taiwan.” Through these special topics drawn from within the domain of literary and cultural studies we hope, of course, to stimulate creative about these issues on the part of our contributors, and to provide a sort of public forum for discussion and debate.

Particularly in the past five years, *Concentric* has also been committed to cultivating an Asian- (or Taiwan-) based perspective on contemporary literary and cultural studies; after all, most contributors still tend to come from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong or other part of East Asia. At the same time we have been increasingly cultivating a global readership by providing “local” observations, combined with the observations of non-East-Asian authors, on both Asian and western literature and cinema, on (inevitably mainly western) literary-theoretical concepts discourses, and on such universal or global issues or problems as “the human” (“Who Speaks for the Human?”), the environment (“Water”) or globalization itself (“The Age of Globalization”). Among the guest editors we have invited in the past five years are a combination of locally representative and globally influential scholars: Hanping Chiu (National Taiwan Normal University), Ban Wang (Stanford University), Wlad Godzich (*University of California, Santa Cruz*), Ying-hsiung Chou (Wufeng Institute of Technology), Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Maria Herrera-Sobek (University of California, Santa Barbara), Scott Slovic (University of Nevada,
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Reno), Serenella Iovino (University of Turin, Italy), and Shin Yamashiro (University of Ryukyu, Japan). Beginning with the 34.1 issue on “Water,” an increasing number of international scholars have also been invited to participate in the blind reviews, in collaboration with our own editorial board’s discussions and debates at our editorial board meetings and also in email roundtables.

For all of the above my special thanks go to all of our devoted editorial board members, and also our dedicated advisory board members, whose names and institutions may be found in the front pages of this Concentric. The advisory board members have been very helpful in recommending other (mainly foreign) reviewers for articles. Beginning with this issue we also have some new and very prestigious scholars on our advisory board: Susan Castillo (King’s College London), Sneja Gunew (University of British Columbia), Yu-cheng Lee (Academia Sinica), and Hugh J. Silverman (Stony Brook University). The quality of the English of each published article is likewise very important to us, and for this I would especially like to acknowledge the whole-hearted support of our three copy-editors at NTNU: Frank Stevenson, Mary Goodwin, and Aaron Deveson.

It is this wonderful teamwork which has made possible the fact that Concentric is now indexed by PerioPath: An Index to Chinese Periodical Literature, the Taiwan Humanities Citation Index (THCI), and the MLA International Bibliography—and this list is expected to expand in the near future. Beginning from the September 2008 issue (“Asia and the Other”) we have cooperated with the EALA (the English and American Literature Association in Taiwan), with a view to increasing our journal’s circulation in Taiwan and hence enhancing its local influence. On the other hand, we continue to actively invite international journal exchanges and university library subscriptions. It is hoped that through these means we can engage an increasing number of participants, inside and outside Taiwan, in our intellectual endeavors.

While we now have a widening network of global and local links, we do also maintain our own focus and sense of direction. Thus the 34.2 and 35.1 issues, “Asia and the Other” and “Affect,” have been edited collaboratively by the Concentric editors with the aim of emphasizing this local (or glocal) interest. This consideration also led to a new addition to the journal’s original configuration of its electronic text on the Concentric webpage (www.concentric-literature.url.tw): aware of the growing influence of the Chinese-speaking community on Asia and the globe and with the hope of attracting more readers, beginning with the 34.1 issue (“Water”), we have been supplementing each English abstract with a Chinese one. The position paper of this “Affect” issue, Sneja Gunew’s “Subaltern Empathy:
Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory,” has made clear that an increasingly important goal of Concentric is to present an alternative Asian perspective on the world.

The non-western perspective assumed by Sneja Gunew’s essay, with its move “Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory,” reverberates in the cover art of our designer Yi-fan Wang. Beginning with Deleuze’s idea of “affect” but experimentally commingling it with a Chinese Chan (禪) Buddhist tenet—“non-reliance on any words”—Ms. Wang transforms the abstract into something physical and emotional. This cover image, based on a minimalistic aesthetic and filled with delicate nuances of texture and color, will hopefully convey to its viewers a highly condensed emotional intensity. Subtly depicted in the foreground is the symbolic—but also very physical, very biological—motif of tears, thus by extension the human act of crying, a response triggered by an intense emotional state. But rather than showing tear-stained cheeks, we chose to let the texture speak in undertones. The image is at once simple and complicated—a piece of brown kraft paper overlaid by a piece of tissue paper, a shred of which has been wetted by tears and carelessly torn off, forming a C-shaped loop which refers to the journal’s name. The white-brown chromatic contrast between the tissue paper and the kraft paper, an effect created by photography, gives one a sense of purity and simplicity. The light brown-orange hue of the kraft paper creates an ambiguity: we may see it either as a piece of human skin covered by a piece of torn tissue paper or as a rough cardboard surface. The words (the special topic “Affect,” the publication date, and the issue number) inscribed on the skin/cardboard are blurred, an effect or affect of, once again, tears or sweat.2

Covered by several strips (stripes) of transparent adhesive tape, the C-shaped orange-brown zone of skin/paper ambiguity might suggest we see the tapes/stripes/stripes (or pale orange rectangles) as representing scars, symbolizing traumatic memories.3 In contrast to the tougher and coarser texture of the craft paper, the ruffled surface of the snow-white tissue paper is softer and more delicate.

2 As in the Chinese Chan (禪 Zen) idea of “non-reliance on any words,” we have kept the words to a minimum (only “Affect,” the publication date, and issue number) and, as if partly obscuring the “literalness” of words themselves, have made “Concentric” in the top left-hand corner almost colorless and covered it with a thin, glossy, transparent membrane. Thus the viewer may still detect the presence of the journal’s title through the reflection of the light.

3 Or more capriciously we might see these as a salute to Andy Warhol’s 1971 cover art for The Rolling Stones’ album Sticky Fingers, which he produced by adopting the offset screenprint on a cardboard surface and overlaying the figure of Mick Jagger with several bands of color (silver, olive green, black, etc.)—thus creating an unlooked-for effect of singularity.
Metaphorically, this sharp contrast in texture may connote the contrast between different kinds of emotions. The vague tear marks which “wet” the granular surface of the tissue paper might seem almost imperceptible, but we hope the viewer can give free reign to her/his imagination, to her/his soaring spirits. In other words, this need not be regarded as (only) a piece of tissue paper. It could be a Dear John letter, a discarded letter to or from home, an unfinished love letter or simply an undelivered letter—a vast number of which we get in the Dead Letter Office at the end of Melville’s “Bartleby”: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” Or on a more literal level this could just be a “pragmatic” piece of tissue paper someone used to wipe away the tears or perspiration from his/her face or other parts of his/her body. In any case, if we do see the wet marks as tear marks, then these tears may be the signs, the marks of various types of emotion: sorrow, sadness, shame, remorse, regret, anger, jealousy, hatred, excitement, joy, ecstasy, true love. Seen in another light they might even be the editors’ drops of sweat, but also their tears of joy at the completion of this issue of the journal.

We at Concentric, on the occasion of our journal’s thirtieth anniversary, thus look forward to the future with great eagerness (if not quite tears of joy)—and we remember the past fondly, if perhaps with a touch of nostalgia. Poets have often expressed their sense of missing the old days, their longing for what is now already irretrievable, having sunk into the dark night of the past. Alfred Tennyson laments the passing of one’s prime in “Tears, Idle Tears”:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more . . .

Through his exquisite design of sound, verbal pattern, and complex mood, Tennyson captures the moment when one confronts the passing of time, how in this moment our perceptions (outer experiences) impact on and affect our mind—the process of an organism’s interaction with stimuli or sense impressions—even if the mood as depicted above is inevitably somewhat melodramatic in the poetic manner of the mid-19th century. In another of the poem’s moments (in the third stanza) the poet describes a “sad and strange” experience—a man on his deathbed awakes to the early birds’ twittering, which comes floating down to his ears in the “dark summer dawns”:
Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns  
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds  
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes  
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;  
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

For Tennyson, the sense of “strangeness” arises from the fact that for the dying man life is ending, but the morning birds’ song paradoxically bespeaks the beginning of a new life. The key point is thus “Death in Life,” a phrase that appears in the last line of the poem. But I would prefer to emphasize “Life in Death,” that moment when the dying man experiences the strange, unnamable joy of reliving and “refreshing” his life before he ends it (ends this life), as if this sense of regeneration were as deep as his first love, as the poet also mentions in the last stanza. This “Life in Death,” or “afterlife,” the sur-vivre (“living on”) that Derrida also speaks of in an essay on Shelley is what keeps us moving, in a sense never-endingly, into the future (“Living On”).

Of course, it is only time and history— which means simultaneously the past and the future—that can attest to the true value of our efforts: “The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame” (Benjamin 71). Also with regard to Walter Benjamin, who speaks of the remote or transcendent future in terms of “chips of messianic time” in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” and bringing in “something rich and strange” from Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s Tempest, Hannah Arendt says:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. . . . [A]lthough the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as
though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as “thought fragments,” as something “rich and strange,” and perhaps even as everlasting Urphänomene. (“Introduction,” Illuminations 51)

It is such a love of adventure, of the exploration and discovery of old and new literary and cultural forms, new interpretations, new ideas that is Concentric’s central raison d’être. As adventurers we will openly embrace interpretations not just of written texts but of the cinematic and television-mediated arts and more generally the visual and graphic arts, recorded music, digital media, and on into the possible new cyborg-culture(s) of the future. Like Janus, the two-faced Roman god of gates—from whose name comes January, which marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new—we straddle the threshold, looking back at the past and anticipating the future. This might also be, looked at in another way, in terms of another spatio-temporal figure, the inner and outer circles in a series of concentric circles where, as in the growth rings of a banyan tree, these also mark time. And the inner circle still lives on (sur-vit) within or on the horizon of the outer—or, as the tree-ring image more likely suggests, as the outer within the horizon of the inner.

Works Cited