

## Review

### *Literary Theory Today.*

Ed. M. A. Abbas and Tak-wai Wong. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1981. 252 pp. HK\$40.

This book contains the papers given at a conference held at the University of Hong Kong from March 31 to April 4, 1981. To complement the papers an edited version of the taped discussions, which comprise about one quarter of the work, has been included. I will only be concerned in this review with evaluating the significance of the book for those interested in the process of East-West comparative literature, a topic addressed formally by only one of the papers, but on which the book necessarily impinges because of its theme: literary theory.

Indeed, the process of relating East to West comes up often enough in the discussion sections relating to various theoretical positions to alone make this book valuable and stimulating reading. Some of the discussions are in fact more revealing than the papers themselves – and this is as it should be given the dialogical nature of the process. In particular, I might mention F. C. T. Moore's paper on Dan Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism*, "The Authority of Symbols," which is met by a rejoinder from Rosalind Coward (author, with John Ellis, of *Language and Materialism*, a basic text for anyone interested in the self-criticism undergone by structuralism and semiotics in the past few years) and which takes up the issue of the ethnocentric traps posed by western theory. Coward's response moves the discussion into an entirely different area (that of practice) by arguing that the concept of *evocation*, of symbolic capacity, functions in the economy of Sperber's thought not so much as a refusal of ethnocentrism as an actual block to further analysis. For her, the symbol is always complexly overdetermined (not a mere indeterminacy), displaced in the various rhetorical ways Freud has defined for us. She argues convincingly that Freud's treatment of the symbol is particularly productive in that it overcomes the problem of simply accepting, as Sperber's idea of evocation seems to do, what a culture produces. Insofar as I know, Freud's rhetoric has yet to encounter a Chinese poem, though he himself compared the dreamwork to Chinese writing. Of

course, these are very large issues, but the problem of ethnocentrism is one which every theorist must face in approaching Chinese literature with western theory and Coward's remarks concerning Sperber's ideas should serve as a prolegomena to any future analysis.

Unfortunately, this is not the case with Wai-lim Yip's paper, "A New Line A New Mind: Language and the Original World," which seems to fall into all the traps mentioned in the previous discussion. To begin with, Yip's use of phenomenological modes of explanation, derived mainly from the later Heidegger, combined in a hodgepodge fashion with a kind of negative dialectic from Hegel, should make one suspicious from the outset because we know that these modes of explanation do not leave their object unchanged, as they claim. Why, we should ask ourselves, does the Taoist aesthetic necessarily reveal itself as involving a (p. 165) complex "decreative-creative dialectic" that aims at a presencing of the original world of nature. The word "decreative-creative" is an interesting bit of language, for it allows for no permanent dislocations or discontinuities in the poetic process. Nothing is or can be lost, but the same always returns to us; as in the Hegelian dialectic, we can never be challenged by anything heterogeneous from outside (a Chinese poem, for example). It also completely disarms the often violent use of language (especially in Chuang Tzu) in Taoist discourse when directed at Confucianism or another of its polemical enemies.

In addition, the maximum and minimum risk accepted by Yip's critical discourse about Chinese poetic processes is perfectly expressed by this hyphenated phrase: "decreative" is just about the weakest word possible, the simple immediate reverse side of creative and this empty, purely negative form, possessing neither content nor value, bears the imprint of the creation it is about to bring into presence. M. A. Abbas rightly points out in his introduction that Yip's paper implicitly raises the question whether there is an original unity to be recovered in the first place (p. 9). I wonder how it might have gotten lost.

If this western critical language is bothersome, it is positively distressing to find Yip asserting that "we find the Taoists and Heidegger speaking the same language (p. 173)." According to Yip, Chinese poetic language inspired by Taoism is perfectly natural, as in the line he quotes from Wang Wei 澗戶寂無人. But Heidegger's language has always been contorted and difficult. And furthermore he asserts in a famous passage in *Being and Time* (p. 265), that "the factual uncoveredness of anything is always, as it were, a kind of

*robbery*. Is it accidental that when the Greeks express themselves as to the essence of truth they use a *privative* expression — $\alpha$ -ληθεια? ” The structure of the Greek word for truth shows that it is a kind of violation or robbery. Heidegger interprets the  $\alpha$  of αληθεια as alpha privative (Latin *privatio* = robbery) and ληθεια as forgetfulness, an etymology which few scholars have accepted and which has shocked some. Thus I find it odd when Yip asserts that in a Taoist-inspired poem the truth of things as unconcealment comes about and that like the Taoists, Heidegger affirms the original world by a process of “dispossessing” (p. 174) the existing concepts. Early or late, Heidegger’s language has always been a violent appropriation of tradition, though he may have sought to hide this in later texts.

If Yip believes these things about Heidegger’s language, then it is easy to see why he attributes them to Taoist-inspired poetry. He is led by these theoretical underpinnings to assert that they produce the adjustment of language strategies in the Chinese poetic world and that these stylistic innovations can therefore never be harsh or fragmented as in the poetics of modernism in the West. He ends with a rebuke to western poets:

Until Western poets adjust their perceptual priority and repossess the original real world, their stylistic innovations cannot become natural and will be viewed as violent acts of defamiliarization. (p. 173)

This sounds like the typical hokum heard by the denizens of California from the latest guru just getting off the plane from the mysterious and mystical Orient. Again, this assertion is manifestly not true in practice and is belied by Yip’s own example. The line from Wang Wei is quoted out of context and we are not given any indication as to how it participates in the logic of the poem it is taken from. Furthermore, if we do restore the line to its original context we find that it is the third of a poem that begins with the surprise of defamiliarization:

辛夷塢

木末芙蓉花  
山中發紅萼  
澗戶寂無人  
紛紛開且落

Magnolia Slope

Lotus flowers on branches' tips  
Send vermilion through the hills  
—The Valley house deserted, no one there—  
Everywhere everywhere they are flowering and falling.  
(Trans. G. W. Robinson)

I do not propose to discuss the merits of the translation, but want only to note that lotus flowers do not grow on trees, a fact that may have slipped Professor Yip's mind, along with the fact that the first line is also not naturally produced by Wang Wei but is an adaptation of a line from the "Hsiang Fu Jen" of the *Ch'u Tz'u*. It may be that the poem can be read in a recuperative manner which would have it end in the blossoming of presence, aletheia, but to analyse one line in its modes of absence and presence is surely not sufficient to convince us that the logic of Taoist-inspired poetry (and Yip seems to be ignoring the influence of Buddhism on Wang Wei also) is based on a decreative-creative dialectic.

Having discerned, as it were, the good, the bad and the ugly that this book has to offer, I can conclude with mention of what is mainly useful: the bulk of the material, in fact. There are excellent introductions to the historical poetics of M. Bakhtin, the use of linguistic analogies in literature, Geoffrey Hartman and the "Yale School," and hermeneutics as a link between literary theory and practical criticism. In addition, there is a lucid essay by John Ellis on semiotics and film theory. All in all, a volume worth owning.

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## CORRIGENDA

The editor apologizes for the oversight in the pagination in John J. Deeney's: "Chinese-English Comparative Literature Bibliography: A Pedagogical Arrangement of Sources in English," in *Tamkang Review*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (Summer 1982), 398-404. On page 334, all the page numbers should be corrected by adding 332. Those in the Author Index on pp. 398-404 should also be corrected by adding the same number of 332. Thus,

Page	Author	Error (s)	Correction (s)
334		5, 6, 7, . . .	337, 338, 339, . . .
398	Boerner, Peter.	p. 5	p. 337
399	Ch'ien, Chung-she.	p. 22	omit
399	Deeney, John J.	p. 1, p. 5, p. 22	p. 333, p. 337, p. 354
399	Eckhardt, Caroline D.	p. 5	p. 337
399	Escarpit, Robert.	p. 17	p. 349
400	Fokkema, Douwe W.	p. 14, p. 26	p. 346, p. 358
400	Gibbs, Donald A.	p. 38	p. 370
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401	Li, Peter.	p. 38	p. 370
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401	Lovejoy, A. O.	p. 35, p. 63	p. 367, p. 395
402	Nienhauser, William H.	p. 17	p. 349
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