Report on Panel II: Comparative Poetics

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In his essay entitled "Comparative Literature and Literary Theory," (1979) Jonathan Culler says that "Comparative Literature has always had a special relationship to literary theory because in order to justify its existence it has had to argue, on theoretical grounds, that the existing organization of literary studies was inadequate. If it was to make a place for itself in universities and in the world of professional organizations, it had to inaugurate a theoretical debate and put in question the notion that the natural units for the study of literature were those of national literatures." It is not altogether inappropriate, therefore, for one to say that it is in this very spirit that our Panel of Comparative Poetics is organized and convened.

Of the 22 papers, six have been scheduled as 50 minute speeches, since they are of general interest to the audience. The first speaker in this group, Lubomir Dolezel presented his "Towards a Typology of Fictional Worlds" under the aegis of "narratology," an area of research which has gained popularity in recent years and has overshadowed such old terms as theory of prose or poetics of prose. It is rather, a logical poetics of fiction devoted to a metalanguage of textual semantics, studying the form and function of narrative by statements of, as Gerald Prince has it (1982), explicitness, completeness and empirical plausibility. Dolezel's paper here presents a global map of the fictional universe as organized and ordered semiotic systems. From standard logic to the logic of imagination, and also through a philosophy of language, the paper searches for a theoretical model which will explain the semantic productivity of what Dolezel calls "the possible worlds semantics." The major concern of this paper, therefore, is the delineation of a set of basic principles of constructional semantics such as "extensional and intensional macroconstraints," so that "worlds" of different types can be worked out within such a global design.

But who gives the meaning to the fictional text? Where does the authority come from and what sanctions such a reading of narrative? These were the questions raised by Barbara Smith, as it were, in response to

Dolezel's paper. Her own paper, "Standards and Judgments: A Post-Axiological Essay," deals with an old problem in new lights, in that it puts Hume's classic discussion of taste and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* into the economic and social contexts in modern times. Smith points out the contingency of value judgments which are "context-dependent and shaped by the relation of the speaker to his or her audience and by the structure of interests – here an obvious rejection of Kant's interest-free theory – that sustains the verbal transaction between them." The paper proposes, therefore, that to work within and against this circumstantial interests, which can produce nothing but an "honest" opinion, we should always interpret (supplement and discount) evaluation in the light of other forms of knowledge we have of the evaluator, or we should regard the concept of "validity" as altogether "inappropriate," and no evaluations can be "equal," since value itself is also contingent.

Smith has indirectly touched on the question of "interpretive community" when she talked about the reciprocal "change" or rather, "exchange" in the social and political relationship between the evaluator and his audience. In the same way the "interpretive community" serves as "the engine of change" in Stanley Fish's paper entitled "Change." Fish's interest in the question of "change" can already be detected in his *Is There a Text in This Class?* in which he tells us how we convince others that they are wrong "within a set of institutional assumptions" that can themselves become the objects of dispute. Then he says: "This in turn means that while we still have all the things we had before (texts, standards, norms, criteria of judgment), we do not always have them in the same form. Rather than a loss, however, this is a gain, because it provides us with a principled account of changed" (p. 367). Thus the whole paper "Change" is developed in this light; one hastens to note that it is a stand not unrelated to that of Smith. To Fish, it is the "interpretive community" which works, organizes and shifts silently within itself. Change harbors within itself "a mechanism for its own transformation" in an ongoing project propelled by an internal mechanism, an "enterprise conceives of itself."

The problems of writing literary historiography in terms of the dichotomy between hermeneutics and the analytical study of literature occupy a good part of Fokkema's paper, "Has it Become Impossible to Write a Literary History?" The obstacles to the task of literary history are (1) hermeneutic understanding and the conception of a text being unique and structurally unexplainable; (2) prejudices against some paradigms of

literary communication as discussed by Barthes, Jauss and Riffaterre; (3) problems of selection and evaluation, in that the questions of canon, by whose judgment, or whether analysis and evaluation can be separated; (4) the dilemma of historicism and presentism, a problem which can be presented also by a dynamics of distanciation and appropriation.

It is true that Fokkema in his paper presents and discusses critically these problems with reference to the book *The Symbolic Movement* edited by Anna Balakian. What he has to say, however, will indirectly contribute to the understanding of problems involved in writing Chinese literary history. This is true since, in the first place, literary history has been of primary importance in the study of classical literature in China. But the very possibility of writing it and the problems therein have not been called into question by Chinese critics and historians in general. It has, for example, enjoyed an unchallenged assumption of continuity. Whereas it is a general practice of most Chinese Literary histories in which writers and poets become the main units of division of periods, Barthes (1964) has criticized that such a practice implies the transcending character of great geniuses inspired by traditional historicism, and he called for a new literary history which included the idea of literature itself. This is what Paul Ricoeur means when he reminds us of the illusion of the Romantic hermeneutics in 19th C. historicism, which aspired to a divine congeniality between geniuses or great souls.

The question of "Historicity of Understanding" is taken up by our next 50 minute speaker, Stephen Owen. His paper may be taken by an audience, especially East-West comparatists, as an advice against a high-handed and careless transplant of an alien conceptual framework onto a body of literature within one tradition. Owen stresses the extent to which literary hermeneutics is bound to the kind of literary works, since the way of reading a certain kind of poetry is integral to the tradition of poetry-making itself. The text comes out with an anticipation of how it should be understood. In other words, a writer inevitably anticipates the kind of question which his or her reader will pose. With regard to cases where a cultural disruption occur, Owen has delineated some specific procedure of coping with the problem, so that a distant work of art can be brought back to us in its vital form.

The last 50 minute speaker Yuan Heh-hsiang just spoke this morning, and his message should be still fresh in our mind. In general, Yuan is concerned with the danger of overstressing methodology over the text itself

(or the meaning of a text carried down in tradition) in the contemporary practice of Chinese-Western comparative studies. By drawing upon Medieval philosophy of numerality, Yuan calls for a balance, a kind of harmony, a truth which lies somewhere between extremes. The proper procedure is to first relate literary work to its appropriate context before any expansion of new meaning can be incorporated. Yuan's admonition, itself an echo of Owen's notion of historicity of understanding, should be of course taken seriously and appreciated.

In the Call-for-Paper sent out by the organizing Committee, there are listed in this Panel of Comparative Poetics six possible critical approaches or methods, namely, structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology and reader's response. The rest of the papers delivered in this panel can be therefore loosely grouped accordingly. In the general field of semiotics-linguistics and structuralism, we have heard essays in different perspectives and with various degrees of emphasis. Matthew Y. Chen's paper addresses itself to some characteristics of Chinese verse by a detailed description of the metrical structures therein. The relationship between poetic prosody and the grammatical structure of the verse is brought to the fore through topics such as abstract symmetry, consonant harmony, syntactic typology, inversion which displays unmistakably metrically induced transformation, etc. Another attempt to make use of linguistics for the study of Chinese literature is J. S. Lin's and S. R. Munro's joint effort. It formulates a tagmemic paradigm devised by Marshall Myer – with charts of discourse Lexemic structure of the hua-pen story – in order to search for structural and functional features underlying a Chinese classical narrative. While the ultimate fruitfulness of this kind of linguistic analysis is yet to be seen, Arthur Kunst, in his "Chomsky Is Not Saussure," makes a claim for a wider recognition of Chomsky's generative linguistics for the benefits of literary criticism. By laying out some basic attitudes advocated by the Saussurean structuralists and even post-structuralists such as Barthes, Jakobson, Todorov, etc., Kunst argues that generative linguistics, which attempts to understand "the innate biological structures of language" through a mathematical model of computer, deserves more respect and studies.

Now, if it is true, as Kunst says it is, that Chomskian linguistics has begun to take the place of Saussurean structuralism, the application of linguistic theories onto Chinese literature is nonetheless still under the sway of Saussure and Jakobson. We can mention here Ku Tim-hung's "A Semiotic

Approach to Wang Wei's Wang River Sequence." There he explores the dichotomy of contiguity and similarity which is perceived by Saussure and Jakobson as fundamental to signification, by examining its manifestations in the Chinese text. The theoretical implication, as Ku suggests, is that the disjunction or blank is necessary structural entity in the semiotic system, and that the endless dialectic between the uncodified motive and the codified one is one of the major dynamics of poetry, and consequently, of culture.

The paper delivered by Tommy Ho demonstrates the structural influence on Chinese comparatists. Ho has taken upon himself to delineate first some advantages and disadvantages in the use of structuralism by Chinese critics, then to explore into problems and prospects of some actual practices around this method or approach. The next paper which also puts to test some practice under the banner of a rather clearly defined school of discipline is Leo Ou-fan Lee's "Problems of Marxist Literary Criticism on Mainland China." Having dealt with the so-called "theoretical" issues around the areas of realism, reflectionism, typicality, subjectivity and consciousness, the paper concludes that Marxist literary criticism on Mainland China, once cogently put in front of Western Marxist theories, lacks methodological precision, so that rigidity and vulgarity are justifiable terms to be used to describe it.

As far as post-structuralism is concerned, I shall, for lack of time, be brief and group together papers by Mohammed A. Abbas, William Touponce, Tsai Yuan-huang and Liao Ping-hui. Abbas's "Reading Positions: The Master's Game" takes its departure from a poem by Stevens, which is read as the thematization of a deconstructionist allegory. The thrust of this paper lies in the claim that reading positions, in some mediated forms of discourse, strive for a kind of power the saturation of which poses a problem for literary theory. Then the several stages of Barthes's position are brought forth for examination in this light. The next article is Touponce's skillful analysis of Li Shang-yin's "The Ornamented Zither" through a Freudian critique developed by Lacan, and the result is a brilliant reading of an erotics of the text. The point is that the reason for the obscurity in meaning in Li's poem may have been that it is language itself to which Li subjected himself. The famous pairing of metaphor and metonymy, turned into Lacanian repression and desire, is channelled into Barthes's *Plaisir* and *Jouissance* as a directive toward understanding the poem. Tsai's self-deconstructive text (in terms of style at least) addresses itself, again, to a reading of Lao Tzu which focuses on the working of language in line with Derrida's strategy. The

conclusion is that "the text of Lao Tzu displays the effort to make *a-letheia* possible and yet problematizes the intransigence of language to Tao." Finally in this group, we have Liao's paper which, basing itself on the theory of the polyphonic or intertextuality of Bakhtin and Kristeva, does "relativize" Chinese and Western notions of intertextuality. As a concept against influence studies, intertextuality is new, complex and difficult to put to practice. A condition of signification, it is often pushed to the "lost codes, thus unobservable and unidentifiable."

We are coming to the last group of papers whose unifying thread, for lack of a better term, could be labelled Chinese Aesthetics. Within this area, a hermeneutic phenomenological reading (Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur) of Ssu-K'ung Tu's 24 Orders of Poetry was presented by Wong Kin-yuen. Admist the recent revival of rhetoric, partly due to structuralist inspiration, Karl Kao's attempt to study the binary pairs of *pi* and *hsing;* text and allusion as well as *yin* and *hsiu* brings into focus a dimension later also taken up by a number of speakers. In this paper, parallelism and binarism in rhetoric is traced back to the cosmological and ontological systems in the Chinese tradition. Chou Ying-hsiung's paper in a way complements Kao's work in that it too is an examination of an instance of binary vision, i.e. *shih* (the substantive) and *hsu* (the empty). The pair is used as a frame of reference in his discussion of mediation in the Chinese historical novel. The two papers both hark back to tradition and try to release meaning which is to a certain extent imprisoned in history.

Owen's concern with poetic systems and concepts of the past in Chinese literature is echoed in Chi Ch'iu-lang, Wong Wai-leung and Cecile Sun's papers, all are attempts to put Chinese aesthetics on its feet, as it were. Sun's takes the form of a careful, analytical reading of both Anglo-American poetry and Classical Chinese poetry in the hope of looking for an "area of genuine covergence" between the two lyrical traditions. The theoretical base for her endeavor lies in a discovery of a common search in the two traditions for means of expressing inner feelings through outer reality. Thus, the paired concept *ch'ing-ching* becomes the central concern of her study. Finally, the subject matters in Chi Ch'iu-lang's and Wong Wai-leung's studies are some of the critical concepts in the famous *Wen-hsin Tiao-lung.* Chi focuses on *Feng-ku,* again, as a paired term, and tries to put it back to its proper tradition, so that an interpretation can be successful in locating some "universals" which point back to aspects of real life of the reader. Wong, on the other hand, sees a possibility of comparing Brooks's emphasis of structure

in *Well Wrought Urn* to Liu Hsieh's concept *liu-kuan,* etc., in an effort, perhaps, of establishing a base for a common poetics between Chinese and Western traditions.