



## THE *ASYMPTOTE* GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

### WINTER 2016 ISSUE

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Asymptote's* educational arm! We believe that new writing in translation such as appears in our quarterly journal provides much potential for enriching the classroom experience. With each new issue, we release a guide for educators, offering a thematic breakdown of our content with relevant contextual information and suggested discussion questions and exercises. We design our materials to highlight various ways in which the literary works in *Asymptote* can be the point of contact between your classroom and vital, ongoing conversations taking place in and beyond the world of literature.

In the following pages, you will find teaching materials which attempt to articulate the current issue's themes in a concrete way, as well as a variety of discussion questions and assignments that can be adapted to help students engage with the writing featured in *Asymptote*.

## INSTRUCTIONS

This guide is grounded in an exploration of themes drawn from *Asymptote's* January 2016 issue (accessible [here in our archive](#) after mid-April 2016). We begin with an introduction to the issue and the broad theme under which it is presented: "Eternal Return." As this theme can have a variety of different meanings and applications depending on the piece under study, we encourage you to engage it in a way that best suits your students and classroom activities.

The section 'Setting the Context' offers information that may be helpful in preparing your students for assigned readings from the journal. Several additional themes are presented in the section that follows, along with suggestions on how each theme may be teased out with discussion questions and sample assignments. These offerings engage directly with writing featured in the issue, and include links to the relevant pieces. We hope that you will find them useful and easy to adapt for your own purposes in the classroom.

Finally, and crucially, we urge teachers and instructors who use our materials, or even just those who are passing through, to leave feedback about this initiative [here](#).

You can contact us directly at [education@asymptotejournal.com](mailto:education@asymptotejournal.com)

## JANUARY 2016 ISSUE INTRODUCTION

### ETERNAL RETURN

*Asymptote's* January issue features new works in translation from thirty countries, with many of the pieces reflecting aspects of the theme "Eternal Return." Some of our contributors write about the "eternal" as a divine presence, a force that compels devotion and an ever-renewing process to negotiate one's relationship with it. For these authors, their subjects continually return to the divine with their hearts and minds, or offer their bodies to it at the end of their earthly existences. Other contributors, in exploring what is eternal about the human condition—birth, death, and the healing impulse—return again and again to an object of fixation, a memory, an ideal.

Exploring or striving for union with the "eternal" often results in a struggle to transcend the particularities of human experience. But the "eternal"—especially for those who dedicate their lives to it—can be understood as the source of particular human experiences, a shaper of identities despite the fact that no human consensus as to the form (or even existence) of eternity seems possible. Perhaps as our contributors explore this paradox, as they view the "eternal" through the lenses of endlessly varied and unique human experiences, their explorations might intersect with your own and those of your students, allowing a momentary glimpse of something "eternal" through the medium of literature.

Our theme can also be understood with an emphasis on "returning"—either as a process that can be healing or transformative, or merely as a state of being that is valuable in itself, regardless of its goals and outcomes. It may be triggered or carried out by actions such as remembering, reflecting, revisiting, reordering, retranslating. How are these processes, within these pieces and within our lives, further nuanced in our understanding when viewed as acts of "return"?

*Asymptote's* January 2016 issue invites you to return to the eternal . . . and to eternally return. Explore with our contributors and their subjects how literature and related modes of expression guide us through those journeys—or, perhaps, how they can be the journey itself.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

As you introduce materials from this issue to your class, we suggest setting the context with relevant cultural, political, and/or historical information such as appears in the examples below.

### Vibhuti Pada: The Chapter of Dubious Glories

The Yoga Sutras were likely written down around 400 CE. They outline an eight-fold path by which a practitioner may reach union with the divine—one can imagine the difficulties involved with translating such an ancient text about such subtle matters. And yet it was translated early and often. With the rise of yoga’s popularity in the West has come a resurgence of translation, adaptation, and commentary of the Yoga Sutras. While the text is foundational to the practice, contemporary students of diverse demographics want to know how a text written thousands of years ago for twelve-year-old Indian boys can apply to their own lives.

Here are some alternative sources of translations to consider:

<http://www.yoga-age.com/sutras/pata3.html>

<http://www.yogajournal.com/category/yoga-101/philosophy/yoga-sutras/>

### Imam Mousa Sadr

Lebanese-Iranian Shia cleric Imam Mousa Sadr was a well-respected human rights advocate who was vocal particularly in defense of Lebanon’s Shia population—a disenfranchised minority. He spoke out against sectarian violence while praising Lebanon’s diversity. His work, unfortunately, was unable to prevent the Lebanese Civil War. At Gaddafi’s invitation, he flew to Libya in 1978 and was never seen again. Some say he was murdered by the regime, while others say he’s still alive in Libyan custody.

More information on this mystery can be found here:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraworld/2012/06/201262711475105411.html>

Consider journalist Habibe Jafarian’s stunning article about her work and her commitment to her country. Note that she refers to Imam Mousa Sadr as “the original architect of the Hezbollah of Lebanon”: <https://www.guernicamag.com/features/how-to-be-a-woman-in-tehran/>

### A Day of Honey, A Day of Onions

Author Ada Aharoni was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1933. Her family fled to France after her father’s work permit was revoked and her family’s property confiscated in 1949. She moved to Israel at the age of sixteen, and has lived and worked there as a writer and academic ever since.

Explore Aharoni’s project, The International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace:

<https://iflac.wordpress.com/>

See Aharoni’s academic article “The Forced Migration of Jews from Arab Countries and Peace” for her account of this period. She also discusses the ways in which understanding this history—and the contemporary reality it underlies—is integral to work towards a peaceful solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

You may want to tease out the rhetoric from the historical fact within this article:

[http://www.hsje.org/second\\_exodus/forcedmigration.htm](http://www.hsje.org/second_exodus/forcedmigration.htm)

### Fairytale About Us

Sarajevo, where author Dijala Hasanbegović lives and works, is the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For centuries, the city was a model for ethnic and religious coexistence. Consider this NPR article for more information about Bosnia's independence, the devastating war with Serbia, and the siege of Sarajevo. The piece addresses the siege's contemporary legacy and some unexpected aspects of the children's experience of it:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/05/150009152/two-decades-after-siege-sarajevo-still-a-city-divided>

### Holi Songs of Demerara

Awadhi-Bhojpuri is a language spoken in North India. It has a long tradition of poetry by poet-saints of the Bhakti (devotional) tradition, in which the speaker's radical personal experience with the divine transcends all other human experience in value. According to the translator's note, the translator reads this piece in the context of that tradition. When the speaker addresses the poem to another presence (in this case, Sakhi), or references herself in the last lines of each poem, she is using devices characteristic of that tradition.

**Chautal:** A musical genre specifically rehearsed and performed for the celebration of Holi. Indentured servants brought the tradition from India to the Caribbean, where it evolved its own diasporic flavor. Often, a chautal will celebrate a story from one of India's most celebrated epics—either the Ramayana or the Mahabharata.

**Holi:** A festival celebrating the beginning of spring. The main feature of the festival involves play with colored powder. It is said that the god Krishna grew up in the region of India where the author Lalbihari Sharma was born. One myth, originating from this region, is that a demon's poison breastmilk turned his skin blue in his infancy, and as he grew up, he feared his beloved Radha would not return his affection because of his skin color. At his mother's suggestion, he colored her face with a color of his choosing, and this was the beginning of their partnership. This is one explanation for the tradition of play with colors. These stories travelled to the Caribbean with diasporic Indians.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ASSIGNMENTS

### Healing—The Body, The Soul, The Nation, The Mind, The Community

Question: How do the pieces communicate the state of “brokenness” or “illness,” or, in other words, the need for healing? Please discuss particular images, narrative threads, contradictions, and literary devices. In each case, in what ways are the healing attempts successful or unsuccessful?

Assignment: Write about something in your life, or something you observe, that is or was in need of healing. What healing process occurred, is occurring, or would you like to see occur? If applicable, was the healing attempt successful in your opinion? In your own writing, please keep in mind the techniques that you have encountered in the pieces. Consider trying to utilize these techniques yourself or reimagine alternative that you think would be more successful.

#### **From This Issue:**

“He dreamed of the girl in the hospital. Her body was swathed in huge worms”  
from “The Healer”

“All that. See in./ Hunger, stop it.”  
from “Vibhuti Pada: The Chapter of Dubious Glories”

“You were adamant about who you were and what you needed to do. You said this was your ‘duty.’ This was the role asked of you and you fought for it, got frustrated over it, were looked down upon and insulted because of it, but you kept going; and something really happened; something changed somewhere and some work was done.”  
from “Imam Mousa Sadr”

### Sound, Sense, and Units of Meaning

Question: Many of our writers create meaning in new and unexpected ways by reimagining what constitutes a unit of meaning, or placing emphasis/value on oft-ignored features of language. For example, translators Martin Rock and Joe Pan offer a web of translations, each of which has its own set of effects on the reader, by alternately emphasizing sound, word equivalence, poetic form, etc. “Silk Fonts” and “Martín Fierro Ordered Alphabetically” both experiment with the value of the letter. How is meaning created? How does sound influence understanding? How does altering the object of your attention alter what you understand of your object?

Assignment: Please use this opportunity to utilize the audio recordings on our website, and the source-language texts. Consider having students read aloud the English-language pieces. Discuss the different sensory experiences of reading, speaking, listening, and looking. Do the different actions illuminate different shades of meaning, or evoke different responses and personal connections for the individual?

Have students write their own literary pieces (a poem, short story, etc.), or choose an existing one. Identify an existing unit of meaning (the word, the image, the line, the clause, the phrase, etc.); choose an alternative one, and rewrite the piece in such a way that the alternative is now primary. The reorganization of epic poem “Martín Fierro” is a great example.

**From this Issue:**

Nicole Brossard's "Silk Fonts"

"except the wild beasts, and your loneliness./ except to go out at dawn/ except when it has to be done,/ experience is all that counts."

from "Martín Fierro Ordered Alphabetically"

"Sweet chew (no cow burger). More aimless boat on yr key."

from "River | Horse | Haiku"

### Devotion

Question: Devotion can often be considered the ultimate act of eternal return. The eternal return of the thoughts, heart, attention, and of action to the object of devotion. Please discuss "devotion" in the contexts of the pieces referenced below. How do the pieces and their characters practice and express their devotion? How might each define devotion? How would you?

Assignment: To what/whom are you devoted? Write a creative piece about your devotion that somehow expresses the following: your definition of your devotion, the object of your devotion, your devotional practices. Consider echoing or responding to the expressive modes in the *Asymptote* pieces.

**From this Issue:**

"Everything that you have done to serve your sisters you have done through my Child and through me. Why do you desire service from them in return?"

from "Selections from the St. Katharinental Sister Book"

"I've wasted my life. My blouse/ bursts; my whole body aches/ for him. This distance between us/ I cannot bear. I am lost."

from "Holi Songs of Demerara"

"Because Ray of Sunlight has assumed a one-pointed mind/ May her soul be taken to Erlig Khan to obtain the Document of Fate/ I, in the world of the living, will heal her, and bestow upon her/blessing"

from "Legend of the Dakini Ray of Sunlight (White Tara)"

### The Wild and the Tamed

Question: Compare and contrast images of nature and images of human creation. Are they at odds with each other, or do they work in harmony? What values or types of experiences are associated with each?

Assignment: Write or make a creative product that somehow portrays both a natural and a human-made space. Do not use any adjectives.

**From This Issue:**

"Fishmoths live to be two to eight years old, and thus the largest of them has lived in this apartment longer than I have. Should I ask their advice. About cleaning the shower head, maybe defrosting the freezer."

from "Every Morning I Crawl Out of the Ocean"

“In other moments of boredom, in New York, in Philadelphia, in Cincinnati, I had turned to reading the phonebook and playing the sad game of looking up my last name.”  
from “The Duke of Solimena”

“The windows are all open. The air circulates, identical.”  
from “Excess—The Factory”

### Rebellion and its (Im)possibility

Question: What is the role of art in rebellion and resistance? Do you believe that art/literature has any power to enact change? Why, or why not? In what ways, if any, can the form of a piece be as rebellious as the content? Against what do these pieces rebel? How do you judge whether or not they are successful?

Assignment: Write/make a creative product that enacts resistance in both its form and its content.

#### **From this Issue:**

“But it’s right at this moment that I become furious with you. I am sure that if you come right now I will fight you. It’s right at this moment that the burden falls on me. The burden of not being you. The burden of you not being an ordinary person. What I have always denied and opposed. If you were in my stead, there would be no ‘not possible’ or ‘not able.’ You did not know ‘not being able.’ You were strange. You had capacities and beliefs that did not falter.”  
from “Imam Mousa Sadr”

“She chewed American gum and got blown to pieces.”  
from “Foreign Gifts”

“The moisture underneath is the earth sweating,/ the wildflower roots wriggle deep into earth’s bones, maggots/ crawling up to devour the last bit of fortitude I relied upon.”  
from “Hillside”

### Reading Prestige

Question: What makes a writer/artist popular? Do you read a piece with different expectations depending on whether it carries some mark of prestige (i.e., a famous author or a prize)? In what ways do you read them differently?

Some of our pieces in this issue can be considered prestigious simply because they are so old. They have survived, in some cases, thousands of years to reach *Asymptote* audiences. Does this sort of prestige carry different expectations for you than the prestige of fame discussed above?

Many of our translators render these ancient pieces in such a way that the foreignness of their age is erased, or translated into other styles of foreignness. Discuss these choices.

Assignment: If you were to interview a prestigious writer, who would you choose, what makes her or him prestigious, and what would you ask?

#### **From this Issue:**

“You teach a course at MIT called World Building”  
From “An Interview with Junot Díaz”

“He called my mother ‘vous’ and addressed me as ‘ma chère.’ My mother, when she spoke of him, would say ‘Lacan.”



from "A Father, Puzzle"

"I'm a messy, untutored blunderer. I might have been left to my ways if it hadn't been for the bizarre success of *Life of Pi*, which—among many other consequences—brought me to the attention of many fine, sharp-minded editors. One of my editors, for example, is J. M. Coetzee's editor. Another regularly works with Rushdie. Well, these kinds of readers call your every bluff."  
from "An Interview with Yann Martel"

### Feeling with the 'Other'

Question: How do these writers express the intensity of their experience? How do they bring you to where they are? Identify particular phrases, images, and devices.

Assignment: Write/make a creative product about a highly emotional experience, fictional or non-fictional. Resist the urge to use the title of the emotion you are trying to convey. Please draw on the referenced *Asymptote* pieces for formal inspiration.

#### **From this Issue:**

"that you're buried with all you grasped,/ with all that you lashed,/ that it ends like that."  
from "How to Die in Zapotec"

"So I also had to throw off the lazy equivalence I allow myself when using English outside of translation, and interrogate the various nuances of obliterate, annul, expunge, efface, excise, before deciding which would be most appropriate where."  
from "On Translating Human Acts by Han Kang"

"The bodies on the other side fell like ballet dancers swooning into the ghastly mass grave, one on top of the other. Most swayed directly into the pit, while others were shoved in by Nazi boots."  
from "A Day of Honey, A Day of Onions"



## **FEEDBACK**

Thank you for reading through our educational guide! Whether or not it made an appearance in your classroom, we invite you to do [this quick survey](#), so you can tell us what you think.

## **CREDITS**

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