

Rejoinder

To have heard the farfella gasping
as toward a bridge over worlds

— Ezra Pound

Professor Yip's reply prompted me to read again his article, this time in tandem with my review. Having done this carefully, I can only say that there is no serious distortion of his views present in it, though there is some sarcasm on my part. The reference to ugliness in particular seems to have irked him more than it should have. I apologize for the sarcasm, even though he has responded more to this than to the substantive issues my review raises about his project for East-West comparative poetics.

It was the philosopher Nietzsche who remarked in one of his barbed aphorisms that the truth is ugly, but it was the philosopher Chuang Tzu who taught me the value of ugliness and deformity: one's differences thereby escape being ground into sameness by the dialectical machine of discourse. So I value the ugly in texts, and, since I write as a deconstructionist, I am concerned to bring it out where I can. I feel also that a little sunny sarcasm is not out of line in the all too serious process of reviewing, but evidently Professor Yip has taken my remarks as a personal slight, probably because he still associates truth and beauty in a typical Western way. But my words were only intended as a slight displacement of Professor Yip's meaning, and not as a disparagement of his project.

Professor Yip thinks Heidegger's notions about truth as the unveiling of presence have an affinity (actually it is more than an affinity; he talks of a "convergence") with Chinese notions about the Tao — and therefore also Taoist-inspired poetry. Now, it may well be true that some Chinese poems present "the priority of things over ego," as he phrases it, but I disagree with him in the case of Wang Wei, the subject of his article, in whose poetry Buddhism seems to me more of an influence. Furthermore, this Buddhist attitude strives to be studiously neutral. Wang Wei does not privilege ego or things, for he would have us believe he is a mirror, that favorite symbol in both Taoist and Buddhist literature, reflecting existence without partiality or prejudice. Of course, it is difficult to prove these, or any, claims about Wang Wei, since he is silent about the nature of literature as well. Nevertheless, I

believe that in saying Wang Wei is a Buddhist-inspired poet I am merely repeating the accepted view of his poetry among Western and Chinese scholars, and the consensus that has more or less been reached about the intent of his poetics, which is almost totally free of overt philosophizing. Professor Yip mentions nothing of the existing scholarship on Wang Wei in his article, so I felt it was my obligation as a reviewer to point this out.

At any rate, Professor Yip claims that I distorted his views in several ways, first of all by quoting him out of context to make him look naive. Well, here is the entire paragraph:

The various philosophical orientations outlined above suggest a potential for reaffirming the innocence and immanence of things, if it could be made acceptable to the post-industrialized man. A new line of poetic expression (such as those that eschew determinate syntactical relationship) needs a new mind to become authentic and natural. It is this need that has made the works of Heidegger particularly meaningful: the attempt to recover the original ground of being by pointing toward the given as given, undoing slowly the reductionist concepts, classifications and logos-centered orders. It is on this level that we find the Taoist and Heidegger speaking the same language.

The problem here is really Yip's understanding of Heidegger, whom he cites with approval throughout his article but about whom he manifestly cannot make up his mind. In the penultimate sentence, for example, he makes Heidegger into a deconstructionist bent on undoing slowly the logos-centered orders, yet earlier in the same paragraph (or indeed the same sentence) he expresses a longing for a center, an originary world of the presence and immanence of meaning. Which Heidegger does Yip want, Derrida's or the existentialists', *différance* or the jargon of authenticity? Which version converges with Taoist-inspired poetry? Yip seems only dimly aware that the two interpretations of Heidegger are incompatible, if he is aware of it at all. So unless Professor Yip finds a coherent point of view some time soon for his project of East-West convergence, or (more in keeping with the "ugliness" of his text) demonstrates coherently (deconstructively) the incoherence of his own argument, I feel it is fair to point out what I take to be unquestioned metaphysical assumptions in his text. That is what is ethnocentric about it.

The "this level" of the same which Yip mentions in the last sentence has about as ambiguous and double an antecedent as we could desire in some of

the more monstrously thrilling sentences of Derrida. But then Derrida knows what he is doing when he makes the reader hunt for such syntactical centers, when he shows us that the text of Western metaphysics is always double, always its own *simulacrum*. A slight displacement, a slight play in the reading of the text, is sufficient to collapse the scarcely perceptible veil that separates the text from itself, from univocity. "To eschew determinate syntactical relationship," is posited by Yip as an ideal for poetry, so why not for criticism?

The other thing which Professor Yip finds distorting is my use of the Robinson translation. I am supposed to have "slipped it in" at the end to give the impression that he does not understand Chinese. Actually, it is there, together with the Chinese text of Wang Wei, because I deliberately put it there. Professor Yip did not have the courtesy to cite the entire text in his original essay (though it is only four lines), and I thought that this was bad critical practice. I can take a line from *The China Post* and make it look like a line from William Carlos Williams. Williams himself made *In the American Grain* out of citations from other historical texts, proudly claiming that not a word of it was his own. Is it inconceivable to Yip that Wang Wei might have done the same? And since I made a point of saying that Yip's argument is based on only one line from Wang Wei's Chinese, which I also reproduced in my review, I do not see how I could have created the illusion that Yip was relying on an inadequate translation. On the contrary, and as I had been at pains to point out, there is no sense of the Chinese *text* in Professor Yip's argument at all, no sense of textuality or the historical weight of words in a tradition. At least Robinson gives us some notes on this. And the lines can be translated as Robinson has them; if Professor Yip will only look in any Chinese botanical dictionary, he will find that 芙蓉 is another word for the lotus flowers.

Of course, Professor Yip has an entire theory of translation riding on his view about the naturalness of the Chinese poetic line, so one should not be surprised that Robinson's translation appears to him as a "mistake." Yip's beautiful truth versus Robinson's ugly error? No, I would not want to make that assertion. It's enough for me that Wang Wei's Chinese can be translated in the way Robinson does it.

Incidentally and in closing, I would like to say that I do not get very choked up emotionally about such fine phrases as "the death of comparative literature." Such phrases to me seem just another symptom of a longing for a center prominent in metaphysics. For Professor Yip's information,

comparative literature, and the dream of universality based on translation which it represents, died recently in the text of Derrida, but is still living on there, perhaps more alive there than it has been elsewhere in a long long time. (Cf. Derrida, "Living On," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Bloom et. al.)

WILLIAM F. TOUPONCE