PERFECTION FORBIDDEN: SHIRLEY LIM IN HONG KONG

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THE MALACCAN-BORN, sometime Singapore resident and long-term American citizen, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, could reasonably lay claim to being the most active and perhaps the best-known Southeast Asian writer on the planet today. A writer-academic in the modern mold, between 2012 and 2014 she spent three periods teaching at the City University of Hong Kong. One unexpected result of these visits were two poetry chapbooks, *Mall Ballads* and *Embracing the Angel*. Both were later collected with other poems in *Do You Live In?*. City University is located adjacent to a modern shopping mall named Festival Walk, and Lim walked there each day. The Head of English at City University describes it as "a place which, for most of us in the Department has grown to be quite ordinary" (Jones), but Lim found walking there both a correspondence and a counter to the walking that led Wordsworth and Coleridge to write *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the key texts in her colonial education in Malacca. The use of the poems in colonialism made a love of them somewhat forbidden and "a force . . . to contend with in writing my own poems" (Lim,*Mall Ballads*,4). While Wordsworth and Coleridge walked in the nature with which Romanticism is centrally associated, Lim walked in an artificial, commercial environment. Neon lit, globalized commercialism is tacitly condemned in contemporary cultural studies but Lim found it inspirational, so that she conceived *Mall Ballads* as an updated *Lyrical Ballads*.

In another poet's hands the poems in *Mall Ballads* might well have been cynically ironic, an anti-pastoral showing up contemporary capitalism's display of the products of "dark Satanic mills" (Blake qtd. in Stevenson 489). At first glance it is difficult to align consumerism with "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all

thought, / And rolls through all things" (Wordsworth qtd. in Stillinger 110). Wordsworth and Coleridge never saw electric light, neon light or shopping malls but the malls might be the very emblem of contemporary Hong Kong.

Of course, shopping malls are not unique to Hong Kong: Manila has its share and they have spread from the United States to all parts of the developed world. However, they have a stronger emblematic power in Hong Kong. There are few countries where you would have an important university attached to one. They exhibit what a poem titled "Hong Kong Muses" from Lim's 2010 collection *Walking Backwards*, describes as "the thrum of the mighty city" (46) – perhaps a loose parallel with the London of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge", but Lim's Hong Kong is decidedly awake! The Hong Kong shopping mall, full of goods and people from all over the world, enthusiastically displays the modernity wrought by globalization. The Hong Kong poet Louise Ho has written that "Our land and space must mean very different things in Hong Kong from what they mean generally, as both are densely compacted into an international, cosmopolitan city" (qtd. in Xu and Ingham xiv).

It is partly this cosmopolitanism which attracted the internationally minded Lim. Of course, this cosmopolitanism is vastly different to the "rustic life" in which Wordsworth sought to trace "the primary laws of our nature" (qtd. in Owen 71). Wordsworth particularly wanted to explore "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (71), but Lim in the mall is much more the flaneur, an observer of other people's excitement. The associative nature of poetic thought, which the Romantics were the first English poets to explore, is present but that is not surprising: it is the standard mode of modern and contemporary poetry. In the original "Advertisement" to *Lyrical Ballads*, published only in the first, 1798 edition, Wordsworth and Coleridge argued that their book contained "a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents" (65). While these days we would be wary of the word "natural" in this context, the rest of the description is apt for *Mall Ballads*, the first of these two chapbooks. The parallel between *Mall Ballads* and *Lyrical Ballads* is loose rather than exact, but it works at a crucial point—that of empathy. Lim describes *Mall Ballads* as "a kind of intertext and subtext to the *Lyrical Ballads*" (*Mall Ballads* 4).

Ho says that Hong Kong has “a community that is constantly changing and endlessly varied” (qtd. in Xu and Ingham xiv), and Festival Walk provided a microcosm of it. While the mall may be relatively fixed, the people are ever-changing, and it is to the people that Lim is drawn. The Romantics were fascinated by what we now call human psychology, whether in the hauntings of the Ancient Mariner or the childish simplicities of “We Are Seven”. Lim is similarly inclined: in another poem of *Walking Backwards* she writes, “Keeping your distance … / … is … what I totally / Cannot do” (62).

In the “Preface” to *Mall Ballads* Lim describes Festival Walk as

> A huge glittering seven-level bubble of filtered air, bright illumination and continuous music that gradually through the day fills with gapers and shoppers, malingerers and the harried, local citizens and foreigners from all over the planet, babies and school children, the very old, brown-complexioned maids, and City University students, fresh-faced, fresh-pressed and radiant with youth.(3)

Lim’s view of the mall itself, apart from the people who inhabit it, is ambivalent. While the people are “Jonahs swallowed in / Leviathan’s maw” but they are also “dream gazers” (20). Festival Walk is “the festival / where neither art nor beauty can prevail”(14). In contrast, it is a “temple” (16) with “white portholes / of fluorescent light / like many suns in the sky / of a mall’s heaven”(10). The mall is, in a phrase simultaneously ironic and serious, “a kind of paradise” (13).

Of particular interest is Festival Walk’s ice rink, the site of the first four poems. The fourth, simply titled “The Rink” is short enough to quote in full:

> The Zamboni has returned to its garage,
> the patchers packed the potholes,
> and the sheet lies smooth, frozen,
> like the rest between two measures
> that have played and will play,
> like a page blank before the pen moves,
> like the dumb moment

> before meaning rushes in,
> busy as skaters with their futile
> sweeps, figures and circles. (8)

In Lim's poems skating is seen as analogous to writing, the marks people make on the perfect surface of ice like those on a blank page. The idea of whiteness, the blank page or silence as perfection, an Ideal, has a metaphysical appeal to poets, and a history at least back to the French *Symboliste*s. Its appeal lies at least partly in its being forbidden to humans. Actually the perfection of the ice or of the blank page is an imputed meaning; in truth, "meaning rushes in" only when skaters sweep in or poets apply ink to paper (nowadays perhaps virtually).

However, these activities are accompanied in the poems by a skepticism about their value. The skaters make "Sweeps and meaningless circles" that are "futile" because they will be erased by the "zamboni", which sounds like either the walking dead or an Italian dessert but quietly becomes a symbol of Time or Death. The preceding poem, "Sunday Morning", its title a nod to Wallace Stevens, is more admiring of the skaters. Lim hears

> Muzak impelling this Sunday morning
> like a priest at his sermon, a stream
> of sound to gather bodies up and set
> them where they must fall, and falling succeed
> to yet another leap. (7)

Lim, an older "ground-bound" observer, admires the young people's "Star-struck" attempts to defy their human limitations.

In the second poem, "Ice Skating in Kowloon", Lim similarly watches a "girl / learning that fluent is not fluid", that "her body ... / will not fly in air" (6). Again, "the Zamboni will render all" her lines "smooth and meaningless", and again skating parallels writing – "the same curving flow for the casual / script of ephemeral leaps on page" (6). The later poem, "Tableaux", which does not concern skating, exhibits a similar self-awareness about what "the pen has drawn", Lim aware – as those she observes are not – "of Time passing / that will wreck the vaulting sky / lights and all who walk under" (11). Elsewhere, Lim, an opera lover, walks

through the mall listening to Maria Callas on earphones, Callas' voice "like ether always pure and ever true", quite "unlike my own voice strangled even / as it utters and weeps in life" (14). However, this poem, "Walking with Maria Callas", begins by telling us that Callas is "Long dead"; hers is a "divine voice lamenting / over death too soon and slow coming". While her voice seems to "transcend human capacity", uplifting mortality "with soft timbre", it is "ghostly", and "invades and oppresses" (14).

Mike Ingham says that in Hong Kong English language poetry "there is a clearly discernible focus on the here and now" (2), and Lim's *Mall Ballads*, with their close observation of activities in Festival Walk, demonstrate the claim. However, that self-awareness and reflectiveness of the poet observer place the "here and now" in a longer sequence of time. Lim's poem "Hong Kong Muses" in *Walking Backwards* highlights "memory, measured / And immeasurable, betraying / No one but my self" (49). Lim, though, speaks for more than herself in the last poem of *Mall Ballads*, "YauYatChuen", the area of Kowloon where Festival Walk is located. YauYatChuen, or the whole of Hong Kong, is "yet another city / of hope among a history / of cities" (21). In our postmodern state "distances" can be "easily covered in glances / of hours. Presence and the present / one and the same". We are reduced to a kind of consumerist passivity: "Here, now / is our Fate's present" where "tomorrow will always be today" (21). This could suggest a living out of Time that is an Ideal – but Maria Callas and the speaker's self-awareness have already shown that the zamboniof Time is inescapable. To live oblivious to Time is not to live out of Time. Like so much in the glittering mall, that is an Ideal that human nature is forbidden. Lim's memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* acknowledges that "we were never pure" (4). Her *Mall Ballads* evidence Mike Ingham's claim for "the city's fascinating blend of reality and chimera" (8) at a philosophical as well as a superficial level.

Lim's second visit took place during the student demonstrations for more democratic elections in Hong Kong than the Chinese Government wished for, so that they respond to a more obvious political forbidding. Could the People's Republic of China be seen as exercising a different kind of colonialism? Written from Lim's viewpoint as a mother, the poems depict the "children . . . working on/the jigsaw of freedom" and learning to refute traditional Chinese values (page number). They are

"Hong Kong born-again" and the poems in *Embracing the Angel* consider the future of national values and the role of a writer in relation to action with a Yeatsian urgency. The key thematic link between the two chapbooks appears in the "Acknowledgements" to *Mall Ballads* where Lim writes "I am daily impressed by the strength of democratic ideals displayed by Hong Kong citizens, among the most resilient of city people". In *Among the White Moonfaces* Lim notes that "Malls and department store aisles do not discriminate. Everything is for sale to everyone" (198). The poem "Mall Vision" describes Festival Walk as "a democratic palace" (*Mall Ballads*12) and the poem "City of Disclocation" declares, "Noble and tawdry / are equal here" (16).

There is nothing especially religious about the "Angel" of the second chapbook's title; it is "the Angel of Freedom" with which the students are "hopelessly in love" (8). Worryingly, the demonstrations and their repression by the Chinese Government echo the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, also led by students. The element of the forbidden is political and obvious, so the poems are often angry and rhetorical. The perceived need for a rhetoric counter to the government's has Lim looking towards Yeats and as with his work there is no doubt where his allegiances lie. Lim finds Yeats's phrase "the deep heart's core" from "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" resonant and the poem entirely about Yeats, "Irelands: From His Tower", implies that the Hong Kong of the students' ideals is a city version of Innisfree.

Again, the role of poetry in this context is raised. The title poem begins, "The pen has not the power / of the people", and the poem ""Teach the Free Man How to Praise"', takes its title from Auden's famous elegy for Yeats (143), a line that does allow poetry the capacity to make something happen. In this chapbook Lim does not long doubt the validity of writing: its role is partly commemorative and partly sustaining. Poetry can teach the Hong Kong students how to praise their forbidden Ideal. In the title poem "This pen / can trace that sadness" of "wings caged / that can never fly over / your own homeland" – the wings of the angel of Freedom (page number). In "Betrayal: The Unspeakable" poetry presents the unspeakable that must be spoken for "children who" in the poem "Your Exercise Books" simply "had not known / they were warriors" against "the dragon" of Chinese authoritarianism (14).

The most interesting thematic element in *Embracing the Angel* is the psychological one. The students' rebellion takes place in a Chinese *cultural* context of obedience, one in which questioning is forbidden:

> In all your years
> you've obeyed father and mother,
> pushing your questions down, each day
> deeper . . . (5)

The "children" have been taught that "obedience is love, / love obedience" but their "questions / have crouched like rats growing larger, / fiercer the longer unfed" (5). The rebellion is a process of "learning" (10) that has given them "an intelligence / of injustice" (5) and an awareness that "love is disobedience, disobedience love" (5). Consequently, "you're Hong Kong born-again, / knowing finally who you are" (9). This impassioned, anguished collection ends with poems that insist on the students' idealism ultimately prevailing. "Beware", warns Lim, "the hopeless, dreamless generation / who'll stalk the city when grown, waiting done" (24). The children will "fledge free" (25); "their city of desires" is "innocent, / illuminated and imminent" (23). Sadly, this is more likely poetic rhetoric than political reality.

Coleridge and Wordsworth, when writing *Lyrical Ballads* were politically radical and spied on by the authorities when they took their rustic walks. Romanticism is generally seen to have been superseded by Victorianism, Modernism and Postmodernism but many elements of Romanticism are still with us: for example, the presentation of "incidents and situations from common life . . . in a selection of language really used by men" (qtd. in Owen 73) (and women we would add), observation of the particular rather than the general, sensory appeal and the valuing of immediacy. It is no surprise that Shirley Lim's chapbooks adhere to these values; it may even be felt that *Embracing the Angel* exhibits "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (qtd. in Owen 72), although her poems are well crafted, as Wordsworth's in fact were. Wordsworth did claim of the *Lyrical Ballads* that "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" (qtd. in Owen 73). This is true of *Mall Ballads* but the

reverse is true of *Embracing the Angel*. The two chapbooks differ in many ways, including in the versions of the forbidden that they confront but both chapbooks conceive of perfections that contemporary reality will not allow to be realized. In this both might emulate not *Lyrical Ballads* but "Tintern Abbey" in that they have us

> hearing oftentimes
> The still sad music of humanity,
> ... of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. (qtd. in Stillinger110)

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