

The Historicity of Understanding

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Introduction in the Form of an Apology

Fairy tales often tell of one ugly sibling in a handsome brood, despised but possessing some capacity that earns him a worthy place with the rest. The author of this paper cannot help but view it as the ugly sibling among his writings: in other essays he hopes for some flair worthy of the poems he is writing about; the most he can hope for in this paper is that, as with one of Chuang-tzu's strange misshapen characters, there may be some value in its very ugliness.

In a ponderous, artless, and sometimes abstruse argument, the paper concludes that interpretation is necessarily an art form. Itself a theoretical discussion containing no poems, the paper speaks of how poetry and theory are bound inextricably together. The author is embarrassed: his first allegiance is to poems; and though he teaches literary theory, it interests him as an *animate* relation of thought to literary texts, a continual exchange and movement between the two. This paper he has written, lacking poems and lacking grace, seems to him an ugly, misshapen thing.

Thus the ugly sibling suffers its parent's disapproval. Quick with a response (as ugly siblings always are), it reminds the author of one of its graceless points: that to understand the field of a problem, it is sometimes necessary to stand outside of it. Like Su Tung-p'o wandering through Lu Mountain, there is more pleasure and honor in the wandering, but to see Lu Mountain's "true face," the pleasure must be renounced for a while and the mountain seen from afar.

I have here tried to work through a problem which comes most forcibly to western scholars of classical Chinese literature. In more subtle ways the questions raised are also germane to Chinese scholars writing on their own literature in this late age of the world. The question, simply put, is this: to what extent and in what way is a hermeneutics (i.e. a tradition of criticism and literary theory as it shapes the way we understand and interpret

literature) bound to the poetry with which it has developed? Can the conceptual vocabulary of interpretation belonging to one tradition be legitimately transferred to another? What are the boundaries of legitimate interpretation? It is a purely theoretical discussion; i.e. it does not give examples of or enumerate legitimate interpretive stances, but describes the conditions which might make an interpretive stance legitimate. For this theoretical disposition the ugly sibling and I apologize. Elsewhere I have tried to enact what is here described.

These questions would be minor ones if they applied only to our scholarship, which will be read by few and be remembered by fewer still. But if a tradition of hermeneutics is, as I believe, an integral (though often unconscious) part of the way everyone learns to read poetry, then the general acceptance of tacit assumptions which are incommensurate with a poetic tradition will gradually distort and blur what is truly valuable about that poetry. One of the conclusions we will be obliged to draw has been empirically validated in the experience of many teachers, both Chinese and western, of Chinese classical literature: that the conceptual vocabulary of western poetics can subtly and seriously distort the Chinese poems to which it is brought.

Of Understanding

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, and in its broader sense, of understanding in general. Through a more or less explicit hermeneutics we engage in outer acts of interpretation; but such acts are grounded in an implicit hermeneutics of everyday language, that dimension of language which makes understanding possible. That we are able to understand one another is one of those miracles we treat so lightly in our everyday life. That we are able to "understand" a poem — each understanding it somewhat differently, able to agree that many of these understandings are equally valid, yet still able to name some interpretations "misunderstandings" — is an even more peculiar miracle.

It is no pleasant task to interrogate a miracle; but when systematic misunderstanding threatens a poetry, we must reflect on how and why it occurs; we must raise up that silent question that lies at the core of all literary studies: how do we understand poetry, how can we understand poetry, how should we understand poetry? Since this question, in all its

variations, is founded upon the understanding of everyday, non-literary language, we must turn briefly to the quotidian miracle, how understanding occurs in any semiotic system such as literature.

Language is an internally self-sufficient system of categories, relations, and distinctions.¹ "Meaning" occurs — and it should be stressed that "meaning" is an event rather than a thing — not by definition or by reference to something "in the world," but by siting a term within the system: a word is no more than a set of relations and exclusions, a complex semantic field whose "space" is defined by other "spaces." An utterance may be used to refer to something outside the system of language, "in the world," but the utterance has meaning only through the system of language. If I point to a tree and say "tree," the physical tree does not define the word; rather, the word is that through which one is able to "recognize" the thing.

I say "Put the ice in the glass": "ice" in this sentence has meaning through a complex series of paradigmatic exclusions and syntagmatic relations. We may, however, go beyond this conventionally semiotic description of understanding in one essential way: in such a sentence "ice" reaches an immediate level of adequacy and completion in regard to its meaning: my hearers all feel they know what I am talking about when I use "ice" in that sentence. In everyday language the complex operations of meaning are taken for granted, submerged; understanding has no temporality beyond the temporality of the utterance itself.²

When Wang Ch'ang-ling writes:

洛陽親友如相問 一片冰心在玉壺
Should friends and kin in Lo-yang ask of me —
My heart, a sheet of ice in a jade pot,

our understanding of "ice" (and of the utterance as a whole) occurs through a hermeneutics based upon the hermeneutics of everyday language, but differing from it in certain essential ways. This modified process of understanding is the domain of literary hermeneutics. Literary hermeneutics is engaged by a situation, an encounter with an utterance which we recognize by certain clues as "literary" (the often repeated example of the situational definition of literature is a newspaper article, typeset as a poem, which will be read very differently from the same article set as prose in a newspaper). Our situational anticipations of literary understanding are usually satisfied by certain recognizable "literary" movements with the text.

The specific operations of a literary hermeneutics differ from one age to another and between civilizations — this is true despite the fact that semioticians try to treat literary understanding as if it were universal and unitary. There is only one universal characteristic of literary hermeneutics, that by which it becomes itself: it must differ from the hermeneutics of everyday language.³

There is, however, one other trait shared by the hermeneutics of most high literatures: they articulate their “difference” against the ongoing closure of understanding which occurs in everyday language. The temporality of the process of understanding is disengaged from the temporality of the utterance. We will never understand Wang Ch’ang-ling’s “ice” in the same way we understand “ice” in “Put the ice in the glass.” In literary hermeneutics meaning is displaced to a perpetual elsewhere; and the closure of understanding is infinitely deferred. In the Chinese theoretical tradition this sense of the deferred completion of understanding is expressed as *yen-wai chih yi* 言外之意, meaning continuing as an event after the words are over.⁴ We may feel that we understand something of Wang Ch’ang-ling’s “ice,” but we can never take our understanding for granted and “have done with it,” as we can with the “ice” of “Put the ice in the glass.”

It is precisely this deferral of understanding, common to high literary traditions, which allows the question of understanding to rise up as a problem. The displacement of understanding allows understanding to come into being as an idea; out of the three great situations of displaced meaning — theology, law, and literature, each differing in the mode of displacement — arises an articulate hermeneutics, the study of understanding and of interpretation.

The special process of literary understanding (the ways in which meaning is greater than, other than, situated beyond the meaning of the same words in everyday language) must be learned, just as the system of everyday language must be learned. But a literary hermeneutics is always secondary, an epiphenomenon, defining itself as a relation to a prior, implicit hermeneutics of everyday language: it comes into being by teaching people *not* to understand language as they ordinarily do. Thus the constitution of literary hermeneutics is directed, both self-conscious and consciously shaped. We learn to understand everyday language by trial and error — inarticulately because we as yet have no language through which to understand the process. But literary hermeneutics usually involves articulate instructions on how to understand — oral and written exegesis accompanying its texts, and a

"poetics," a statement of what poetry "is," thereby telling readers of poetry how poetry in general is to be understood.

Language is, by its very nature, intersubjective: it is part of a community (and indeed is often the determinant component of a community). We may describe the community's agreement to share a language system as a "contract" (though it is a contract one usually receives rather than freely chooses). Within the larger contract of the full language community, there are smaller contractual groups, such as the one comprised of the readers and writers of poetry.

When we read a Ch'ing poet writing of Ch'ang-an in certain contexts, we know he is referring to Peking and not to T'ang Ch'ang-an. We know this because it appears in the context of that smaller language community of poetry, a community which has agreed to modify the language of the larger community in that detail. And the precise nature of the modification supports the particular concerns of the community (i.e., it does not simply articulate an "us," but also contributes to its definition—to assert the essential continuity of the civilization in face of bewildering changes, to desire that we in the Ch'ing write as well as they did in the T'ang. Literature articulates its separateness as a language system by multiplying such contractual details (and, on occasion, becoming anxious about their separateness, rejecting the "literary" modifications of the language, and seeking to return more closely to the larger language community; here, however, it is not everyday language which they rediscover but a new, highly sophisticated literary language, the negation of a negation, a style based on differentiating itself from a language based on differentiating itself from the everyday language of the larger community).

These language contracts, both the large contract of the full community and the smaller, modified contracts of the literary community, are radically historical; i.e. they are formed in the accidents of history in a civilization, they change with that history, and they are *received* by their users.⁵ This is an essential point: the particular form of a language system, including both its terms and its operations, is not determined by natural necessity or by any historical absolutes; rather, language is something which "happens" in time, within human history. A linguistic concept or operation may be *initiated* by some external, natural need; but the particular form which the concept or operation assumes is not determined by that need. Something out there in the natural world makes it convenient for us to have a word for the "branch" of a tree; but the sound we use for the word, its semantic

range, and its differentiation from other words are not products of nature but of historical "accident" (accident here being used in the philosophical sense of "happenings"; the semantic range of a word is determined by a complex history of occasions of its use). There is no reason to call this thing the "branch" of a tree but the fact that it is a sign we have received; moreover, there is no reason to distinguish "branch" from "twig" from "bough" or "limb" but the fact that these roughly distinguished terms are received. We can conceive of botanically adequate languages in which there is only one word for "branch," "twig," "bough," and "limb"; we can conceive of languages which do not distinguish these parts of a tree by size, but do have terms for the roughly vertical limb, the roughly horizontal limb, and the drooping limb. We receive as a heritage a language of arbitrary signifiers, whose signifieds are a product of historical accident. And if we modify that linguistic heritage, either consciously or unconsciously, our modifications are only minimal changes on a shared language base.

Let me raise one other essential point, this one in regard to the functioning of language, the formation of utterances. The particular form of any utterance is determined not by "what I want to say," but by "what I want to be understood"; i.e., every speech act is contingent upon the anticipation of the hermeneutic contract through which it can be understood. Speech depends upon the existence of someone who can understand it (even if it is the speaker who in certain circumstances fills that role), someone sited within the language community. The linguistic contract is, in its essence, a hermeneutic contract; a sign system exists *for the sake of* understanding. Moreover, it follows from what we said earlier that the hermeneutic contract is essentially historical.⁶

The smaller language community comprised of poets and the readers of poetry also has a historically constituted hermeneutic contract at its core. A literary text, a highly complex utterance, is shaped by an anticipation of how it will be understood. Its very existence as an utterance is inextricable from that historically constituted hermeneutic contract.

The Withdrawal of Historicity: Language in Use

The above description of understanding is valid when considering the system of language as object; however, it is significantly untrue to how language is known in use. When we use language, speaking and understanding,

we take this historically determined system *as if* it were not merely historical; i.e. we intend an ahistorical validity into a historically constituted system. Thus the real functioning of language bears fundamental similarities to Kant's description of aesthetic judgement in the *Critique of Judgement*; and Kant's siting of the aesthetic judgement will help to clarify the position of real language acts.

The aesthetic judgement, which for the sake of simplicity we can give the linguistic form "That is beautiful," is distinguished from a moral judgement ("That is good.") and likewise from a judgement of interest, of the "pleasant" ("I like that."). In contrast to the moral judgement, which is grounded in reason and thus capable of universal validation, an aesthetic judgement has a purely subjective ground; i.e., the judgement "That is beautiful" arises from the subject and not from any transsubjective reason, nor can there be any universal principles adduced by which such a judgement can be validated (the formation and use of such principles to prove something is "beautiful" leads to what in Kantian terms is a "moral" judgement rather than an aesthetic one). On the other hand, unlike a judgement of the "pleasant" (a judgement of the senses), the aesthetic judgement refers itself to the object and not to the subject: when I say "That is beautiful," I am asserting that the quality of beauty does indeed inhere in the thing and that it is not my merely private opinion; I feel that if others could recognize the beautiful, they would surely agree with me. On reflection I realize that this aesthetic judgement I make is purely subjective; I recognize that I cannot have the judgement empirically validated by others; nevertheless, I feel that others "ought to" agree with me and recognize this as beautiful. If I make a moral judgement (not here assuming that such a judgement is, in fact, possible), it should be demonstrable by reason; if I make a judgement of interest, saying "I like that," I have no sense that others "ought to" agree. In effect, Kant defines an aesthetic judgement as a subjective act which is known as if it were universal and not merely subjective.

As a mode of recognition and as it gives form to the process of thought, all language functions on the model of the Kantian aesthetic judgement, with one significant variation: the ground of all linguistic acts is historically intersubjective rather than merely subjective. Thus, on reflection, we know that any utterance is grounded only in that complex body of historical accidents that constitutes the language as a whole; on the other hand, we use that language as if it could claim a validity beyond the merely historical: Any act of recognition is the application of a linguistic category whose

ground is ultimately historical and accidental (i.e. on reflection we can claim no universality or natural validity in it); but when we recognize something and say "That is a branch," we assert that the category inheres in the thing.⁷

Although we acknowledge the mere historicity of the language system, it necessarily eludes us in using language. Our very certainty of the mere historicity of language is contingent upon taking the terms of our conceptualization as ahistorically valid. We think of the dubious validity of language in the very terms whose capacity to bear unconditionally valid thought we doubt.

Encounters between Language Systems: Identity and Limitation through Difference: Exchanging Terms

Our comfortable confidence in the unconditional validity of our own language system cannot be questioned (even if the questioning must occur with the very language system under question) until two different language systems confront one another. Between language systems with a common origin and a history of continual exchange of terms — as is the case between most European languages including English — the difference is not great enough to reveal the systemic identity of the language. Only in the encounter with genuinely different systems — the differences defined in time, as when a modern language encounters classical Greek; or by culture, as when English encounters classical Chinese, or Chinese encounters English — can a language reveal the local character of its very constitution. Word by word, we see that the language we use with such confidence is only one possible system: what is challenged is not just the sounds and written symbols, the signifiers, but the very signifieds.

Just as the hermeneutics of everyday language required a second hermeneutics, defined in its difference from everyday hermeneutics (e.g. literary hermeneutics), to reveal the question of understanding and permit us to reflect on hermeneutics, so for a language to have identity and reveals its internal coherence as system, it requires difference, another language. One can even say that the boundaries of its identity exists only as a relation to the other language. The more profound the systemic differences between the languages, the deeper the assumptions revealed. For example, between close cousins such as French and English one will take the shared concept of "grammar" for granted; grammar becomes a ground of comparison so that

we compare the grammars of the two languages, but in pairing these two languages we cannot question the concept of "grammar" itself. When we compare English and classical Chinese, concepts such as "grammar" or "sentences" cease to be grounds of comparison and become questions themselves; their own local historicity is suddenly revealed. Through alternative concepts of the structure of language as offered by classical Chinese language theory, we now come to think on a concept like "grammar" not as an unconditionally valid category for describing linguistic relations, but as a concept which arose in western (and Indian) history at a certain time for historically motivated reasons (to preserve a dying language and unify linguistic variation). We suddenly see that "grammar" in its descriptive aspect is one way of describing linguistic relations, but not the only way; in its productive aspect, we see that in most modern languages a prior, historically conditioned concept of "grammar" influences the shaping of linguistic utterances it then promises to describe.

Identity is also limitation. The language we would use as unconditionally valid exposes itself as a local, historical phenomenon. Confronting the different language system which simultaneously grants identity and limitation to our language, the impulse is to unify and to share, to find ways in which the two language systems can be brought together, recreating the illusion of unconditionally valid language. The fusion of western and Chinese concepts in the evolution of vernacular Chinese over the past century is an excellent example of the process.

The shared material world, which the users of different languages inhabit, gives us a ground for sharing, which we wrongly assume can be extended to the system of language as a whole. I say: "That is a branch"; "That is green"; "That is a pillow"; "That is a symbol." Although all four of the things named are historically determined categories rather than natural ones, there are important gradations between them, varying qualities of referentiality. The category "branch" may be a historically determined semantic field, but users of different language systems can point to one and exchange names for it; the thing "in the world" is a focus for exchange. My "green" is not coextensive with *ch'ing* 青: the two languages divide the spectrum differently. I may insist on calling 青天 a "blue sky" rather than a "green sky," but still there is a shared perception of the world with which language must contend.

When we come to the word "pillow," the situation takes on interesting complications. Here we find that class of words which brings "into the

world" the very objects it names. Pillows are produced, come into being, through a prior concept of what a pillow is; and that concept is the word. In this case the semantic units of the semiotic system become productive, fulfilling themselves in the material world: the thing and the word are mutually interdependent. Then a T'ang poet and I stand face to face, each holding our "pillows": we each do not recognize what the other holds, but finally we discuss the matter and decide that, despite their different appearances, these two things are the same in their shared material functions. Again reference to the materiality of our being provides grounds for sharing words, even productive words that generate quite different objects.

Finally we come to the case of the "symbol": these are found primarily in human artifacts and art products, though sometimes we claim to find them in the world. When we do find a symbol "in the world," we doubt that nature produced it in quite the same way it produced a "branch." In an art work the "symbol" is like a "pillow," something which comes into being through the name we have for it; but unlike the "pillow," the "symbol" exists only in being intended and recognized: it is a peculiar mode of recognition which redeems the artist's and the poet's "rose" from the sharable domain of botany.

"Symbol" belongs to the system of language in its purest sense, free of reference to the material world (which, we will recall, is the only ground of sharing between two radically different language systems): it is an arbitrary, historical category which exists only within the language contract, because we agree to have such a category. In this pure sense, language, both its terms and its operations, is nothing more than what the community agrees it should be. Were the human race to vanish from the earth tomorrow, we could argue that branches, the color green, and even the pillows we have made would survive without us; however, it is difficult to imagine that there would still be symbols without the possibility of their being recognized as such. In the case of "symbol" the referent depends upon the sign to sustain its very existence. And the sign is nothing more than a historical relation to other signs.

The community's agreement of the language system is radically historical, both in detail and as total system; i.e. it receives its determinations from a particular past rather than from nature. On the other hand, the system of language as a mode of recognition and understanding (rather than as an object of knowing) is given to us ahistorically. I reflect on the word "symbol"; I recognize that it is the product of a particular evolution; there

is no word in classical Chinese that corresponds to it, and the way I think of it is profoundly different than the way the term appears in Greek. Nevertheless, when I read a symbolist poem (and to go to the problem that lies at the heart of this paper, when I read a Greek poem or a Chinese one), I may say "That is a symbol." I do not qualify this act of recognition with reflection on its historical propriety; I say "That is one." We use these categories, which have no existence outside of the historical language contract, as if they were universally valid.

And beyond the symbol itself, when I reflect on the historicity of the word, the terms through which I reflect on the fact (e.g. "historicity") are themselves no less a part of the historical language system. When I reflect on the historicity of the word "symbol," I treat the term "historicity" as if it were not merely a product of its own, very complex historicity. We find ourselves in an infinite regression, always reflecting on the mere historicity of language from within that linguistic historicity.

Initial Conclusions: the Historical Unity between a Hermeneutic Contract and a Body of Literary Texts

A literary hermeneutics is comprised of a complex set of interdefining terms/concepts such as "symbol." Since literary hermeneutics is to some degree self-conscious, it does encourage speculation on such terms as object, concerning itself both with "definition" and sometimes with the historicity of the term.⁸ However, in acts of reading and interpretation, such terms are usually taken for granted, taken as unconditionally valid. They are the categories through which we know a literary text.

Let us return to our earlier point, that any utterance in a language is shaped and determined by an anticipation of how it will be understood. Like an utterance in everyday language, a literary text is produced through a hermeneutic contract, an anticipation of how it will be understood. Unlike in everyday language, the anticipation in the case of a literary text involves that complex set of terms that constitutes literary hermeneutics, terms which serve to defer meaning, the process which we spoke of earlier as essential in a high literary tradition. This is to say that poetry comes into being for and through a historically constituted literary hermeneutics and is bound to it, just as it is bound to the everyday language system.

Poetry is not a body of texts but a *relation* between texts and a

hermeneutics (both the hermeneutics realized in reading and the anticipated hermeneutics of writing). Without that accompanying hermeneutics, the texts of poems are not poetry, just as a map is not really a map without the abstract understanding of what a map is and how to read one. This bound relation between a poetry and a hermeneutics is a local and historical relation: the two develop together through time situated in a certain language community, a growing and changing body of text and ways to read them. Finally, the terms and operations which constitute that literary hermeneutics have meaning only as a mutually interdefining system, their referentiality confirmed by their application to a specific body of texts which those terms (or their antecedents) have shared in producing.

It follows from the argument above that the texts of Chinese poetry can exist as poetry only through their own hermeneutic contract, the contract in whose anticipation they were shaped and with which they have spent their long life. The intrusion of the conceptual terminology of western poetics, either explicitly in interpretation or implicitly in reading, will necessarily distort and diminish those texts: there is no shared contract between the Chinese texts and western hermeneutics through which those texts can unfold the process of meaning. The text of a poem and the hermeneutics brought to it in the course of reading and interpretation each "give" something to the process of understanding: the process is reciprocal; as in listening to someone speak, one is aware of a human presence other than one's own which participates in the formation of meaning. If westernized interpretations of Chinese poetry often sound "unnatural" or "forced," it is because the texts become mere objects in the interpretive act; the interpreter does not understand the hermeneutic contract the texts are speaking for. In all its immense historical, national, and ideological variety, the tradition of western hermeneutics (i.e. western literary criticism), both its terminology and its silent assumptions, are profoundly incommensurate with Chinese poetry. In saying this, I acknowledge the irony that such an argument can be made only through the terms and habits of thought of western literary theory.

A proper hermeneutics for Chinese poetry can be founded only upon the tradition of Chinese hermeneutics. However, in that phrase "founded upon" we move into the more difficult part of our discussion: before considering what a valid interpretive mode might be in the future and how a valid interpretive mode can be constituted in English, we must face the question of how a hermeneutics may change over time and the peculiar

relation between literary texts and history. Already we have treated the danger of an incommensurate tradition of literary hermeneutics, which can only distort and diminish the texts to which it is brought. Now, on the other side, we must face the equal danger of a sterile historicism which would claim that a text can be understood only in the terms through which it might have been understood when it was written. This false historicism misunderstands the true historicity of both poetry and its hermeneutics.

Literary Hermeneutics: Confronting History as Problem

Literary hermeneutics and the body of literary texts written for that hermeneutics constitute a language system which is grounded in the system of everyday language. Like all language systems, the system of literary language is situated in a contractual community, and its constitution at any given moment is determined by its history. As we have said earlier, that historicity is concealed in everyday language in use; everyday language exists in an eternally synchronic present. In contrast, the system of literary language continually confronts its own historicity as a problem; its project is to discover a synchronous present in its own patent diachrony. In other words, literary hermeneutics attempts to share language across time, to keep past language as present. For that project a complex hermeneutics will be necessary.

When two people speak together, they assume a shared, synchronic language system. Individuation within this shared system is rigidly circumscribed, and the capacity to achieve perfect linguistic identity, while simultaneously obeying the shared rules, is one of the most elusive and desired accomplishments in using a language. Violation of the community's language contract usually results in punishment or ostracism — remedial writing courses, red marks around solecisms, the contempt shown to a teenager who fails to use or understand the argot of his subcommunity.

When I read Shakespeare or a Ch'ing intellectual reads Tu Fu, in each case the historicity of the language and of the literary system reveal themselves: the hermeneutic contract, through which understanding can occur, is constantly challenged by the historical changes of literature. We are not content to have literary texts (here using "literature" in the larger sense, encompassing a variety of culture-bearing texts such as the Classics and certain kinds of history) be like other, merely "old" texts, to whose pastness

we can easily reconcile ourselves: we may be willing to "decipher" old tax records for the information they contain, but we want literary texts to speak to us as directly as a person speaking in our own time. For this purpose we seek a hermeneutic contract through which we can share texts with old writers.

We are made unavoidably aware of the historicity of old texts, of their linguistic distance from us. We seek means by which that distance can become presence, as immediate to us as everyday language — as we said earlier, to discover a synchronic present in a patent diachrony. One means is a special interpretation of history, one which assumes that a civilization grows by accretion rather than by that linear movement of history which involves continual loss. Such an interpretation of history, appearing both in Europe and traditional China, is always found with its fearful opposite, that the past has fallen away from us and eludes us. Thus a vast body of critical writing from the Sung through the Ch'ing attests to an acute awareness of the distance of the past and of the difficulty of continuing its accomplishments: there is a constant anxiety that we in this later age cannot write as well as pre-Ch'in writers, or as Han writers, or as T'ang writers. At the same time, there is a contrary impulse, supported by the memorization of texts, to translate that linear history of loss into a synchronic variety of present possibilities. Both in poetry and in comments on the history of poetry, one sees a notion that the variety of historical styles are somehow "completing" 備 a full range of poetic possibilities. A Ch'ing poet may write in the T'ang style, in the Sung style, in the Chien-an and Wei style: he is aware (and often uneasy about) their pastness, yet they remain to him present possibilities, idioms in which he feels entirely at home.

A more important and far more subtle means to achieve this "presence in distance" desired when facing old texts lies in the constitution of literary hermeneutics. We noted earlier that the trait of high literary hermeneutics ("high" here being virtually defined as having a complex past) is the deferral of understanding, a system in which what is communicated is not completed meanings but the process of understanding itself.⁹ This can be shared as directly as any utterance in everyday language; but what is shared is precisely the distance of meaning spoken of above. The deferral of understanding in literary hermeneutics corresponds precisely to the distance that separates us from old texts. The "distance" of history is absorbed into and concealed by the more general distance of literary understanding. In fact, we may assume that the deferral of meaning in literary hermeneutics (applied as much

to the generation and understanding of present texts as to the understanding of past texts) came into being as an answer to the problem of the historicity of old texts.

Let us return to what we said earlier about the community's punishment of those who violate the shared, synchronic language contract. An exemption, a license to violate the contract, is granted to literary writers, especially to poets (and, I might add, granted only to those contemporary writers in whom the reading community has agreed to repose its trust: the line between fustian obfuscation in poetry and profundity is often a fine one, crossed only by the reader's faith in the poet he is reading). The community authorizes a contemporary literature (comprised of both a hermeneutics and texts anticipating that hermeneutics) to use language that defers understanding, yet is immediately accessible because we expect that deferral of meaning; old texts, with their problematic historicity, enter that system and belong equally to it (to give an extreme case, note that Mid-T'ang poetic fustian and *fu-ku* 復古 appear together). In deferring understanding, literary hermeneutics achieves its goal of presence in distance.

A literary hermeneutics comes into being to contend with the patent historicity of a received literature (in contrast to the synchrony, and hence the illusion of unconditional authority in everyday language). Its project is to be a means to understand language that we do not immediately understand. It accomplishes its project by promising to share precisely this condition of not-yet-understanding, in which understanding becomes an immense possibility always just visible on the horizon. Unlike other speech acts, the literary text does not assume we understand; it assumes only that we *can* understand as a continuing act and teaches us the process of understanding.

Yet literary hermeneutics, seeking to bridge the distances of literary history and linguistic change, is itself in history. We have been speaking of its unified ground (the deferral of understanding); but in the specific processes of understanding which it teaches, it is various and changes through history. As we have said, literary hermeneutics tends to become explicit and self-conscious; finally it becomes a written text itself, written acts of interpretation, and is itself transmitted in history. Receiving such texts in a later age, their own historicity is exposed. I do not read Shakespeare as Shakespeare was read in the nineteenth century, nor do I understand the plays as they were understood when first performed. The Ch'ing reader understands Tu Fu differently from the way in which Tu Fu was understood in the Sung

or in the T'ang.

We now must confront again our previous assertion that the texts of a poetry and the hermeneutics for which those texts were written are inextricably bound together. We have rejected the transfer of incommensurate concepts from one reading tradition to another; nevertheless, we feel that the modern western reader's Shakespeare is valid, even though it is read through concepts which Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not possess. The Ch'ing reader brings to his reading of Tu Fu problems and concepts which could not have occurred to Tu Fu; but this Ch'ing reading of Tu Fu remains valid while the western mode of reading Shakespeare, transferred to reading Tu Fu, does not.

The continuing validity of a tradition of literary hermeneutics through its complex historical changes rests in its continuity. Through all the changes, disagreements, and movements of negation, there is a clear ground of coherence — certain constant assumptions, certain evolving problems, a certain range of response. Looking at such a tradition from outside and examining those changes, this ground of coherence emerges clearly.¹⁰ In a very real sense, post-structuralism and neo-classicism have a clear ground of unity (e.g. the fascination with free-play, traceable to Kant, is inextricable from the neo-classical fascination with necessity). Traditions do change, nor are the precise directions of their changes determined, but the field within which they change is bounded. As long as a hermeneutics remains within that field, it retains its capacity to speak to its own past texts.

Finally, texts have the capacity to pose their own questions, if we but listen.¹¹ In each tradition the existence of canonical literary texts (e.g. Shakespeare and Tu Fu) demand that an evolving hermeneutics continue to richly answer the questions such texts pose. Thus the stable texts, serving more to stabilize the process of literary value than to be themselves evaluated, help to govern the changes in the hermeneutic tradition. Tu Fu's continual reference to contemporary history and to his own biographical circumstances guides Chinese literary hermeneutics, in all its complex evolution, to see the poem as sited in the living circumstance that produced it; it helped to restrict the tendency in *shih* criticism to focus on mood (though that hermeneutic interest was given free rein in *tz'u* criticism); it guided metaphorical criticism to look for historical rather than ahistorical referents (i.e. to take an allegorical "evil" animal or bird as referring to a specific figure rather than to a general class of evil persons). In the English literary tradition the incipient canonization of Shakespeare left a mark of distinct discomfort on

the English reception of continental neo-classicism (as in Dryden's "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy"). When we say that a poetry is a relation between a body of texts and a hermeneutics, we do not mean that the hermeneutics makes of those texts whatever it wills; the texts themselves have an active relation (they are, after all, "utterances") and have an equal role with hermeneutic operations in the process of understanding.

A literary text is written under the assumption that it will be read in a certain way; its very life as poetry exists in that relation to an anticipated hermeneutics. The hermeneutics may change, develop, expand; but it retains its authority for the text because its variations are governed by a continuity of assumptions and a coherent evolution of the questions it poses; that continuity and coherence is guided by a body of texts, particularly canonical texts, which support certain kinds of reading. To bring another hermeneutic tradition to the interpretation of a text fractures that continuity: the text becomes a mere object, facing a new way of reading for which it was never written.

[Throughout this argument we have been speaking of "high" literary texts, texts from periods when there was already a complex idea of what that literary form was, how it should be written, and how it should be understood; in such periods "high" literature is written in anticipation of those assumptions. Our question of the historicity of hermeneutic contracts does not apply to great primitive texts, such as the *Shih-ching* or the Homeric epics — despite the fact that canonical interpretations of such texts played a major role in shaping the evolution of hermeneutics. In the case of texts like the *Shih-ching*, all we can do is make ourselves innocent and listen to the texts themselves to tell us how they wish to be understood. Another area in which the historicity of hermeneutic contracts does not apply is in "low" literary forms, particularly in their early stages, before they became concerned with the question of understanding. Thus the early novel and short story in China can be legitimately considered in the same terms that one uses to think of the early novel in the west. Our discussion has centered on forms such as *shih*, classical prose, and *tz'u*, in which authors had a complex sense of how they were supposed to be writing and how they might be read.]

Considering the Consequences of Our Argument: To Reconstitute a Hermeneutic Tradition

From the foregoing discussion we see that the only legitimate and satisfying interpretive mode for a literature must lie, quite simply, in continuing and extending that literature's hermeneutic tradition. [Note that by a "literature" here we refer to those relatively cohesive and autonomous families of literatures — such as the Anglo-European, the Islamic, the Indian, the Chinese; obviously there are no profound problems raised by the exchange of local hermeneutic modes within a family; e.g., French to English.] Although continuation and, in continuation, extension are the imperatives, the degree to which acts of continuation are simple, or even possible is another matter.

The imperative is to continue and extend, not to repeat; an easy archaism is not a solution. We cannot go back and rewrite Ch'ing or Sung criticism, nor would we want to even if we could do so. One of the characteristics of a hermeneutics is its historicity; it does and must change through time, and it is sited within a cultural present. Ch'ing criticism written in the Ch'ing (a Yeh Hsieh or Chi Yün) was an original extension of the tradition, occurring in the context of that exciting growth of traditional thought which occurred in the Ch'ing; the same kind of criticism written in the late twentieth century would mark a paralyzing fear of change and an inability to confront a new intellectual world.

On the other hand, the problems posed by the increasingly global civilization of the late twentieth century are of a different order entirely from the problems posed by the growth of traditional Chinese thought in the Ch'ing. Without indulging in an extended meditation on the place of this strange century in the history of the species, we may still wonder if the continuity of various human civilizations can be maintained, vitally maintained and not kept as a mere museum of the mind. Our capacity to read old literature well is, as I have said, our primary means to maintain direct communication with our past, to share a language with them; thus literature — or more properly, *our* ability to read it well — becomes the center of our hope to maintain continuity in the civilization.

In the case of modern Chinese civilization, we must wonder if the fusion in modern vernacular Chinese of the traditional Chinese conceptual world and the Anglo-European conceptual world will allow the continuation and extension of traditional hermeneutics; i.e., do younger readers bring to poems

creative extensions of the old concerns of the reading tradition, thus permitting the poems to retain their vitality, or do they bring western literary and intellectual concerns, in face of which the old poems grow increasingly mute? Note clearly that I am speaking of the ability to read poems well, not of a patriotic affection for Chinese poetry as an emblem of the greatness of Chinese civilization. From my limited experience, I believe that the continuity of the reading tradition has, on the whole, been maintained. However, in face of the continuing and inevitable fusion of western conceptual traditions with Chinese conceptual traditions in the vernacular language, how long and how well that continuity can be maintained are perhaps less certain. My Chinese colleagues, watching the ways in which their students read and understand poems, can answer this question far better than I.

If someday the continuity of the hermeneutic tradition should be irreparably broken, if the language, the concerns, and the vital presence of that poetry should someday elude even Chinese readers and survive merely as an emblem of past greatness, if such a time should come, then thoughtful scholars will have to face the problem of reconstituting a hermeneutic tradition. Then they may find value in the experiences of western scholars of Chinese literature, seeking to reconstitute the Chinese hermeneutic tradition in a language and culture to which it does not come naturally. The question is, simply put, how can we recover and reconstitute the conditions of an art when that art is separate from us, whether that separation occurs through the difference of civilizations or by a historical rupture within a single civilization. Though we will focus on the case of Chinese poetry, it is a question of general importance in this new world growing ever more forgetful of its past.

To reconstitute the conditions of understanding a lost art, there are two imperatives: first, it must be reconstituted as itself and not assimilated into the conceptual and artistic world within which it is reconstituted; second, it must be known not as an object but as an art, a presence in which the reader / viewer/audience participates. These two imperatives are close to being mutually exclusive, and resolved only in the creation of a heterocosm which can absorb, at least for a while, its creators.¹²

As we have stated earlier, the unifying assumptions and coherence of a tradition become visible only when one can stand elsewhere, see them from another tradition: they achieve their identity through relation. Thus the position of separation when reconstituting an art gives a unique perspective on the boundaries of its field of change. The old hermeneutic project of

recasting historical, diachronic variation as synchronic variation becomes possible here: one may extend a tradition by creatively using its basic assumption, by tracing down all the paths not taken. In this we gain and lose: on the one hand, we are free of the linearity of history and can rewrite its possibilities as we choose; on the other hand, we are no longer "in" that history, we have these possibilities only as object.

Thus in the first imperative, to reconstitute an art as itself and not let it be assimilated into the conceptual and artistic world within which it is reconstituted, we have three movements. First, we provide a body of texts — in this case Chinese poems. Poetry is not "a poem," but occurs through a group of many poems which give one another identity: the qualities of Tu Fu's K'uei-chou poems achieve their identity in relation to Tu Fu's earlier work; the qualities of Tu Fu's work as a whole achieves its identity as a relation to the works of other poets — the tradition always sets Tu Fu against Li Po for precisely this purpose; if we were always to think of Tu Fu's poetry in relation to Han Yü's poetry, or to Li Shang-yin's poetry, or problematically, to T'ao Ch'ien's poetry, our sense of Tu Fu's identity would be subtly changed.

The second movement, occurring simultaneously with the first, is to reconstitute a group of important conceptual terms of hermeneutics, the kinds of terms in which poetry was understood. If poetry *is*, as we have said earlier, a relation between texts and a hermeneutics, the texts of poetry can be poetry only when considered through such concepts. Here again it is essential to work with groups of terms, for as we have seen earlier, these terms have meaning only through their relations to one another. For example, we present a concept such as *han-hsü* 含蓄 not with translations or definitions but in the context of a group of conceptual concerns and related terms: *han-hsü*'s relation to *Yi-ching* notions of reversion to opposites when a process reaches an extreme, leading to ideas that what is manifest exhausts itself, while what it latent has the perpetual possibility of coming forth; *han-hsü*'s relation to notions of "reticence," implying hidden richness in personality, to the aesthetic of the "unsaid" in *Ch'un-ch'iu* interpretation, to *yen-wai* 言外 and a long fascination with exteriority and interiority, *nei* 內 and *wai* 外, in literature, to Liu Hsieh's opposition of *yin* 隱 and *hsiu* 秀. In short, in these first two movements in reconstituting the conditions of an art, one seeks as much as possible to build up a body of texts, ways of understanding texts, and concepts which define and support one another; in the intensity of their mutual relations, they articulate

concerns which are not easily assimilated into the culture within which they are presented.

The third movement is less obvious than the other two and finally more interesting: by observing the coherence of the hermeneutic tradition, to extend it, to show the possibility of understanding poems in terms commensurate with but not the same as the kinds of terms and comments found in traditional hermeneutics. This final movement is essential: through it the new readers of the literature participate in the tradition, pose its old question afresh, and begin to allow the hermeneutics to become a way of knowing rather than an object of knowledge.¹³

This final movement carries us toward the second imperative, that the art work be known not as object but as a presence in which the reader participates. I have been speaking of literary hermeneutics as if it were an autonomous domain of understanding within a civilization; of course it is not. Although it possesses certain distinctive features, a literary hermeneutics, in teaching us to understand, supports and is supported by the larger structures of understanding within a civilization. The way one understands the relations between parallel lines in a couplet of Chinese poetry was related to the way one understood the structure of the world and of society. Likewise, the fascination with narrative necessity and free-play in western hermeneutics is obviously sustained by larger questions in the western intellectual tradition.

Thus when we transfer a poetry and its hermeneutics across the boundaries between civilizations or the ruptures of history within a single civilization, we tear them out of that living world that sustained them. In such a situation the literary system (texts and a hermeneutics) are in danger of becoming mere object, something that we observe without any sense that we too share in it. In the relation of a hermeneutics to a body of poetry, there is a great difference between "applying" a concept one has understood and reading the poetry "through" the concept: the former involves the distance of instrumentality; the latter assumes that the concept has become "second nature." Poetry can exist only in the latter condition.¹⁴

An art form is itself only when it is known as it was meant to be known. A musical score tells us much about a piece of music — its tradition, its form, its internal coherence. But however rich that knowledge gained may be, we do not call it "music." In this regard a musical score and a text of poetry are the same: the text does not become "poetry" until it is read with understanding. No two performances and no two readings will be the same; in the hands of the unskillful, the ignorant, or the insensitive, we may not even

want to call the performance "music" or the reading "poetry." Nevertheless, the possibility of music exists only in educated performance, and the possibility of poetry exists only in educated reading. In remarking an art, we must somehow go from knowledge to action, from literary understand as an object of non-literary understanding to the process of literary understanding itself.

Coda: The Third Poetry

In remaking a literature which has become separated from us, the final stage is itself hermeneutics as a high art, reconstituting both a hermeneutics and the texts written for it. This "remaking" is "poetry" in its root sense, *poiesis*. In his "Dialogue on Poetry" the German romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel spoke of the "First Poetry," the first making which is the natural world we inhabit; as that world becomes strangely old and distant from us, its wonders blurring, there arises the "Second Poetry," the making which we commonly call "poetry," which remakes the distant First Poetry and causes it to be present for us again.

The argument presented in this paper leads inescapably to an extension of Schlegel's position, to a Third Poetry. When, through the ruptures of cultural history or through the transfer between civilizations, the Second Poetry becomes old, blurred, and distant from us, we may look for a Third Poetry to remake the Second Poetry and bring it vitally before us once again. This task lies at the heart of intercultural literary studies, and may someday be the task even of intracultural literary studies: to create a new art form of interpretation within which a poetry, its hermeneutics, and the living world that sustained it can be still present in later ages.

Commentary

The essay has reached its destination; there is no need to read this commentary unless you are curious to know where I might have lingered, where I might have turned off the path, had I not been in such a hurry to reach my destination. Read properly, the essay should show that I have allegiances neither to semiotics and structuralism nor to deconstruction; my affections lie altogether elsewhere. Yet I have constructed the argument on

a semiotic ground because it promised to take me where I wanted us to go with the greatest economy and clarity. However, there are many places in this essay where I would choose to linger, to reformulate, to raise problems.

1. Here I would evade the issue between semiotics / structuralism and deconstruction as to whether system genuinely governs semiotic operations or whether it is, as a unifying structure, a tainted and misguided historical enterprise. Both sides in the dispute would agree that it has been and continues to be a historical enterprise, this desire for centering. One should add that a desire for decentering has existed just as long and side by side with the desire for centering (though as a carefully argued response to centering, it is datable to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*). Centering and decentering, creating and dissolving margins are bound to one another, each to its mirroring negation. Insofar as one locates oneself on the vector toward centering and meaning (allowing that the degree of intensity in the vector commits one to an equal fascination with its negation), we *project* the possibility of a system of determining relations. Although the system of determining relations can be easily deconstructed, as a projective mode of knowing it has historical existence. Moreover, only from within such a projective mode of knowing can one anticipate the possibility of standing outside of / one the elusive margins of determining system (i.e. system as the projective anticipation through which the meaning of an utterance can be determined, either absolutely or relatively).

Derrida's admirable caution in eluding the boundedness of mere negation is seriously undermined by the kind of propositions he makes, interrogating the world's textuality in regard to how it "is" rather than how it is taken. A logocentric position is "true" insofar as it is taken for granted that it is true (allowing that such an assumption is fired by a horizon of anxieties about the antithesis); the freeplay of the signifier is "true" insofar as it can be taken for granted that it is true (though its strident joyousness is continually sparring with impulses to closure). The two readers are bound together and each functions in the menacing shadow of the other. The logocentric reader sees dimly that language fractures, runs off in disparate directions, and against that threat, he asserts closure. The deconstructive reader senses everywhere the drive to isotopy, and against that danger, clings to the tenuous threads that lead elsewhere. Both vectors are true in that they are: they are lovers who exist in their mutual relation. Perhaps that relation can be transcended, but that would be uninteresting — merely a third possibility elsewhere, which would dull the passion of the first relation in confronting a new other. The

only interesting response is to bow to their contradictory truths, to inhabit each, and to move between them.

2. Our definition of "everyday" language will be unabashedly circular: language in which the temporality of understanding is coextensive with reading / hearing the text / utterance is "everyday" ("everyday" in the sense that its existence as language has the drabness of habit: it does not present itself as language; it must humbly get out of the way to make way for other utterances that continue to impinge upon us and continue to demand that we attend to them). If misunderstanding or incomprehension occur in such "everyday" language, we assume a flaw in the production of the utterance or in the hermeneutic capacity of the listener / reader. So great is our faith in the capacity of language to adequately "bear" meaning.

3. This is to say that literary hermeneutics is indeterminately bound to the hermeneutics of everyday language. In the event of "differing," the paired terms depend on one another for their very existence, for their identity. Freely yielding to tradition and hence to the way literary hermeneutics is known, I here make literary hermeneutics a secondary, contingent mode, an epiphenomenon. But everyday language, as we can conceive it, is no less contingent and secondary. There is no primordial language which we find. The "priority" of everyday language (see p. 5) is illusory, but it is the necessary assumption through which literary language can occur: literacy needs a myth of prior presence, of loss and fall. As we see later in the essay, this myth is a trope upon literature's implication in historicity.

4. Just as Chinese ancestral spirits have no claim to a Platonic or Christian immortality of the soul, but instead attenuate over the generations, so in the traditional Chinese construction of the operation of meaning, there is a process of attenuation. The metaphor of "flavor" helps to shape the understanding of the process: some unique quality that lingers on, changes, and becomes an increasingly subtle presence until it dissipates into the background. This seems more true to the reading process than the western mode of displaced meaning as a locus perpetually out of reach or a space perpetually unfilled; in their projective hermeneutics Chinese critics did tend to take into account more readily our being in the material world.

If the attenuation of understanding is true to our experience of reading, then one might argue that an imposed closure on interpretive acts is a defense against such attenuation (just as the deconstructive reading is an attempt to deny attenuation). Unless heroically maintained, the event of understanding fades slowly away into our lives, into the noise of the world around us.

Because a Chinese poem is usually a memorized text, thus a continually returning text, attenuation of understanding is less menacing: it is not lost, but comes back instantly.

Unless it relaces the text in the reader's mind (as it often does), the act of interpretive closure is always ironic.

5. Again, the capacity of the language system for determining meaning is not so much a necessary fact as an assumption projected in reading / listening. In such encounters — and I stress that they are “encounters” — with oral and written texts, we discover that we share language with others. Our freedom of writing / speaking or of reading / writing encounters their freedom: language is a most intense encounter with external determination, and as a species we have always chafed at such encounters. Literarity (from its earliest manifestations to Kant's aesthetics to Derrida's floating signifier) has been the attempt to escape such determination and to engage one's own freedom in the production and understanding of language — to rewrite the language contract. In its primary form (as opposed to the radicalization of such freedom from Kant to Derrida, where the reader's freedom is unbounded and solitary), literarity becomes a negotiation between my freedom and the freedom of the other: it escapes the determinacy of the larger language community and renegotiates the contract between two people. Yet it remains — even on this level of minimal language contract — an encounter with an other: language, to be language, must be intersubjective.

6. Here (and in the performative withdrawal of historicity) we swerve most strongly from the concerns of deconstruction. Every text anticipates an other with whom to share. That anticipation limits the freedom of the production of an utterance, just as the other's (reader's / listener's) knowledge of that anticipation limits the freedom of understanding. To deny that presence of an other is to turn a disability into an ideology. We speak here not of the subject's quest for presence (which may or may not be a fact), but of the other's demand that I acknowledge his or her presence: the other asserts his / her right of being in my face. It is, perhaps, the promiscuity of the text that makes us feel we are being made it's object, and thus which leads us to make it into our object or to declare its dissolution. By pointing to its multiple misprisions, we justify making it the object of our *jouissance*. But because the other remains there, in the voice of the text, such acts must necessarily be guilty, continually self-justifying enterprises.

To speak of the *presence* of the other in the text is not in itself to engage a logocentric presence of meaning. We might choose to dissociate the other's

presence entirely from the totalizing quest for meaning, but we can see how those with logocentric dispositions could work upon the same site. But suppose we pose the question "What does the other mean?" (not interrogating the statement but the other himself / herself). To pose such a question is, in a special way, a transgression of the other's humanity, reducing person to mere referent. Our incapacity to pose such a question lets us see that the other may be, in fact, the locus for all disparities, contradictions, and fractures of isotopy: we do hear what we were not supposed to hear, overlaying that illusory coherence that was perhaps "intended" by the other; we hear what the other himself / herself cannot hear. All these are unified in the other's "I am" and the knowledge that we are being addressed (even if that address is concealed in a game of "overhearing," we were meant to overhear). Nor is it any critique of the other's presence that the boundary between myself and the other dissolves upon the margins — the problematic pun, the association of which we are unsure whether I added it or the other gave it — joint property, that. And suppose you prove to me, item by item, that I was wrong; it was all mine; I made it up. That does not change the fact that I heard the other then, and will probably hear another other in the next text I read. There is no limit to my folly; you cannot teach me otherwise.

In the text of the western fiction-maker we hear that demand to recognize the other's presence lay claim to the whole text and its heterocosm. In the case of *shih* the other reveals himself / herself engaged in the determinations of the inhabited world — which enables us to say that nature can compete there to unwrite the poem which the poet is trying to write (a western counterpart, with history as the contending writer, can be seen in Lukaács' reading of Balzac).

We cannot help but recognize the other in the text; however, this is not to say that we must of necessity acknowledge the other's presence. Obviously there are complicated ways of reading texts which ignore the other's presence (one thinks of the scene in Canetti's *Auto da Fé* in which Kien is being asked the location of the Mut Strasse). The demand of the other to be acknowledged is perhaps a moral issue, engaging our humanity: it is that which transcends the bourgeois "claim" of possession which makes the other's demand possible. There may have been ages and societies in which the "claim" of possessing language was not made. Confronting a piece of land or of language is easy when no one claims it. But once a claim has been staked, whether we want to acknowledge the validity of the claim or not, we must still come to terms with the other who stands before us and says "This is me /

mine." Nor do I have any anticipation that the most radical Marxist restructuring of civilization will ever change the power of a person's claim to possess language. Even the Greeks speak of "Homer" more often than the *Iliad* (whatever Homer's true historicity may be); the orthodox Mao interpretation of the *Shih-ching* assigns authors to the anonymous poems. The lure of a ballad's anonymity is precisely that it is "not possessed" by anyone (for wherever there is the possession of language, there will be the desire for language that escapes possession). The medieval romance may seem the very embodiment of the voiceless text, but we are less sure that its maker may not have been proclaiming his skill in it (even if not proclaiming a post-renaissance "identity"). There are thousands of interesting variations and deviations — forgeries, collaborations, complex strategies of impersonality, the exaltation of self through skill or mastery of a koine — but everywhere literature is the case in which the self "lays claim to" language and demands to be recognized in it. And the claim usually promises some extension of self (aggrandizement, renown in far places, immortality).

7. The existential assertion "that is a branch," like the entire science of Being, is a flight from relational determination. Traditional Chinese cosmology, in which the existence of an entity is sustained by relations grounded in the historical myth of its generation (e.g. Heaven is Heaven as a relation to Earth, grounded in the historical event of their differentiation) avoids the quest for Being. It does, however, generate a structural counterpart in the quest for ideal historicity and the solicitous maintenance of history.

8. I am using "defining" here in an idiosyncratic and precarious way: "definition" is not that some meaning of the term is bounded and determined, but that we have a subjective sense of the term within the system and can use it as a way of knowing. A term like "plot" does not and cannot have determinate "meaning," yet we feel at home with it. No two people can agree on precisely what does and what does not constitute the plot of a novel; but "plot" remains a way of centering and unifying minimal relations of events. Such terms are properly hermeneutic, a particular operation of recognizing rather than an object of recognition: since such terms are what they are only in process and use, their translation into a hypostatized object of reflection renders them invisible. They do not have "meaning," only relations to other, similarly hermeneutic terms.

9. The privilege granted to spoken voice over writing in the logocentric tradition has been (pace Derrida) a flight from historicity. The opposition is

properly one between spontaneous utterance and transmissible text (Plato's opposition between memory and writing initiated the misdirection of our attention: a speech or memorized message that can be carried elsewhere and repeated is no less a transmissible text than a written document). The very idea that language can transcend the temporality of utterance, can be repeated, marks its fall into history. It is significant that in Eden the Lord's sole "text," his single commandment given for the sake of memory, initiates the fall into history. The transmissible text is always the past word, the revenant, the other demanding that I recognize his / her being, while at the same time reminding me that he / she is gone. Spontaneous utterance, supported by situation, the norms of voice, and the stresses of the moment, control the temporality of understanding: without promise of repetition, it insists that the temporality of understanding be coextensive with the temporality of utterance. The transmissible text, insisting equally on the presence and absence of the other, detaches the temporality of understanding from the temporality of utterance: it calls for reflective interpretation; it is the initiation of literature — fallen, historical language, marked by absence.

10. Properly speaking, this ground of coherence can exist only in the presence of another tradition. Each act of self-negation within a tradition (often erroneously conceived as acts of self-transcendence) achieves its identity only through a determinate relation to the past. From within a single tradition, such acts are visible only as a "going beyond"; only by looking at those acts from another tradition do we see that the "going beyond" involves some fundamental shared term. Even Derrida, the great heresiarch, in his deftest feints, cannot elude being thrown again and again into the determinate traps of multiple negation. Centrifugal and centripetal are equally defined by a center; and "decentering" is meaningless except as a relation to "centering." Although the boundedness of the tradition's field of change may be viewed by many as a "prisonhouse," it may be a more fragile house than we imagine; if this house were to be broken, we would find ourselves irrevocably elsewhere, a rupture with the human past that would rewrite our identity, individual and collective. Though some consider the abrogation of our historicity an exciting event (that eschatological urge of western civilization in which annihilation and utopia are one), there are those of us who would hope, with equal intensity, to remain within the community of our history.

11. The schools and sects of twentieth century western literary studies agree on very little; but they are unanimous in their assurance that I, the

reader, am *not* being addressed in the text by an other. Some still declare the governing power of an authorial "intent," but that is no less a minimalization of the other: when being addressed by an other, we recognize too many complications and cross-purposes, which cannot be subdued into any easily delimited "intent" — though they are unified in the insistent presence of the other, demanding to be heard.

Such unanimity should make us suspicious: why should they, who agree on nothing, agree on this? Is this unanimity the point of unity, the hidden point of pain which each modern critic tries in his own way to heal? Or is this the double of technology, the attempt to wrest control from the ancient Other — be he / she *deus absconditus* or *auctor absconditus* — and to reverse the relation of power to which we have been subjugated?

12. Literary theory has always been writing theology into this sublunary world: minor makers ape the greater Maker; divine justice and poetic justice are intertwined; and the commonplace that "all the world's a stage" is a trope sustained by secret belief. To resolve our problem in a heterocosm that absorbs its creator and makes him / her subject to it was not a movement consciously patterned on Christian theology; but I am happy to find us back again, a return to tradition in falling from it.

These heterocosms that might span the gaps between civilizations or ruptures within a civilization will certainly not escape the historicity of their makers and the world they inhabit; defining itself by difference from the world that generated it, the heterocosm will remain bound to it. But the direction of its difference will be guided by the other tradition, previously "disparate" rather than "different." As in the encounter between reader and writer, we have here the negotiation of a new language contract, the encounter of two disparate freedoms, which being cast into relation, through negotiation become different.

13. This movement, which we pass over lightly, is by far the most intriguing. As the other's self encountered in reading becomes the unifying ground on which dispartes and discontinuities can occur, so in this movement of internalizing heterogenous assumptions, we ourselves willingly become a unifying ground on which heterogenous assumptions find a way to exist together. Unlike in the tradition of western metaphysics (and the world of the mind it sustains), we do not claim that these assumptions are "true": we do not repeat the serpent in saying "Eat and you will know." Instead we say, "Take those assumptions in; you can put them from you at any time; they do not touch who you are." We lie. Our name is legion.

14. The "Second Nature" of renaissance literary theory (e.g. Sidney – but surviving in Schlegel's Second Poetry) and the "second nature" of common parlance are unified in the possibility of a heterocosm that absorbs its maker. As one repeats the performance of a piece of music, the relation between the performer and the score changes: gradually the score loses its otherness and is absorbed into the performer; or conversely, the performer loses his sense of separate self and is absorbed into the score. Through that process the piece of music becomes at once other and one's own – "second nature." This magic of "taking for granted" may seem some perversely anti-Heideggerian praise of habit (both in the sense of "custom" and of "vestment" – a gradual covering up, as opposed to the un-covering of *aletheia*). Yet to enter a world – the voluntary acceptance of its limitations in order to encounter an other – may be a more interesting act than seeing out of it.

The Second Poetry is usually interpreted as a response to the Fall (e.g. Sidney). The Third Poetry is no less a response to a second Fall – a fall which uncovers for us the true face of history and its utter indifference to our survival as civilizations.