

**Straw Dogs: A Deconstructive Reading
of the Problem of Mimesis in
James Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature***

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All honor then to the memory of Amadis, and let him be the model, so far as it is possible, for Don Quixote de la Mancha, of whom it shall be said, as it was said of that other, that if he did not achieve great things he died attempting them. . . So now to work! Come into my mind, deeds of Amadis, and teach me where to begin to imitate you.

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

The Master said, "The Chou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I follow Chou."

Confucius, *Analects* III, 14

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* V

I

With the publication in 1975 of James J. Y. Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature* the field of East-West comparative poetics reached the point of systematic comparison of Chinese and western theories of literature. Furthermore, this book expresses the admirable desire to rid comparative literature of eurocentrism by this process of comparison and by aspiring to be trans-historical and transcultural, searching for "literary features and qualities and

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critical concepts and standards that transcend historical differences.”¹ Yet in this book we find also the curious assertion that the literary tradition wholly indigenous to China produced no theory of mimesis, but that a theory of literature stating that literature is the spontaneous manifestation of the Tao arose instead. Curious because, according to Liu, this is the theory from which “distinctively Chinese contributions to an eventual universal theory of literature are most likely to be derived.”² Yet this “distinctively Chinese” theory can be grasped only as a kind of difference from and an exclusion of Western theories of mimesis. Writing in the light of recent developments in the West concerning the nature of mimesis, I do not think these assertions can be allowed to stand as they are, for it is my belief that mimesis is a universal phenomenon. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to question radically the relationship between a Taoist theory of literature and mimesis as Liu presents it, and to show, from a post-structuralist point of view, how Liu, because of his attraction to phenomenology, immobilizes mimesis into a binary structure of imitator and imitated. I shall also be concerned to show how his thought, because of its attraction to phenomenology, falls unwittingly into the very ethnocentrism he wishes to escape.

In broad outline, my argument proceeds as follows. I first point out the pattern of blindness and insight manifested by phenomenology itself as a methodology. Then I approach Liu’s project with two other features of a deconstructive analysis: 1) a dismantling of Liu’s programmatic statements about and canonical reading of the Tao as forming the basis of a “distinctively Chinese” metaphysical theory of literature. I attempt this by showing that Liu’s use of Heidegger in defining the Tao is completely unhistorical and that if Liu had considered the history of Being in the West as Heidegger understands it, he would have been to modify his claims about the originality of Tao 2) the related task of showing that mimesis cannot be excluded from the Chinese context. This is demonstrated by showing Liu’s failure to exclude mimetic phenomena from his own discourse. An attempt at exclusion or banishment is then seen as necessary in the first place for a supposedly neutral ground of universal poetics to appear. This failure of exclusion also places Liu’s project solidly within the canonical tradition of Western philosophy which has attempted (as I show from Derrida’s and Girard’s arguments about mimesis) to control mimesis by expelling it. I conclude by pointing out some instances of conflictual mimesis in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*. But before we attempt this radical critique or “deconstruction,”

it is necessary to follow briefly the development of Liu's project for a universal poetics and examine his commitment to phenomenological methodology.

The very work of interpretation in Liu's several earlier books on Chinese literature reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the western reader to a foreign text.³ In these books his methodology is avowedly that of phenomenology (Ingarden, Dufrenne) broadly located on two levels of interest, language and world. He conceives of poetry (Chinese and western) as a double exploration of worlds and language, and his hermeneutic attempts to reveal how the poet's incessant efforts to embody the worlds he explores leads him to deploy "complex verbal structures and to realize the potentialities of the language in which he writes as a medium of expression."⁴ For these lucid and detailed presentations of delicately nuanced and intimately lyrical Chinese worlds and their modes of expression, their literary forms, the western critic owes Liu a debt of gratitude. I think it can be said that they, beyond cavil, have provided the western reader without knowledge of the Chinese language with a doorway to the comprehension of eastern approaches to poetics. Yet on the level of literary theory, which is where we want to locate our discussion, Liu's phenomenological methodology, with its binary classification of poet and world, is itself not without eurocentric consequences. Is it significant, for example, that Liu never tries to specify in any detail the links between literature and society or the ways in which a poet might transform literary language in order to come to terms with new social experience?

In his book *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (1962), a book which adumbrates a lot of the theoretical discussion in *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Liu himself admits to a certain tendency towards systematization and analysis that is not part of the Chinese mind. In the latter book however, he does not talk about his western prejudices, but simply asserts that because Chinese theories of literature are seldom systematically expounded or explicitly described, it is necessary to use western methodologies to extract these theories latent in the writings of Chinese critics, which lie like "nuggets" in the "thick sands" of technical discussions, practical criticism, quotations, and anecdotes.⁵ This is a revealing metaphor, hardly innocent, which indicates that Liu believes Chinese theories of literature to be lying around already constituted, sedimented as nuggets of meaning, simply waiting for the western prospector with the right phenomenological tools to extract

them. In short, Liu claims to have devised a hermeneutic so powerful that it will enable him to "make sense" of any Chinese statement about literature, no matter how paradoxical it may seem. In the earlier book he is a little more honest in admitting that his prejudices come from his exposure to western culture at an early age and in saying that his tendencies towards the building of systems was encouraged by the fact that he was "trying to interpret Chinese poetry to Western readers in terms readily comprehensible to them."⁶

But after this rather *pro forma* assertion of critical prejudices in *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, we find that it is quickly abandoned without any further questioning in his later work. In fact, in the very next paragraph which follows these admissions we find this statement about the nature of the Chinese mind and its relationship to literary form:

Another trait of the Chinese mind which is in favour of short poems is its concentration on the essence of an object or experience rather than its details. The Chinese poet is usually intent on capturing the spirit of a scene, a mood, a world, rather than depicting its multifarious manifestations. In view of what I said in the last paragraph, the Chinese mentality presents something of a paradox; as far as individual experience is concerned, the Chinese mind is inclined to concentrate on the essence rather than the appearance, and is therefore 'essentialist'; but in its attitude towards life as a whole, it is more 'existentialist' than 'essentialist' in so far as it concerns itself with actual living experience rather than with Platonic ideas or abstract categories.⁷

Despite the fact that the meaning of some of these terms is held in suspension by quotation marks, this passage describing the putative Chinese mind is so couched in western terminology (the hierarchies of essence and appearance, lived experience and abstraction) that we may well wonder what is distinctively Chinese about it. Furthermore, as I am sure some readers will be aware, the "paradox" which Liu finds as operative in the Chinese mind, that of the contradiction between "essentialist" and "existentialist" tendencies, is one that also developed historically in the West as the phenomenological movement itself departed from the project of its founder, Edmund Husserl. As Paul Ricoeur points out:

It is thus finally against the early Husserl, against the alternately Platonizing and idealizing tendencies of his theory of meaning and inten-

tionality, that the theory of understanding has been erected. And if the later Husserl points to this ontology, it is because his efforts to reduce being failed and because, consequently, the ultimate result of phenomenology escaped the initial project. It is in spite of itself that phenomenology discovers, in place of an idealist subject locked within its system of meanings, a living being which from all time has, as the horizon of all its intentions, a world, the world.⁸

I think that we can see from the background of Ricoeur's discussion here that Liu's discovery of a paradox in the Chinese mind is a result of his being situated within the closure of Western metaphysics, and that his idea of the Chinese poet as exploring the world of the Tao, and then as trying to express this inexpressible adventure in being (life-world, *Lebenswelt*) in language (ideal, abstract meanings), as argued in his *Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung* and elsewhere, is a pattern too eurocentrically interesting not to be deliberate. In reading Ricoeur's statement against Liu's, we should also become aware of a pattern of blindness and insight that has been made part of the rhetoric of contemporary criticism by Paul de Man.⁹ The fact that the ultimate findings of phenomenology surpassed and contradicted the expressed intent of the methodology, the fact that Husserl never intended phenomenology to be grafted with a hermeneutics of temporal understanding of Being in Heidegger (whose consequence is, as de Man points out, that literature is the foreknowledge of criticism) — these are facts which we, proclaiming our expressed intent to overcome eurocentrism, ignore to our own peril. Logical and programmatic intentions such as Liu's are fated to repeat this same pattern unless we are ruthless in seeking the light of insight that has been hidden in the shadow of error. And if we use Liu's work repeatedly to show where and how he, blinded or unblinded, diverged from it, then in the process of this showing our understanding of his project is modified and the faulty vision made productive.

Now, I hesitate in saying that Liu is misreading Chinese poems because he fails to come close enough to the dynamics of the primary text. Obviously, James J. Y. Liu is a scholar who has trained himself on the highest levels. But on the level of theory of literature, when misreadings of the sort mentioned above go on the work of a critic such as Liu, it is most likely attributable not to the critic's professional limitations but to his having been deceived by a rhetorical feature of the text not recognized as such. For example, in a recent article I questioned his phenomenological interpretation

of Chuang Tzu's butterfly dream in support of his argument that a "meta-physical" theory of literature, which, states that literature is the spontaneous manifestation of the Tao, exists in the Chinese tradition.¹⁰ I argued that this text (the butterfly dream) could not be used to support a realm of Taoist essence. Indeed, I would say now, to use the current jargon, that it approximates a "self-deconstructing" text which puts itself into question by distancing itself ironically from its own rhetorical mode, which, as Lacan correctly points out in his moment of insight, is philosophically that belonging to mimesis and representation. It is so, I think, because Chuang-Tzu's dream prefigures its own misreadings in an unblinded mode: Liu, in trying to decide this text for phenomenology, has lost Chuang Tzu's insight into the nature of literary language which tends to undermine its own authority to say what it says. Lacan's structuralist rhetoric blinds him to the nature of the double narrative voice in Chuang Tzu, that philosopher who appears to be both inside and outside his own dream experience.

The degree of Liu's blindness is crucially at stake in his *Chinese Theories of Literature*, and we cannot possibly decide about this until his entire project has been examined. But certainly, when Liu tries to grapple with the problem of East-West incommensurability of statements about the nature of literature by translating them onto a single plane of discourse (universal poetics), the contradictions are obvious enough. To take one glaring example, Liu argues that Liu Hsieh, the main proponent of his meta-physical theory of literature, effectively demonstrated in the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍 that in this theory "Nature needs no interpretation, and the poet spontaneously manifests the Tao of nature and parallels its 'patterns' with his own."¹¹ Now this is Liu's reconstruction of Liu Hsieh's intent, not a statement that he actually made. In short we have the anomaly of the presence of a self-interpreting text in Liu's theory, discovered by western hermeneutical techniques. Furthermore, if the Tao requires no interpretation by literature, then how can its closest equivalent in the West be none other than Martin Heidegger's description of Being which Liu tells us, "could almost serve as one of the Tao"¹² ? Need I remind the reader, as Liu does not, that Heidegger's is not a description of Being but a problematic of hiddenness and aletheia? Or that it is the concealedness of the question of Being to whose hermeneutical exposition *Being and Time* is dedicated?

Actually, the passage which Liu quotes from *Being and Time* as serving for a description of the transcendent Tao is a description, not of Being, but

of the difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), which is referred to elsewhere in Heidegger's texts as the *Ontological Difference* or simply *Difference*. As a major concept of Heidegger's philosophy, the *Ontological Difference* is indeed founded on man's (*Dasein's*) transcendence, his ability to stand out from mere things and question Being itself as the unconcealedness of truth, but Liu ignores the crucial dimension of Heidegger's historical interpretation of that transcendence. As Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, Heidegger's thesis was that being itself is time:

The fact that There-being (*Dasein*) is concerned about its being, that it is distinguished from all other beings by its understanding of being, does not constitute, as appears from *Being and Time*, the ultimate basis from which a transcendental approach has to start. Rather, there is a quite different reason, by virtue of which alone any understanding of being is possible, and that is that there is a "there", a clearing in being, i.e. a distinction between being and beings. The enquiry directed towards this fundamental fact that this "exists" is, in fact, an enquiry into being, but in a direction that necessarily remained unconsidered in all previous enquiry into the being of beings, indeed, that was concealed by the metaphysical enquiry into being. Heidegger revealed the essential forgetfulness of being that dominated western thought since Greek metaphysics due to the embarrassment caused by the problem of nothingness. By showing that the question of being included the question of nothingness, he joined the beginning to the end of metaphysics. That the question of being could represent itself as the question of nothingness postulated a thinking of nothingness repugnant to metaphysics.¹³

According to Fung Yu-lan, to whose book on Chinese philosophy Liu refers us, the Tao, as the first principle of all things, is indeed involved with both Being and Non-being. Tao therefore cannot itself be a "thing" in the sense that Heaven and Earth are things. Objects can be said to have Being (you 有), but Tao is not an object, and so may only be spoken of as Non-Being (wu 無).¹⁴ Similarly, in the inaugural lecture *What is Metaphysics?* in which Heidegger deals with the problem of nothingness to which Gadamer refers, Heidegger speaks of Nothing as the purely "Other" than what-is, as the veil of Being. But these affinities are deceptive, and Liu has not told us the whole story about Being in the West as Heidegger understands it (or is Liu's qualifier "almost" intended to imply this lacking historical dimension?). In any case, Liu seems to imply that the meaning of Being has not

been forgotten in the Chinese tradition, that it became part of a metaphysical theory of literature, and what is more, to return to our original point, that this theory says that its own texts require no interpretation. What need, then, has James J. Y. Liu of western hermeneutical techniques?

I am afraid that Liu is one of those scholars who think they have found in phenomenology, and particularly in the thought of Martin Heidegger, a neutral ground, the opening of a region which is above the opposition East-West, beyond the clash of traditions and the conflict of interpretations. This "region of all regions," suspended in itself, is called Being by Heidegger, Tao by Lao Tzu. According to Heidegger it is a realm of universality and simplicity of primordial truth, the happening of *aletheia*, of overtness, in the belongingness of Being. It is in this region alone where divergent traditions, disfranchised of their exclusive claims and yet without losing their identity, can meet as one. But if this realm is inaccessible to representational thinking, and Heidegger repeatedly tells us that it is, then what basis can it provide for any proposed universal poetics? Are we only going to consider how each tradition, East and West, has found a name for Being? Can we tell that story without using narrative representationally?

I too believe that if there is any hope of an ultimate unity of divergent theories of literature and poetics, it may lie not in the throwing of dubious bridges across them, not in questionable syntheses and compromises, but solely through a going back of each cultural tradition to its origins. As problematic as the question of origins seems today, I do not believe we should abandon the attempt to think it — what phenomenology was as a philosophic program, after all — and that we can theorize with some coherence and significance about how a generative, pre-representational (pre-cultural) region may form the basis of many cultural systems of differences. But structuralism can only collect differences, and phenomenology can only describe them. What is needed is an attempt to consider how differences emerge out of the undifferentiated, an attempt which is not really considered by Heidegger, but is at least implicit in his thought about the primal Ontological Difference and its relation to sacrifice and which we will come to in a moment.

Before we do that, however, it would be well to ask ourselves what the earliest representational texts of Chinese culture, the Shang oracle bones, tell us.¹⁵ They record, as it is well known, acts of divination and sacrificial rituals, particularly human sacrifice. What are we to make of this hermeneu-

tic (for that is what it is) of questions and answers which points us towards the violent origins of culture? Of all the elements in these divinational rituals, none was more important than sacrifice. Constantly in early Chinese literature the maintenance of offerings to the ancestors is represented as the ultimate aim of all social institutions. There are some forty hymns and eulogies (sung 頌) intended to be performed at sacrifices to gods and ancestral spirits of the royal house collected in the *Shih Ching* alone. The importance of sacrifice in early Chinese culture is again reflected in written characters (consult, for example, the word index in any volume of Legge's *The Chinese Classics* under the radical *shih* 示). Many Chinese words, perhaps even *wen* 文, which comes later to mean literature, owe their origin to sacrifice and the rituals connected with it, for sacrifice was the climax of all those ritual prescriptions which the Chinese embodied in patterned (*wen* 文) behavior. As a culture, the Chinese seem to have felt that a country which was unable to keep up these offerings had lost its identity and existence. These characteristic facts about Chinese civilization are, as I mentioned, well known, and only bear repeating here because of the astonishing lack of any reference to them in anything Liu has written about the origins of Chinese theories of literature. I would like to suggest at this point that the reason for this lack is related to Liu's findings about mimesis, for sacrifice is a ritual that is a miming of the original event which founded the cultural system. Furthermore, Heidegger says as much about the nature of sacrifice as a response to Being, which, the reader will remember, Liu says can be equated with the Tao, in a passage we may now examine.

In his *What is Metaphysics?* Heidegger formulates an answer to the problem of transcendence, showing how going beyond beings towards Nothing is the very essence of *Dasein*. But in a postscript added in 1943, Heidegger expresses his concern that the question of Being not be forgotten. According to Heidegger, sacrifice, as a non-calculative mode of thinking (because in it we give up our involvement with mere things), as an attitude of thankfulness, preserves the difference between Being and beings, forgotten by metaphysics, so that Being can be thought. I shall quote extensively from this postscript presenting sacrifice as a preserving of the truth of Being so that the reader may gain a sense of the profound importance of sacrifice in Heidegger's view:

The need is: to preserve the truth of Being no matter what may happen to man and everything that "is." Freed from all constraint,

because born of the abyss of freedom, this sacrifice is the expense of our human being for the preservation of the truth of Being in respect of what-is. In sacrifice there is expressed that hidden *thanking* which alone does homage to the grace wherewith Being has endowed the nature of man, in order that he may take over in his relationship to Being the guardianship of Being. Original thanking is the echo of Being's favour wherein it clears a space for itself and causes the unique occurrence: that what-is is. This echo is man's answer to the Word of the soundless voice of Being. The speechless answer of his thanking through sacrifice is the source of the human word, which is the prime cause of language as the enunciation of the Word in words. Were there not an occasional thanking in the heart of historical man he could never attain the thinking—assuming that there must be thinking (*Denken*) in all doubt (*Bedenken*) and memory (*Andenken*) — which originally thinks the thought of Being. But how else could humanity attain to original thanking unless Being's favour preserved for man, through his open relationship to this favour, the splendid poverty in which the freedom of sacrifice hides its own treasure? Sacrifice is a valediction to everything that "is" on the road to the preservation of the favour of Being. . . . Sacrifice is rooted in the nature of the event through which Being claims man for the truth of Being.¹⁶

As this passage shows, the nature of sacrifice is a saying farewell to our preoccupation with things, our worldly possessions, our calculative and logical ways of thought, and a thanking for our guardianship of the "hidden treasure" of Being. More important than this dimension of transcendence, however, is the fact that sacrifice is an occasional thanking in the heart of *historical* man, a mimetic echo of an original event: the unique occurrence of what-is instead of nothing. At the origins of human history and of the mundane world is the difference between Being and beings, a literal event, which is mimed by the figuration of language (the system of differences *par excellence*), in this case by metaphor. Man's language is not originating, therefore, but is in the nature of an echo, a mimesis or representation of Being which is in itself soundless. Heidegger speaks of the unconcealment of Being as more of a ritual action, an event, than of truth belonging to any propositional statement. Hence it seems unlikely that we will get to the truth of any metaphysical theory of literature by reconstructing statements about the Tao, as Liu's hermeneutic attempts to do. If then we take Liu's own statements about the Tao to be true, then the Tao must be a kind of unconcealment not available to representational statements. Clearly, Liu's blind-

ness here consists in the affirmation of a methodology that can be deconstructed in terms of its own findings.

I will pursue these questions of origins, mimesis and sacrifice a bit later on in my discussion of post-structuralist mimetological theories in which the nature of mimesis is linked to an undifferentiation at the origins of culture so violent that it refuses to be stopped and examined by phenomenological techniques. But to return to our original question, why is a theory of mimesis excluded by Liu from the Chinese context? To answer this question we must examine the passage in which this displacement of mimesis occurs. Of course, I cannot provide, in the space of this short paper, a deconstruction of Liu's entire project which alone could give us, as I have mentioned, the exact limits of Liu's blindness. All that I can do here is to examine several crucial passages where blindness occurs or where Liu surpasses the limits of his own methodology and comes close to the original insight embodied, but veiled, for reasons involving the very nature of mimesis, in the primary texts he examines in reconstructing his theories. First of all, let us examine a moment of blindness. It occurs in the several pages devoted to comparing the metaphysical theory with a mimetic one (I will not bother to discuss the obvious discrepancies involved in the affinities Liu finds between phenomenological theories and metaphysical ones, as I have discussed this elsewhere in the article on Lacan mentioned above) after this theory has been, I hasten to reiterate, reconstructed by using western phenomenological techniques:

As for the interrelations among the universe, the writer, and the literary work, in Western mimetic theories the poet is either conceived of as consciously imitating Nature or human society, as in Aristotelian and neoclassical theories, or as being possessed by the Divine and unconsciously uttering oracles, as described by Plato in the *Ion*, whereas in Chinese metaphysical theories the poet is conceived of neither as consciously imitating Nature nor yet as reflecting the Tao in a purely unconscious manner, as if he were a passive, shaman-like, instrument of some supernatural force of which he were unaware and over which he had no control, but as spontaneously manifesting the Tao, in the "transformed state" of consciousness he has attained in which there is no longer any distinction between the subjective and the objective. In the metaphysical view, the writer's relation to the universe is a dynamic one, involving a process of change from conscious effort at contemplating Nature to intuitive identification with the Tao.

In view of the differences between metaphysical and mimetic theories mentioned above, and, further, in view of the literal meaning of the word "mimetic" (even though I am aware that the Greek *mimesis* or its English equivalent "imitation" does not always mean "copying" in the literal sense), I have decided not to apply the word "mimetic" to the theories of literature discussed in this chapter but to call them metaphysical instead.¹⁷

Liu goes on to qualify this statement by saying that the concept of imitation is prominent in Chinese archaism, as in European neoclassicism, but that the idea of imitating ancient writers never formed the basis of any major theory of literature. But be that as it may, we may begin by questioning whether or not the "differences" Liu finds between a Taoist theory and a mimetic one are as real as he thinks they are. From what center of authorizing presence does Liu banish from the Chinese domain of letters (a gesture which, by the way, repeats that of Plato's) the signifier *mimesis* as an inferior term? We are told that, unlike the western poet in mimetic frenzy, the Chinese poet achieves an "identification" with the Tao. But since Liu is committed to rational procedures, we are justified in asking him how one identifies with the Tao without understanding first a model of how it behaves, and then imitating it. Do not Taoist texts give us models of behavior for the Tao (water in the *Tao Te Ching*, for example)? I will return to this point later when we examine Liu's discussion of the metaphor of the mirror in East-West poetics.

Furthermore, lying behind this entire discussion of *mimesis* is Liu's own model of the artistic process, adapted from M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*.¹⁸ This book chronicles a radical shift to the artist in the alignment of aesthetic theories during the romantic period. It uses a triangular model of the artistic process to decide on what level the critic is theorizing: universe, work, artist, or audience. Now Liu transforms this triangular model with the work at the center into a phenomenological model of the hermeneutic circle which tends to deny, as he admits (but refuses to discuss), the objective existence of a literary work "apart from the writer's experience of creating it and the reader's of re-creating it."¹⁹ Again, here we have the anomaly of a critic deciding about statements about the ontological status of a work of art on the basis of a model which tends to deny the objective existence of the work of art. Yet there is deeper blindness located in this passage.

Liu, in adopting a hermeneutic and circular pattern to decide about the

nature of mimesis effectively displaces Abrams's original insight into the essentially rivalrous (i.e. triangular) nature of mimesis in the Platonic (and hence Western) context. Abrams observes correctly that in many later mimetic theories everything is comprehended in two categories, the imitable and the imitation, but that the philosopher in the Platonic dialogues characteristically operates in three categories. "On these grounds," says Abrams, "the poet is *inescapably* (my italics) the competitor of the artisan, the lawmaker, and the moralist."²⁰ Abrams goes on to quote Plato's famous reply to the poets seeking admission to his ideal republic: you are poets and we are poets, rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas. Although it is true that Confucius never advocated the banishing of poets from his ideal state, the Chinese context of poetry is certainly not without rivalry, as the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍 itself attests. (cf. CH. XLIX, *Ch'eng-Ch'i* 程器第四十九). Now, I also think that this displacement of mimetic desire which leads to rivalry allows Liu to maintain the traditional view that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between the Taoist and Confucian conceptions of the Tao, since both theories ostensibly deemphasize conflict.²¹ I intend to show in the conclusion to this paper that a careful reading of the original texts will tell us that both Taoism and Confucianism are concerned with the problem of disorder in society, and that at least Confucian theories which seek an answer to this problem are highly mimetic in conception. This is something which structuralism and phenomenology, based as they are on the foundation of binary differences, cannot think, for disorder is a growing symmetry of mimetic violence which leads to the breakdown of differences. But for the moment let us conclude our analysis of this passage by noting that although Liu says he is aware of the fact that Plato does not employ the literal meaning of mimesis, i.e., that mimesis is the mere literal representation of its object, he nevertheless himself never mentions any other model of mimesis than a binary one. Liu himself seems to have accepted the thesis, which no major critic in the West ever did, that art simply copies reality. Why does he need this simplified version of mimesis?

From our discussion of Abrams's schema, which Liu has modified and displaced, I think we can affirm that Liu writes about mimesis rhetorically with the hidden purpose of strengthening his own hand. It is now the opportune time then, to talk about some recent attempts to link mimesis to the concept of ethnocentrism. I am referring, of course, to Jacques Derrida who uses mimesis as a deconstructive tool to point out the double nature of

literary texts. For Derrida literature reveals itself to be inevitably lacking in presence (of meaning, of being) and as doubling itself in a mimetic gesture designed to hide this fundamental lack. For Derrida, mimesis is undecidability, and literature, as revealed by deconstruction, is a perpetual *mise en abîme* of intertextuality, without origins. His theory of Platonic (and therefore Western) mimesis is presented in *La dissémination*.²² Here Derrida sketches an outline of the mimetological schema which constrains the discourse of Plato. He finds that this schema of two propositions and six consequences to be a sort of logical machine that produces and distributes the entire tradition of mimetic theories in the West. What is important for our analysis however, is that Derrida argues convincingly that mimesis is always a double inscription. According to Derrida, it is impossible to immobilize mimesis in a binary structure (which phenomenologists and structuralists, thinking the same thought, have done), for the mimetic in Plato's system is at the same time one of the three forms of the art of production and a device used in the art of erotic acquisition (non productive, not poetic). The sophist imitates the poetic (in order to attract young men) which however already contains within itself the mimetic. He produces, says Derrida, the double of production. And so for Derrida, mimesis becomes a factor of undecidability (which Plato is always trying to decide) and an indication of the play of representation which has seduced every Western thinker since Plato.

Now Derrida sees in mimesis a crucial lever with which to decenter ethnocentrism, a critique which we find in his earlier book, *De la grammatologie* (1967). In this work Derrida dismantles the illusion of Chinese writing that has functioned as a kind of European hallucination. This Chinese prejudice produced in the West what Derrida terms an effect of "interested blindness" among western thinkers seeking to escape western prejudices. But as Derrida's analysis of Lévi-Strauss shows, it is not easy to escape the closure of Western metaphysics because of the hidden "presence" of mimesis. Furthermore, hyperbolic admiration for Chinese culture is often the reverse side of ethnocentric scorn. Derrida unravels, for Lévi-Strauss and other thinkers who profess the desire to escape ethnocentrism, a pattern of blindness which has the function of showing us that each time that ethnocentrism has been precipitately and ostentatiously reversed some effort to consolidate a domestic western benefit is hidden. Ethnocentrism, apparently avoided, is disclosed by Derrida as already having profoundly operated, silently imposing its standard concepts. Ethnocentric assimilation/exclusion, a double move-

ment, is always betrayed, according to Derrida, by the haste with which it is satisfied with certain translations or domestic equivalents (hence, I hasten to point out, James Legge's fantastic translation of *Tao* 道 as logos). Actually, Derrida himself appeals to the Chinese concept of *wen* as in principle defining a broad concept of writing that is not phonetic (based on a binary model) and which does not privilege the speaking voice.²³ Whether or not Derrida's own view of Chinese writing needs to be deconstructed, a possibility raised in the introduction to the English translation, is a possibility he seems to have anticipated, for as this work progresses, it elaborates the risk that even Derrida's own work would be questioned by the most radical elements of his thought.

For his part, James J. Y. Liu seems a good deal less blinded than Legge in his pages dealing with the various meanings of *wen* 文. Since I am not a sinologist, I cannot judge the value of these translations, but I would like to note, following Derrida, that polysemy is still presence of meaning which enables us to decide a hierarchy of meanings, and that Liu displaces all of the materials relating *wen* to ritual sacrifice and mimesis (in the figure of the impersonator of the dead, the *shih* 尸) to a footnote at the margins of his thought where he can safely deal with this "dangerous" problem.²⁴ It would thus seem to be possible to deconstruct Liu's metaphysical theory from his own findings about *wen*, at least in principle, by arguing that he silently privileges a binary structuralist model (phonetic writing) at the basis of his theory.

Or by arguing that all forms of discourse consciously or unconsciously exploit the polysemic potential of language to transmit ambiguous undecidable messages. We could show, in short, that the polysemy involved in *wen* evolved from the constant and inevitable mimetic play between a multiplicity of codes, texts, and contexts: play which implicates all discourse in a complex undecidable web. Ethnocentrism could then be shown as thinking itself as anti-ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating program for comparative literature. But this would be, I think, a rather tiresome exercise without positive results. Besides, we have already demonstrated that Liu writes within the closure of western metaphysics. It is perhaps time to approach Liu's moment of insight, but, again, in order not to come to this moment blindly and draw back from it, as Liu does, too soon, we must delve a little more deeply into the nature of mimesis.

To return to our discussion of Derrida, we may want to remember that he takes Lévi-Strauss to task for slackness of method, for sentimental ethno-

centrism, and for an oversimplified reading of Rousseau. In particular he criticizes Lévi-Strauss for conceiving of writing only in the narrow sense, for seeing it as a scapegoat for all the exploitative evils of civilization and for conceiving of the violent Nambikwara as an innocent community without writing. What is the basis of these misconceptions according to Derrida? Lévi-Strauss's professed admiration for his model, Rousseau:

One already suspects — and all Lévi-Strauss's writings would confirm it — that the critique of ethnocentrism, a theme so dear to the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being-unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror. Rousseau would have taught the modern anthropologist this humility of one who knows he is "unacceptable," this remorse that produces anthropology.²⁵

The mirror metaphor here clearly indicates that Derrida regards the possibility of anthropology's escaping ethnocentrism as rather slight, and since he argues that the master-disciple relationship is one of blinded intertextual mimesis, he is of course not willing to posit the existence of any originating real event outside the texts themselves which is being imitated. Derrida's discussion confines mimesis largely to the West. It is therefore necessary to consider the work of René Girard, another post-structuralist thinker who, unlike Derrida for whom it is just another term in a vast deconstructive arsenal, has devoted his entire project to the understanding of the nature of mimesis. His idea of the mimetic character of ritual sacrifice with regards to an original generative act of violence (the murder or expulsion of the surrogate victim or scapegoat) which founds the cultural order, as expressed in *Violence and the Sacred* and elsewhere, will enable us to approach the texts of Taoism (and Confucianism) in an unblinded manner, for Girard posits the universal presence of mimesis.

Girard's system for mimesis goes beyond that of Derrida, which comprehends a model and imitator, master and disciple, to demonstrate the conflictual nature of mimesis. In Girard's system, mimesis, desire and rivalry are inextricably linked together. Beginning with a study of the European novel, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (English translation, 1965), Girard provided a reading of Cervantes, Proust, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, and others in the light of the (largely Hegelian in tone at this time) problematic of

desire and mediation. Girard observes that desire is not spontaneously directed at an object (as in Freud's theory of the drives). We choose an object because another, whom we have taken as a model, desires it. Girard's analysis, as Hegel's, begins with the matrix of society for understanding desire. But he argues further that the bourgeois mentality tries to hide this fundamental lack of spontaneity from itself. Because desire's obsession is originality, it wants its origins and its essence forgotten. Girard then presents the thesis that it is the function of great literature to reveal the truth about mediated desire. According to Girard, great literature shows us that every desire is the desire of the desire of the other, and that once the hero's disillusionment reaches this stage of knowledge, he realizes that his true desire is not for the objects of this world, but for the plenitude of transcendent Being, or God. The hero's hidden quest is for being, something he himself lacks and which he believes some other person seems to possess. In Girard's view the European novel tells us furthermore that every structure of desire is triangular (including that of the other — the model or mediator — whose desire desire imitates).

Every desire is thus from its inception trapped by hatred and rivalry; in short, the origin of desire is mimesis — mimeticism — and no desire is ever forged in the world of the novel which does not desire forthwith the death or disappearance of the model or "exemplary" character which gave rise to it, since the disciple and model are usually in the same society and are roughly contemporaneous. In the case of Don Quixote, whose model Amadis of Gaul exists only in the legends of medieval chivalry, Girard speaks of "external" mediation which, for all that distance, is nonetheless conflictual. Don Quixote never comes into contact with his mediator (nor does Madame Bovary her Parisian mediator), although Cervantes's conception of his characters as partners in the many conflicts which end in pure violence, between the chivalric giants and the windmills of La Mancha, is the hallmark of the novel. Literature for Girard is the scene or agent of demystification, but he does not claim that all literature has this power to point at the hidden role of mimetic effects in human interaction.

With the publication of *Violence and the Sacred* (English translation 1977) Girard leaves the purely literary treatment of mimetic phenomena to study the phenomena themselves, and particularly to weigh the massive evidence that designates unanimous victimage as the generative mechanism of all religious and cultural institutions.²⁶ In this further elaboration of his

system, mimesis meets violence and violence redoubles mimesis. This is the reason, generally speaking, that every culture (every society whatsoever) is built violently upon the ground of the threat of a generalized state of competition. The movement of the mimetic process, according to this later view, is to go from the mimetic impulse (the desire to imitate a model) to mimetic appropriation (the desire to appropriate the object that the other, by appropriating it himself, designates as desirable). This gesture of appropriation is extremely important, for it marks the difference between Girard's theory and all other theories of mimesis. When any gesture of appropriation is imitated it means that two hands will reach for the same object simultaneously. Conflict cannot fail to result. Appropriation conceived in this manner, as prior to any representation of an object, is also the basis of his quarrel with Plato (and with the deconstructionists who he says do not understand the radical simplicity of that primordial mimetic interference):

Plato's problematic fails to mention the domain of application where imitation is inevitably conflictual: appropriation. No one has ever perceived that failure. Everybody always imitates Plato's concept of imitation. As a result of this curious mutilation, the reality of the threat imitation poses to the harmony and even the survival of human communities has never been correctly assessed. The omission by Plato of acquisitive mimesis as a source of conflict is paradoxical because Plato still shares but cannot justify the universal terror of primitive communities for mimetic phenomena.²⁷

Which is why, I might add, Plato banishes the poet from his ideal republic as a rival, thus in a mimetic gesture repeating the attempt to control mimetic phenomena by means of the scapegoat mechanism. It is the role of this mechanism, and its function in establishing cultural differences, that is the theoretical focus of *Violence and the Sacred*, as I have mentioned. As mimetic fascination gets stronger and stronger (as in the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles where Oedipus, Tiresias, and Creon are rivals to save the city from a sacrificial crisis) desire breaks away from the object and fixes its attention on the rival protagonist, so that at the height of the crisis both protagonists serve as the other's model while attempting to deny the symmetry of their actions in relation to the other. They think that they are different, and hurl the vilest accusations at each other (incest, parricide), producing texts of persecution

which veil the fact that they are doubles caught in the mirror effects of reciprocal violence. This reciprocal violence can contagiously affect an entire community. Everyone begins to take sides in the conflict (as the chorus does in the *Oedipus Rex*). Differences, the basis of the cultural system, are continually being broken down, but there is structuration at the last moment of this disorder. The pre-cultural and (and pre-sacrificial) disorder possesses its own clearly defined structure which is paradoxically grounded in absolute symmetry, organized as the undifferentiated. But how does the community escape this plague of sameness in which everyone is trying to establish their difference from everyone else?

It does this, Girard says, by ganging up against one member who will be arbitrarily chosen (thought religion and the cultural order will represent it as divine will or selection) as responsible for the crisis. Once calm and order have been restored, this victim is seen as beneficial to the community, as a source of divine power, and may even be eaten by its members. Girard is discussing a notorious example of cannibalistic ritual, as practiced by the Tupinamba Indians of northwest Brazil, among whose peoples war was endemic, and provides a useful summary of the process:

The mechanism of the surrogate victim is redemptive twice over; by promoting unanimity it quells violence on all fronts, and by preventing the outbreak of bloodshed within the community it keeps the truth about men from becoming known. The mechanism transposes this truth to the realm of the divine, in the form of an inscrutable god.

The prisoner drew to his person all the community's inner tensions, all its accumulated bitterness and hatred. Through his death he was expected to transform maleficent violence into sacred beneficence, to reinvigorate a depleted cultural order. Ritual cannibalism is a rite that functions like any of the other rites I have discussed. The Tupinamba were following a model — or rather, their ritual system was following a model. They were trying to reproduce an original event that actually took place, to recover the unanimity that occurred and recurred around the person of the surrogate victim. If the prisoner was treated in two contradictory ways, if he was sometimes vilified and sometimes honored, it was because he represented the primordial victim. He was hated insofar as he polarized the as yet untransformed violence; he was revered

insofar as he transformed the violence and set in motion the unifying mechanism of the surrogate victim. The more detestable the victim was made to appear and the more passion he aroused, the more effectively the machinery functioned.²⁸

Society is formed by the (mystified) decision of a group to direct its power against something other than its own members. The sacred takes shape when the scapegoat becomes the bearer of cultural differences. Violence is at the origin of the sacred and the sacred is a technique for controlling the outbreak of reciprocal vengeance. All ritual, more or less displaced or based on substitutions, represents the imitation of an original sacrificial crisis and its resolution. But mimetic desire remains unperceived because of myths, stories which, as Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists have shown, are based on systems of differences, and which therefore veil retrospectively the truth about human violence and our tendency to find victims.

This insight returns us to the function of literature in Girard's system. In literature, the mechanism of scapegoating can turn back upon itself and discover its own violent origins. Religious discourse can never speak directly about its true object, for its power lies in its concealment of the social function of religion itself. The only real scapegoats are, after all, those who are not perceived as such. Literary discourse, by contrast, can only speak directly about its true object; for the purpose of all "truly great" art (and here Girard has in mind Shakespeare, a writer obsessed with the breakdown of order and degree) is to reveal the truth of religion. Thus religion, in the work of René Girard, denied, displaced and reified into an effect of the imaginary in thinkers such as Freud and Frazer or Marx, still manages to proclaim its own truth and necessity.

This insight returns us also to our discussion of James J. Y. Liu, where we can now approach his attitude towards religious discourse in an unblinded fashion. Committed as he is to rational structuralist (which he thinks are phenomenological) procedures, Liu disparages any religious talk about Taoism as nonsense hampering our ability to decide how a theory of literature could have arisen from such texts. Religious discourse would not help us furthermore in resolving (by establishing hierarchies) contradictions which the critics themselves manifest. In short, to resort to religious discourse is to indulge in "obscurantism and mumbo jumbo by means of Zen-ny (if not zany) sayings calculated to perpetuate the myths of the

'mysterious Orient' and the 'inscrutable Chinese.'"²⁹ It is important to read this statement carefully, for it reveals the fact that Liu thinks of himself as a demystifying critic who writes in the service of anti-ethnocentrism when in fact all he is doing is scapegoating religious discourse, a gesture of the rational West, and his openly professed contempt for religious themes really serves to protect him from any unwelcome discovery about the nature of mimetic phenomena at work behind religious significations.

This ethnocentrism posing as anti-ethnocentrism can be located in another, more developed passage, which follow upon the one I have quoted above as an example of Liu's blindness. Here again Liu is blinded, but less so, because his system is reaching its limits in approaching the original insights of the primary texts. In discussing the similarities and dissimilarities between the metaphysical and mimetic theories, he considers the significance of the mirror metaphor in these theories, and, after reducing it to a binary schema of work and mind = mirror (Western theories) and mirror = writer's mind (Chinese metaphysical theories) with the image varying in meaning from a reflection of the universe to a reflection of the cosmic Tao — all of which, of course, is designed to show that Oriental theories are not mimetic — he goes on to say:

However, if we wish to find deeper significance in the metaphor, we should first of all realize that to these critics (Yen Yü and Wang Shih-chen) poetry is not the mirror that reflects reality but an image in the mirror, and if we pursued this analogy ruthlessly, we would have to conclude that since according to Buddhist doctrine "reality" is only an illusion, poetry is an illusion of an illusion — a conclusion even more damning than Plato's that poetry is twice removed from reality. As a matter of fact, the Ch'an masters did reach such a conclusion about language in general, and therefore refused to write anything and even warned their disciples not to remember their words. Fortunately for us, Chinese poet-critics who held metaphysical views of poetry did not go so far; instead, they followed the examples of the Taoists Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu in accepting the paradoxical nature of language as the inadequate but necessary means to communicate the incommunicable.³⁰

Let's examine this passage carefully, for it is controlled by the question of mimesis, which it refuses consciously to name. Liu first of all says that if we pursued this metaphor "ruthlessly" we would come to the conclusion that literature is founded on a mimetic illusion of illusion, a conclusion even

more damning (i.e., dangerous) than Plato's. But since metaphysical theories are not mimetic, Liu will imitate them in rejecting this ruthless insight into the nature of mimesis! He furthermore doesn't seem to want to discuss the reasons for the Ch'an master's refusing to become models (that's just Buddhist religious obscurantism, not part of the wholly indigenous Chinese tradition, he seems to be saying; again, religious discourse is being scapegoated here) nor the reasons of the metaphysical theorists who, in his own language "*followed the example* [my italics] of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu" in constructing their theories. At the limits of his thought, James J. Y. Liu has veiled an insight of major magnitude.

The fear lying behind these Chinese Buddhist texts is the fear of mimesis. All discourse is imitation. All discourse deals in likenesses, in images, however much it may complain of representation (cf. Plato's *Critias* 107 BC).

II

It would seem impertinent to question the project of James J. Y. Liu for East-West poetics without citing myself texts in the wholly indigenous Chinese tradition that point unmistakably to mimetic phenomena. We can begin with Liu's observation that Lao Tzu's words are a paradoxical attempt to express the inexpressible. Indeed, there are passages in the *Tao Te Ching* which express sentiments of this sort, but what Liu fails to mention is the fact that they are often given, while attempting to provide a model for the Tao, in a ritual context which is furthermore that of the scapegoat mechanism:

In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place.

That the weak overcomes the strong,
And the submissive overcomes the hard,
Everyone in the world knows yet no one can put
this knowledge into practice.

Therefore the sage says,

One who takes on himself the humiliation of the state

Is called a ruler worthy of offering sacrifices to
the gods of earth and millet;
One who takes on himself the calamity of the state
Is called king worthy of dominion over the entire
empire.

Straightforward words
Seem paradoxical.³¹

(*Tao Te Ching* LXXVIII)

Straightforward words about the necessity of the scapegoat-king's suffering in order to overcome disorder may seem paradoxical, at least to James J. Y. Liu, but it seems to me that Lao Tzu is unveiling to us the secret of mimetic victimage. If we proceed with a truly demystified reading of the *Tao Te Ching* we come to a passage, quoted as an epigraph to this paper, that says the sage himself, is ruthless, and in following the Tao of Heaven and Earth, he treats the people as sacrificial victims, as straw dogs. As in the T'ien yün chapter of the *Chuang Tzu*, which we will examine in a moment, we are given the example of sacrificial substitution as a model for understanding the Tao. The straw dogs represent (i.e., are a mimesis of) an original surrogate victim. Now, the straw dogs at a sacrifice to the ancestors were first treated with the greatest deference before they were used as an offering, only to be discarded and trampled upon as soon as they had served their purpose. Reversal is the movement of the Tao, as Lao Tzu says elsewhere (Ch. XL). Of course I cannot give an interpretation of the *Tao Te Ching* in terms of what we now know about conflictual mimesis in the remaining space of this paper. Let it suffice for me to refer the reader to a book by Holmes Welch, *Taoism, The Parting of the Way*, as an instance of a writer who arrived, independently of Girard, at an analysis of how mimetic desire spreads conflict like the plague and what answers Lao Tzu had to this problem.³²

Be that as it may, and however far Lao Tzu may see into the violent origins of culture, when we come to the *Chuang Tzu* we find many passages of overt scapegoat dymythologizing. Chuang Tzu is forever telling us about the danger of being useful. But malformed animals, pigs with turned-up snouts, and men with piles (human sacrifice!) cannot be offered in sacrifice to the river god. All men know the use of the useful (i.e., sacrificeable) but nobody knows the use of the useless (i.e., not being used as a ritual victim). Let us examine in detail a passage from the *Chuang Tzu*; it occurs in chapter fourteen, entitled "The Turning of Heaven:"

When Confucius was away in the west visiting the state of Wei, Yen Yüan said to the Music Master Chin, "What do you think of my master's trip?"

Music Master Chin said, "A pity! — your master will most likely end up in trouble."

"How so?" asked Yen Yüan.

Music Master Chin said, "Before the straw dogs are presented at the sacrifice, they are stored in bamboo boxes and covered over with patterned embroidery, while the impersonator of the dead and the priest fast and practice austerities in preparation for fetching them. But after they have once been presented, then all that remains for them is to be trampled on, head and back, by passers-by; to be swept up by the grass-cutters and burned. And if anyone should come along and put them back in their bamboo boxes, cover them over with patterned embroidery, and linger or lie down in sleep beneath them, he would dream no proper dreams; on the contrary, he would most certainly be visited again and again by nightmares.

"Now your master has picked up some old straw dogs that had been presented by the former kings, and has called together his disciples to linger and lie down in sleep beneath them. Therefore the people chopped down the tree on him in Sung, wiped away his footprints in Wei, and made trouble for him in Shang and Chou—such were the dreams he had. They besieged him between Ch'en and Ts'ai, and for seven days he ate no cooked food, till he hovered on the border between life and death — such were the nightmares he had."³³

This is a rather astonishing passage, remarkable for its insight into the relationship of mimesis, violence, and the sacred. First of all, on a parodistic level it makes the rival of Taoism, Confucius, seem to be a kind of hapless Don Quixote who, as everywhere he travels with his disciples of mediated desire, is constantly stirring up persecution. This is all the more ironic, of course, because it is the expressed desire of Confucius to control disorder through the imitation of the (sacrificial) rites of Chou. But Confucius's model, the duke of Chou, has been dead for some five hundred years. Times have changed, and in Chuang Tzu's view the imitation of these rites is a complete waste of time. Worse than that, to want to lie down in sleep beneath these rites and not to question their significance is like inviting the scapegoat victim back into culture whose very foundation in the first place rests on his violent expulsion from the community. It is to invite sheer madness, the breakdown of differences in violent reciprocity. That is why Chuang Tzu compares the ways of the former kings, appealed to blindly by Confucius,

to straw dogs made for sacrificial use: they have been displayed, are no longer effective, and are therefore to be discarded. To put them back in their bamboo boxes, wrap them again in patterned embroidery (巾以文繡, *wen*, the very word for culture and literature is used here), is a contradiction in terms.

Secondly, we may note what happens to Confucius as he travels from state to rivalrous state trying to institute the rites of Chou. He experiences a nightmare, the monstrous double of the dream, as a breakdown of differences between life and death (literally, life and death are neighbors 死生相與鄰). Ironically, Confucius himself, as outsider to the community, becomes the ideal prey for the mechanism of victimage operating in these states. Beseiged, a scapegoat himself of a rite he does not understand, Confucius eats no cooked food for seven days and hovers on the border between life and death.

Lastly, although there is no reference to any divinity here, we may mention the presence of the impersonator of the dead, the *Shih* 尸, as a kind of mime. We know that in the Chinese ritual system the mythic ancestors, or the dead, are the founders, guardians, and, in times of sacrificial crisis, the disrupters, of the social order. This passage actually mimes the return of the sacrificial crisis as a critique of Confucianism. The crisis here assumes the form, in the person of Confucius himself, of a loss of difference between the living and the dead, a casting down of barriers between two normally separate realms (measuring the living and the dead by the same standard, as the rites of Chou do, seems sheer folly to Chuang Tzu, and goes against the inborn nature of both entities). According to Girard, the institution of ancestor worship as practiced in the Chinese context is actually the least mystified of ritual models:

The worship of the dead, like the worship of the gods, represents an interpretation of the role of violence in the destiny of a community. In fact, it is the most transparent of all such interpretations, the closest to what actually occurred *the first time* — except, of course, that it has misconstrued, as always, the mechanism of recovered unanimity. This interpretation states explicitly that the origin of any cultural order involves a human death and that the decisive death is that of a member of the community.³⁴

I hope that these few examples will serve to demonstrate that while

China may be said not to have produced any mimetic theory of literature, such as James J. Y. Liu asserts, the reason may well be due to blinded readings within the Chinese tradition itself and not from any lack of discussion of these phenomena in the original texts on which the so-called meta-physical theories were derived. Whether or not there are any unblinded critics in the Chinese tradition who approach the original insight into the violently mimetic origins of culture that we find in *Chuang Tzu*, I am not qualified to judge. These few examples do not even begin to explore the scope of the question Girard has raised for the study of Chinese culture. We have in the texts of Confucius and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu a body of materials that calls out for detailed analysis. What might the Chinese understanding of mimesis be? Is Tao related to a mimetic cycle of de-structuration or crisis and then re-structuration through unanimous victimage, as mimesis is in the West? Can the texts of Confucianism and Taoism be arranged along an axis of dissimulation/revelation in spite of their essential diversity?

I cannot give a precise account of this diversity and I do not claim it can be mastered, but we can attempt to classify these texts in a preliminary fashion according to their attitude towards the sacrificial system. We know from the *Mencius* (V.B. 4) that when Confucius held the office of police commissioner in Lu, the people were in the habit of fighting over the catch in a hunt to use as a sacrifice, and that Confucius joined in the fight. We also know from the *Shih Chi* 史記 of Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Chapter 63) that Chuang Tzu is said to have refused political office offered him by King Wei of Ch'u with an argument based on scapegoat dymythologizing:

"A thousand ounces of gold is indeed a great reward, and the office of chief minister is truly an elevated position. But have you, sir, not seen the sacrificial ox awaiting the sacrifices at the royal shrine of state? It is well cared for and fed for a few years, caparisoned with rich brocades, so that it will be ready to be led into the Great Temple. At that moment, even though it would gladly change places with any solitary pig, can it do so? So, quick and be off with you!"³⁵

Both of these attitudes towards sacrifice were produced by the late Chou period, a time of intense rivalry, violence and conflict. Was it a time, also, of mimesis? Clearly, Confucian texts manifest a faith in the sacrificial system which Taoist texts do not, and that is enough, for our purposes, to classify them as mystified. Mystified because in order to understand the

Confucian attitude toward the sacrificial system, we must reverse the order of events mentioned in the (mythical) narrative of the *Mencius*. Human violence in the community comes first, spontaneous and senseless. But the object of the quarrel in the story is ostensibly the sacrifice itself; that is, the selection of the victim. Now this is the mechanism of scapegoating itself: blaming the victim for the outbreak of violence. The Confucian explanation of disorder sanctions a participation in the act of terminal violence, violence which can only be seen retrospectively as the miraculous ceasing of hostilities. This may well be, however, a great oversimplification, for both Taoism and Confucianism were a response to the problem of disorder in society, both were attempts to recover the Tao, and both were locked in a battle of ideas for intellectual hegemony which has been described by one famous political historian of China as "a chase in which rival hunters, having hotly pursued the same deer, are unable to decide by whose hand it would be brought down."³⁶ Need I remind the reader that K. C. Hsiao was using a metaphor for the clashing of appropriating forces over the same object that is an early Chinese idiom meaning "contesting for mastery of the state"? Clearly, a sense of inescapable rivalry lies at the origins of both Chinese and western thought about culture. Confining mimesis to the West would seem, then, the last recourse of ethnocentrism.

Notes

1. James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 140. Hereafter cited as *CL*.
2. Liu, *CL*, p. 16.
3. I am referring here to *Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974) and to *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).
4. Liu, *Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung*, p. 6.
5. Liu, *CL*, p. 4.
6. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 153
7. *Ibid.*
8. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974), p. 9.
9. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).
10. William F. Touponce, "The Way of the Subject: Jacques Lacan's Use of Chuang

- Tzu's Butterfly Dream," *Tamkang Review*, Vol. XI, No. 3 (Spring, 1981), pp. 249-265.
11. Liu, *CL*, p. 54.
 12. Liu, *CL*, p. 59.
 13. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. ed. G. Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p. 228.
 14. Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol 1, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 178.
 15. Kwang-Chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 32-42, 210-259.
 16. Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, ed. Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1949), pp. 358-359. The translation of *Was ist Metaphysik?* is by R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick.
 17. Liu, *CL*, p. 49.
 18. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp, Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 3-14.
 19. Liu, *CL*, p. 11.
 20. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 9.
 21. Liu, *CL*, p. 16.
 22. Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 211-213.
 23. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 123.
 24. Liu, *CL*, pp. 142-143.
 25. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 114.
 26. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1965). *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977).
 27. "Interview with René Girard," *Diacritics*, Vol. 8. No. 1 (Spring, 1978), p. 32.
 28. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 276.
 29. Liu, *CL*, p. 14.
 30. Liu, *CL*, p. 50-51.
 31. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Trans. D. C. Lau (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 140.
 32. Holmes Welch, *Taoism, The Parting of the Way*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).
 33. Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 158-159.
 34. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 256.
 35. Quoted in Kung-chuan Hsiao *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, Vol I, trans. F. W. Mote (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 277.
 34. *Ibid*, p. 14.

COMMENT

The contribution of this perceptive paper to East-West comparative poetics is twofold. It is one of the most persuasive reviews (and perhaps *the* most radical one) of Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature* to date. Its incisive discussion of the Chinese metaphysics and poetics in terms of Derrida's and Girard's theories of mimesis has opened up new possibilities for comparatists. In his carefully argued review, the author has entirely dismantled Liu's critical discourse, showing, for instance, the irony that results from Liu's stated purpose and the fact that he writes within the closure of Western metaphysics. Even in the latter perspective, Liu is found shifting and sliding from one model to another (pp. 370–71). Though not a sinologist, a lack for which the author has repeatedly apologized, his reading of the Chinese philosophical texts (in translation) has shown considerable insight. The assumption that ritual (sacrifice) gave rise to *wen* (writing) has gained strong currency recently, as can be borne out by the deciphered inscriptions on the oracle bones and turtle shells. Girard's theory seems to be most relevant here. However, that sacrifice precedes *wen* does not preclude the linguistic phenomenon of phonetic language 音 (yen) preceding *wen* and the metaphysics of Tao preceding *wen*, that is, the canonical Chinese logocentrism. The illusion (of Derrida?) that *wen* is not based on a binary model as opposed to *yen* is another version of ethnocentrism that needs deconstruction. Because of *wen*'s polysemous nature, a hierarchy showing *wen*'s system of relations should be constructed (e.g., *wen/yen*, *wen/wu*, *wen/pi*, etc.). Two questions might be posed here. First, is Girard free from ethnocentrism and can he posit the universal presence of mimesis when his theory is a critique launched against the structuralist differentiation and embedded in its socio-historical setting? Second, is a deconstructive reading compatible with a Girardian reading?

CHANG HAN-LIANG

RESPONSE

I thank Chang Han-liang for his comments on my paper and also for his pertinent questions, which I will try to answer briefly. First of all, it is

true that Girard's theory and methodology are more important to me than Derrida's, if only because his outlook is more positive than Derrida's in terms of our ability as critics to overcome ethnocentrism. Whether or not Girard is himself involved in ethnocentrism because of his rapport with anthropology depends on how we define our terms. If on the one hand we characterize ethnocentrism simply as the taking of one's own culture as a center of reference for the establishment of meaning, then Girard's thought is certainly not to be termed such. Indeed, his position is that the Chinese sacrificial system is the *least* mystified in terms of how it represents the origins of culture. But on the other hand if we define ethnocentrism a little more broadly and try to show, as Derrida does in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere, that the attempt to escape it is part of Western thought about structure then I suppose that Girard does not entirely escape Western discourse. After all, it is only in the West where the project of ethnology originates as a critique of ethnocentrism and a de-centering of European culture. And it may well be, as Derrida asserts, that this project is systematically and historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics in Heidegger (Nietzsche and Freud also) and the thinking of the structurality of structure in Levi-Strauss. Thus Girard's theory of literature as the place of disclosure about the truth of mimesis as the origin of structure could be shown to belong to the same historical "era" as these thinkers and to depend on a problematic of *aletheia*. In Derrida's reading, no one escapes employing traditional concepts, however much they may struggle against them, and any attempt to deny this is read as a rhetorical gesture hiding the real violence of the hierarchy which supposedly enters innocently upon the space of some neutral ground. So I attempted to read Liu's project for a universal poetics, which conveniently finds a Taoist theory of literature with no mimetic contaminations after having banished a simplified theory of mimesis from his discourse. It seemed to me, then, rather pointless to bring this kind of critique to bear on Girard because he is aware of all the old concepts of mimesis, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use. In short I think his argument is already sufficiently deconstructive in intent not to warrant such impertinence.

Secondly, I don't find on the basis of the above remarks any scandal in combining the two types of reading, for Girard and Derrida share a common ground in their thinking about the nature of scapegoating. In fact in Derrida's critique of western logocentrism, writing has the negative privi-

lege of being the scapegoat whose exclusion represents the definition of the metaphysical enclosure (I refer here especially to his writings on the *pharmakos* in *La dissémination*). Furthermore, in relating phonocentrism to logocentrism in *Of Grammatology* he sees scapegoating as a much broader tendency in the West. It seems that writing is always defined in a narrow sense and yet it is made into a scapegoat for all the exploitative evils of civilization. One could argue that it is the idea of the scapegoating of writing that enables Derrida's deconstructions in the first place. Of course Derrida does not attribute this tendency to Chinese culture, and that may be a real weakness in his argument as you point out. I suspect that for Girard this kind of scapegoating only repeats on the intellectual plane an original response to uncontrollable violence in the human community. Indeed, in Girard's system sacrifice is the Origin of all cultures though their memories of the originating event may be more or less mystified. For me, Derrida, while adept at tracing the scapegoating of writing in western texts, fails to grasp the power of Girard's insight into the origins of mimetic phenomena which lie outside of textuality. It may be that Girard's theory, as some of Derrida's disciples have argued, is weak on representation, but I find it more compelling. Obviously, they do not read texts in the same way, but I think the two kinds of reading are not ultimately incompatible. I was trying to use Derrida's deconstructive method to show that Liu writes within the closure of western metaphysics and that his appeal to anti-ethnocentrism is in fact a rhetorical gesture intended to shore up his own idiosyncratic reconstruction of a Taoist theory of literature. Mimesis is *the* theory of literature in the West, and any hint of it in his system would have destroyed it. I was using Girard perhaps a little uncritically (my problem, not his) to show how one might achieve an understanding of Chinese mimesis by leaping outside any western rational system.

Lastly, and concerning your idea about canonical Chinese logocentrism, again I have to say that I don't possess the requisite philological training to judge whether or not there exists a binary opposition in Chinese between speaking *yen*, the voice, and writing *wen*, or in what historical period it may have appeared. What would be crucial, however, I can say, and that would be the evidence for the denigration of writing, if and when writing was scapegoated. In general though, and since I agree with Girard's view concerning the ritual origins of culture, I would suggest a reading of Marcel Granet's *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China* in this regard (his other books on Chinese civilization have been read with much profit by Julia Kristeva in

her book *Des Chinoises*). Granet thinks he has evidence, from the *Shih Ching* in particular, that as the Chinese system of writing evolved it was guided by a model in essence involving a mimic gesture towards the spoken. Granet posits a mimed scene at the origin of writing and of the voice. I would like, therefore, to conclude by quoting him:

I cannot help believing that the gestures, which formed an integral part of expression found by men to represent objects, came to suggest and guide the growing system of writing. I think also that if Chinese writing remained fundamentally ideographic throughout the ages it was because the voice was insufficient wholly to express the concrete ideas inherent in words when it was not accompanied by sketch or gesture. It is well known that a Chinese will often sketch with his fingers the characters corresponding with the words he utters.

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