

East-West Resonances in New York

A. Owen Aldridge

Western literary criticism all too often consists in applying a system of previously-established criteria to one or more related works. More of these critical systems exist in the West than in the East, running from the pronouncements of Aristotle to those of the latest Gallic epistemological technocrats. At present Aristotle is out of favor, and the French are in. Among the papers delivered in the East-West sections of the Tenth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in August 1982, several of them transcended ready-made systems in order to develop independent perspectives in viewing relationships between the literatures of the two hemispheres.

Two of these concern the stage. Mei-shu Hwang in a consideration of the practical necessities in the production of Peking Opera argued that the symbolic conventions of its stagecraft are the result of physical limitations rather than esthetic principles. Since the scenery, props, lighting and, other technical aids are minimal, information concerning locale, furnishings, time and space is conveyed to the audience by artistic conventions. Hwang attempted to explain why these somewhat primitive conditions have survived despite the technological advances in modern life. Some of the explanations which he advanced concern the storytelling tone of the plays, which have built-in descriptions of scenery and locale; the ability of the storyteller to change locale at will; the peripatetic nature of the acting profession; the movability of the stages or platforms, resembling those of the folk theatre of Medieval Europe; the lack of stage directions concerning scenery or movements of actors; and the historical periods of war and turbulence which prevented the establishment of a commercial theatre with scenery, lighting and mechanical devices until the early nineteenth century. In addition to these primarily social and economic causes, Hwang suggested a psychological one, Chinese lethargy. In his words, the customary attitude is "to meet

millions of changes with non-changes; to see things from a point somewhere in between the realistic and the idealistic." Unfortunately Hwang developed no comparative perspectives beyond making the very dubious suggestion that poetic drama vanished in the West as a result of the rise of realism and naturalism. Actually poetic drama in the West was on its last legs before the advent of romanticism. It would undoubtedly be of interest to have a comparison of those elements of the Chinese theater discussed by Hwang with those which were instrumental in the development of realism in Japanese drama together with some explanation for the advances in cinematic technique which have given Japanese films a world-wide prominence.

Another paper on the drama leaped from the past to the present by describing the reception of Bertholt Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* in Thailand in 1976. According to Chelana Nagavajara, the climate of opinion could hardly have been less conducive for such a cultural combination, for Germanistik as an academic discipline hardly existed in Thailand, and because of the inroads of cinema and television, the notion of dramatic literature for reading had almost disappeared. The period of political liberation between 1973 and 1976, however, saw an upsurge of creative activity in the nation, including the emergence of literature for life or *la littérature engagée*. Brecht's play was performed by amateur actors in academic surroundings in individual performances in an atmosphere resembling the conviviality of the English Elizabethan and the German Romantic stages — the kind of ambiance which Brecht himself envisaged for the delivery of a "universal message" through drama.

Traditional Thai drama resembles the Chinese, comprising music, song, dance, narration and spoken dialogue. Spoken drama in the western vein was not introduced until the early twentieth century when the theater was taken over by professionals concomitant with the advent and flourishing of the commercial cinema. The performance of Brecht by amateurs was, therefore, in one sense a throwback to earlier times. The performers, like Brecht himself, considered his *Lehrstück* as something not definitive or completed, and they freely intermingled scenes of Thai life with the original ones in Brecht's script. In so doing, they converted Brecht's pessimism into an optimistic attitude typical of Thai culture.

Pauline Yu in a penetrating analysis of the first Chinese anthology *Classic of Poetry* of the sixth century B.C. raised the question whether modern sinologists are justified in condemning the allegorizing which occurs

in the historical commentary which has grown up around the collection. In answering this question, Yu not only explained Chinese theories of allegory, but also applied western theories to the Chinese text, the justification for treating the subject in a congress of comparative literature. She concluded that there is actually very little allegorizing in traditional Chinese poetics or criticism and that the Chinese tradition "sees literature as inferring lessons from the world as it actually is or was." The early commentators, therefore, grounded the individual poems of the anthology upon actual history.

Stephen Owen began his paper with a humorous portrayal of the twenty-minute congress paper as a literary genre and gradually advanced to the broader topic of the contrast between the forms of written interpretation in China and the West. He noticed first of all the typographical distinction in the West between a text and a commentary on it in religious scriptures such as the Christian Bible or in a secular work such as Bayle's *Dictionary*. Typography in itself sets up a barrier between the primary text and the words of the commentator or interpreter. Owen next pointed to the Christian sermon based on a Biblical passage which customarily breaks up the text into separate words. In contemporary literary criticism or interpretation, the primary text completely disappears under the assumption that the reader is already familiar with it. Chinese interpreters, however, assume that their texts are not frozen or definitive, but living or in the process of creation. Editions of a poet's work purposely leave large margins for successive readers or generations of readers to add their immediate and personal reactions. This is a parallel to the way Brecht's dramas are interpreted in Thailand as well as an illustration of the western transactional theory of literature which was treated in a separate round table of the Congress. Marginalia represented the preferred method of interpretation for many of the most eminent Chinese scholars, serving the same function for poetry which the *Analects* of Neo-Confucian philosophers have had over the philosophical treatise. This is in direct contrast, according to Owen, with the remote or disengaged tone of the western critical essay. Western criticism focusses on an overall effect, Chinese on details or "moments" in the text.

David Liu opened up a fruitful field by exploring the rhetorical principles evinced in early Chinese historical works and comparing them with western moralistic fiction, the so-called oriental tale of the early Enlightenment. Liu found rhetorical patterns in Chinese historical texts which resemble those in later Chinese fiction and which have been subjected to

criticism or commentary at roughly the same period. The primary difference of opinion in this criticism concerned embellishments, some writers favoring economy or anti-verbosity and others accepting flowery adornment. Liu noticed other rhetorical patterns such as the combination of narratives and the use of similes. He derived his examples for the most part from relatively late fiction – almost contemporary to his western models – rather than from early historical works. He also observed that Chinese narrative of this period lacks suspense, that is, that the outcome is already known because of the reliance upon stock themes and characters representing conventional morality. As parallels from the West, he gave examples of French and English moral tales such as *Candide* and *Rasselas*. The outcome in these narratives, however, is not necessarily foreseen; the similarity to Chinese fiction resides in the actors in the narrative situation, who are standard types rather than individual characters. It is, therefore, not actually rhetorical patterns of historical narrative which are involved, but rather the construction of conventional moralistic types in narrative exposition. Liu's critical procedure is, nevertheless, a promising one, particularly if it should be expanded to comprise a comparison of early Chinese historical works with those of Greek and Latin antiquity as well as with later fiction in both geographical areas.

James Liu's exposition of a paradox concerning language also dealt with rhetorical theories in both ancient and modern worlds, but his material has more to do with the history of ideas. His paradox resembles the accusation of the ancient Greek Epimenides that all Cretans are liars, which is based on his statement, "I am lying" – if true, it is false; and if false, it is true. Liu traced some of the ramifications of the related paradox that language is necessary as a medium of communication; yet poets and philosophers argue that it is incapable of conveying deep emotion or ultimate reality. The reverse of the paradox lies in the use of words to convey the assertion that emotion and ultimate reality may be conveyed without the use of words. The paradoxical element is far less striking here, and this is probably why nearly all of Liu's examples concern the inadequacy of language to convey meaning or emotion. He showed first of all a major intellectual resemblance between Lao Tzu's assertion that "the name that can be named is not the constant Name" and Saussure's distinction between *parole* and *langue*. He also cited a passage from Chuang Tzu which suggests not merely that language is inadequate to convey ultimate reality, but also that ultimate reality does not reside in the empirical world. Liu indicated the resemblance of this opinion to the

Platonic notion of the existence of a world of ideas superior to the world of objects.

Liu associated his paradox with the "proud conceit" of the Renaissance, that is, the statement that a person or a concept will live forever because it is enshrined in a poet's verses but, in my opinion, this favorite conceit of Petrarch and Shakespeare actually asserts the enduring power of language. A long passage from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* which Liu quoted as a statement of the inadequacy of language, moreover, could be interpreted instead as a tribute to the power of the human mind, which keeps on working after the words in an artistic creation have already been set down. Other English poets seem confident in the capacity of language to overcome the paradox of limitation, for example, Abraham Cowley's line "Words that weep and tears that speak" (*The Prophet*) and Thomas Gray's similar one "Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn" (*Progress of Poesy*). One may accept the empirical sufficiency of language and still believe with another of Liu's Chinese sources that "words do not exhaust meaning." Also many of the poetic lamentations in both cultures about the inability of language to convey deep emotion by using such terms as "inexpressible," "indicible," or "beyond utterance," may represent hyperbole or result from pure laziness. A stanza by Thackeray entitled *Sorrows of Werther* suggests this lack of sincerity.

Werther had a love for Charlotte;
Such as words could never utter;
Would you know how first he met her?
She was cutting bread and butter.

As Liu suggested, popular theories of deconstruction are related to epistemological doubts concerning the power of language although all of the disciples of these theories may not be familiar with their historical roots. Gurhbagat Singh traced the treatment of the relationship of language to reality in a number of western thinkers from Plato to Derrida in order to show a resemblance between the theories of the latter and those of an Indian metaphysician of the second century, Nagarjuna. Unlike Liu, he treated language as a metaphysical-epistemological entity rather than as an instrument of rhetoric. I am not a disciple of Derrida and do not wish to give the appearance of interpreting his system on the basis of Mr. Singh's exegesis.

If it is true, as Singh maintains, that Derrida ascribes an independent existence to language, that is, giving it an ontological basis superior to empirical reality, I cannot pretend to take his system seriously — still less, if he assigns human characteristics such as willing or desire to language, which would be a twentieth century version of Ruskin's pathetic fallacy. I can understand suprarationalism as a type of religious experience, but not as a system of esthetics. Singh states unequivocally that Derrida's sign has no body, but he nevertheless seems to give it a mind or personality. To my materialistic way of thinking, a sign is something which has no meaning in itself but which conveys meaning to a thinking being. This is why I feel incompetent to interpret either Derrida or Nagarjuna, much less Singh's suggestion that both offer a road to the attainment of Nirvana. So far as I know, however, even the most rabid followers of Derrida do not claim that deconstruction involves the same intellectual or psychological processes which lead to Nirvana. True Derridean disciples would presumably attempt to deconstruct Nagarjuna rather than to look for epistemological parallels. Whatever valid criticism or not, the effort would not represent comparative literature.

A second paper on Indian literature offered a conventional comparison of the symbols of light and silence in the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez and Rabindranath Tagore, both twentieth-century winners of a Nobel Prize. The author, Timothy L. Kilk, interpreted Jiménez as a rigorously intellectual poet who, nevertheless, shared with Tagore the mystical goal of becoming one with light as a symbol of the "silent unity which exists between man and the objects of his world."

Annie Cecchi joined ancient and contemporary writing in a survey of "Roland Barthes et la mirage du Haiku," which also treats the alleged inadequacies of language. The great value of this paper from the perspective of East-West relations is not in a presentation of a scheme of theoretical poetics, but in a historical portrayal of a series of lectures on the Haiku which Barthes presented for several months at the College de France. It is well known that the Haiku as a literary genre has recently had an extensive influence on nearly all western literatures, and this paper presents concrete evidence of its entrance into the curriculum of one of the major intellectual institutions of the western world. Like the two preceding scholars, Cecchi based her exposition on the alleged deficiencies of the occidental languages in portraying ultimate reality. With apologies to James Liu, I should like to

indicate the paradox involved in the theories of Barthes and other epistemological critics, which is that these theorists use language to demonstrate the inadequacies of language. Their approach is exactly equivalent to that of western religionists of the eighteenth century who used arguments based on reason to discredit the efficacy of reason itself as an instrument for the discovery of truth. According to Cecchi, Barthes was attracted to the Haiku because of his aversion to the logical-temporal organization of reality and language and his proclivity toward fragmentation in writing. He liked the Haiku, moreover, because of its lack of meaning or sense. Cecchi recognizes, however, that he wandered from mere lack of logic to illogic when he praised the Haiku because of its ability to escape the cultural ideology of its ambiance, which is almost the same as praising it for not being Japanese. Cecchi quotes a long passage from Barthes designating the Haiku as the literary branch of Zen Buddhism and attributing to it a type of *satori* (which is loosely translated as illumination or intuition). This parallelism is similar to that between Derrida and Buddhism of the second century. Barthes also compares the Haiku to a photograph in the sense of portraying an instant of the past, a comparison which, Cecchi points out, does not conform either to Japanese morphology or to the psycho-epistemology of Barthes's other works. The metaphor is related to Earl Miner's disquisition on whether poems are open-ended or not. Miner's translation of the most famous of all Haikus, one by Basho, affords an excellent illustration:

The still old pond
and as a frog leaps in it
the sound of a splash.

One may ask whether the reader conceives of a frozen past or a continuing present.

Cecchi's exposition of both the system of Roland Barthes and the nature of the Haiku is a model of clarity and precision. I take issue only with her statement that the discourse of Barthes on the Haiku is the most stimulating text that a French writer has devoted to Japanese literature, which neglects the extraordinary achievement of Etiemble, who unfortunately does not seem to have been given his due in any part of the present congress.

In contrast to the metaphysical complexities of Derrida and Barthes,

the approach taken by Makoto Ueda concerning the therapeutic uses of the Haiku is realistic and practical. His pragmatic approach has nothing in common with French or Buddhist illumination, and for this reason it appeals to my own rationalist proclivities. The only critical controversy he raises concerns the psychological effect of reading and writing poetry — in Aristotelean terms, does the process of reading and writing the Haiku involve purgation or mimesis? Ueda cites a Japanese critic who suggested that poetry could be a substitute for the behavior of an angry man in smashing something to pieces. He also quotes a letter from a mental patient, however, which indicates that the Haiku has none of the ingredients of purgation, but that instead it leads to an increased awareness of the empirical world. As a naive realist, I subscribe to this opinion.

A somewhat broader historical span was covered by Kuo-ch'ing Tu's survey of Chinese and Japanese symbolist poetics designed to illustrate the universal nature of symbolist poetry in general and especially its characteristics common to the poetry of the East and the West. It has been recognized for some time that the western symbolist movement was based to some degree on eastern traditions and that many of the essential aspects of French symbolism in particular are traditional in oriental poetry. Admitting that modern Chinese and Japanese symbolism developed under French influence, Tu interpreted the historical elements of Chinese and Japanese literary criticism relevant to the esthetic principles associated with symbolism in the West in order to determine whether Chinese traditional poems written according to *pi* and *hsing* principles are indeed equivalent to those written in the twentieth century and designated as *shōchō* in Japanese and *hsiang-cheng* in Chinese. He defines western symbolism "as an indirect or suggestive poetic expression in which objects of perception are used to evoke, suggest or set off by contrast certain moods or ideas." The object of perception, moreover, "is a vehicle used to express certain spiritual content in the poet's mind, which is the tenor of the poem." Subsequently Tu classified the three primary modes of Chinese poetry as the *fu* or descriptive mode, *pi* or figurative mode, and *hsing* or evocative mode, the latter comprising symbolism. In Japanese poetry, he interprets the *waka* as a symbolism of moods or emotion and the *haiku* as a symbolism of ideas or perception, the latter requiring depersonalization or annihilation of the self. He concluded that traditional symbolist poetics in China recommend "spirit and tone" and those of Japan advocate "mystery and depth," goals which expound and

complement each other while conforming to the art of individual expression.

Amy Heinrich's paper on contemporary fiction by Japanese women writers treated some of the resonances of these writers with their counterparts in the United States and suggested that a study of their works reinforces rather than confuses or contradicts the growing awareness in America of the problems facing its female authors. According to an ironical article in a Japanese periodical, the Japanese woman of today who hopes to attain public acceptance as a writer must present herself as motivated in large degree by jealousy, as not physically beautiful, and as a bad wife. Heinrich showed that despite cultural variations, these and other requirements exist also in the United States. But the resonances she developed are hardly "startling" as her title suggests.

Although the paper of Janet Walker used a theoretical basis for comparisons, it is pragmatic in the sense that it revealed concrete relationships between specific works in different national literatures. Her theory has nothing to do with metaphysics, moreover, but derives from commonly-accepted historical principles: western poetics are in the main based on the drama and are thus mimetic; Japanese poetics are in the main based on the lyric and are affective or expressive. Western narrative is dramatic in structure with a beginning, middle and end, but Japanese is episodic, adorned with interludes in dialogue which do not advance the plot, but provide lyrical moments to be enjoyed for their own sake. During the Meiji period, the pioneer Japanese comparatist and literary critic Tsubouchi Shōyō urged Japanese novelists to imitate western models. Walker showed how two classic works of fiction of the modern period are related to Shōyō's principles and to those of the West. Futabatei Shimei derived the plot of his *Ukigumo* or *The Floating Clouds* from a Russian novel, *A Common Story* by Goncharov, while retaining the essential features of Japanese narrative. The linear plot is far less important than the episodes, and lengthy dialogue scenes, which provide an affective-expressive display of moods, resemble a lyrical rhythm.

Walker's second illustration is that of *Kokoro* or *Heart* by Natsume Soseki, perhaps the most popular of all Japanese novels. The plot, concerning the suicide of the protagonist, Sensei, cannot be traced to any single western source, but various elements seem to derive from western works which Sōseki mentions in his other writings. Walker makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the novel by comparing its structure to that of the tales of Henry James in his early period in which the protagonist

is surrounded by a certain mystery which is not explained until the end of the narrative. This is precisely the formula of *Kokoro*. The emphasis in the novel is, nevertheless, still upon the emotional moods and experiences of the characters.

The rise of western-style fiction in the Meiji Period in Japan was closely parallel by developments at about the same time in Turkey. The first Turkish novel, Ahmet Mithat's *Felâhât ve Rakim Efendi*, appeared in 1875 and was followed in the next year by Namik Kemal's *Intibah*. Jale Parla provided an absorbing account of the westernizing process in an analysis of the latter work. This and four other novels of the period concern an orphaned protagonist who falls rather than rises and who brings down with him the family with which he is associated. Parla explained that this scenario does not, as it might seem, point to the western picaresque or Bildungsroman, but rather to a purely national, psychological condition, the need for a father figure. Turkish culture had lost its faith in the Ottoman sultan, and the novel consequently lamented the death of the father. In the preface to *Intibah*, the author affirmed the superiority of oriental imagination to that in the West, but at the same time advocated reciprocal borrowing. He particularly reminded his readers "that Europeans, when they imitate, imitate only what is worth imitating. They have carefully translated Eastern classics in order to find and adopt a master to emulate."

The most pragmatic paper of the series was that of John Deeney on Chinese-English relations. He suggested that scholars working with China and western literatures concentrate on differences or contrasts rather than continuing the traditional emphasis on finding similarities. A critical examination of literary texts from the perspective of contrasts, he affirmed, would lead to a questioning of some of the basic western assumptions concerning the nature of the various genres and even of literature itself. This is a timely recognition of a reality already expressed by Etiemble, who has unequivocally asserted in a recent book that even a cursory knowledge of the nature of the major genres in Japanese literature would overturn the traditional theories firmly held in the West. Deeney also advocated increased attention to mirage studies, another excellent proposal. Perhaps his most valuable contribution consisted of his graph plotting publications on Chinese-English relations from 1930 to the present which not surprisingly reveals that the vast majority "have been related in one way or other to the problems of poetics."

Considerations of logic have required that I leave to the last my remarks on Earl Miner's *tour de force* "I've been wondering lately why poems end," which is written as a single sentence, contains no punctuation to indicate cessation, and is only ostensibly about poems and endings, but actually about the proliferation of systems of criticism, and therefore leads to his prediction that "much of the critical edifice is near its fall" even though he takes such extra-literary movements as semiotics seriously enough to observe that "signs are incapable of suffering or joy" and that semiotics cannot explain "causation, history, why this differs from that," and he ridicules Samuel Beckett as an example of contemporary non-linear, non-temporal, non-conventional, nonsensical narrative, while making the telling point that a naive realist is no worse than a naive textualist who believes that "the critical symphony is staffed solely by French horns," and Miner also shows the relevance of linked poetry about which he has previously proved himself to be an authority and which figures in many of the other papers on the Haiku and the lyrical tradition, and because of this relevance I cannot help quoting from James Liu's paper the dictum of a Chinese critic of the thirteenth century, Yen Yu, "the words come to an end but the meaning is endless" . . . and exactly the same notion from Kuo-ch'ing Tu's paper ascribed to Chung Hung of the fifth century "words have ended and yet meanings are lingering" together with a phrase in the same paper from a Japanese critic of the twelfth century "words have ended but excess feeling remains" . . . , all of which leads to the conclusion that Miner's single sentence as well as this one must inevitably have an end, but we can predict that controversy over literary styles never will . . . ¹

Note

1. This footnote is not intended as a conclusion but as a continuation for readers seeking further interpretation: Barbara Hernstein Smith: *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1963); David Richter, *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (Chicago, 1974).

