

Comment

Everyone will agree that Professor Owen has presented the case of historicism very persuasively and with great erudition, and that his treatment of the problems of intercultural literary studies is very much pertinent to the theme of this conference. In view of the qualities of the argument, my task as a commentator is not an easy one. Professor Owen, who has foreseen the plight of the commentator, was kind enough to write a commentary himself. His own commentary, however, is repeating the hermeneutic position of his paper, and, as such, is characteristic of historicist hermeneutics, which in principle refuses to go beyond repeating the words once written, although it may present them in a different order. Historicist hermeneutics, therefore, never can provide us with an answer to questions that we, here or elsewhere, may have. We can only be too glad that the theory of hermeneutics as advanced by Professor Owen so far has not destroyed his ability to interpret T'ang poetry on the basis of modern (and Western) concepts of truth, historical reasoning and aesthetics, and in terms comprehensible to the Western reader.

As one will notice, for brevity's sake, I have chosen to be blunt rather than polite. For brevity's sake, also, I shall quickly mention a series of points which I consider to be mistaken, or at least questionable.

1. Professor Owen argues that the historicist interpretation, or rather a specific kind of historicist interpretation, supported by various imperatives — such as that the interpretation should be an extension rather than a repetition of a hermeneutic tradition — provides the “only legitimate and satisfying interpretive mode.” There is, however, no justification for the absoluteness of this value judgement. There is no universally valid reason which should make us decide that the past should dictate the present rather than that the present should be allowed to question the past.

2. Part of the misunderstanding may derive from an unexpected expansion of the term hermeneutics. According to Professor Owen, the writing of literature is guided by an anticipation of the hermeneutics of reading. No mention is made of the traditional poetic system which a writer may consider as independent from future hermeneutics, and as geared towards accomodating not only the persuasive function, but also the

expressive and referential functions of literature.

3. Professor Owen stresses the point that the author anticipates the deferment of meaning. Many texts, however, were not intended as literature and only in later times received as literature or, the other way round, intended as literature and later not received as such. This was explained already by Viktor Sklovskij in the 1910s. Professor Owen cannot cope with this historical phenomenon, and feels compelled to make exceptions for what he calls the "great primitive texts," such as the *Shih-ching* and Homer, and "low" literary forms, such as the early Chinese novel.

4. Professor Owen raises another problematic turn in his argument when he talks about "our past" and — though perhaps not literally — "their past." He maintains that poems should be "read well." This means that literary hermeneutics remains valid in spite of a great historical distance, but that a geographical or cultural distance destroys its validity. I wonder where the customs house is that is to separate the valid from the invalid, and on what authority that customs house is operating. Why is my interpretation of Indian poetry doomed to be wrong and a deconstructionist interpretation of Keats allright? Did Keats really anticipate deconstruction? Did Shakespeare foresee Tom Stoppard?

5. Professor Owen maintains that texts have the capacity to pose their own questions. This was also the position of Roland Barthes, but I believe that Barthes has been criticized on this point rather convincingly by Hans Robert Jauss. Indeed, in the stacks of our own libraries it is utterly silent. Texts do not speak and do not pose questions, but implicitly or explicitly the reader may have questions which motivate him to turn to particular texts and not to others. When the reader is emancipated from the shackles of a self-evident canon, his intellectual independence and responsibility is restored. Professor Owen might say in reply that the ideal of intellectual independence is a typical Western invention. I am not sure whether he would say so and, if he did, whether it would be true.

The final argument against the historicist approach, whether or not combined with some form of cultural relativism, is, of course, that man is human, precisely in so far as he uses his faculty of transcending the limitations of his own culture, the conditions of his own time, his own race or class.

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